

The Twilight Hour

by

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for Carrie

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Dedication

We humans lack the ability to bring those lost back to life. But through these characters who speak our hopes, dreams and fears, we can return a measure of that life again and again so long as we hold their ideals in their hearts, retelling their stories to the generations that follow. This book is dedicated to my wife, children, friends who have fallen, and those who continue to seek truth in everyday life.

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Chapter 1

Hidden

The dark haired young woman moved unnoticed through the double doors of the University library making her way to the back offices. Approaching the reference desk the intern looked up knowingly, “You know better than to find him here this time of day.” Sorano continued down the stairs to her left and out the doors leading to the East Lawn. Outside a man in his 30’s stood alone, lost in thought as he gazed northward toward the serene twin peaks of Mount Tsukuba. In his hand she saw an object bearing symbols she recognized.

“May I interrupt you Professor Sato?”

“Sorano, always a pleasure to see you,” he said quickly placing the object into his pocket.

“Your message said there might be some progress?” she asked expectantly.

“The network program was able to link several recent inscriptions to the historical records in our archives. Together they may point a way toward a possible location of your artifact.”

“Great! When can we proceed?”

“Not just yet. There are few more things I need to check before we’ll know whether it’s worth pursuing.”

“Such as?”

“I’d like to visit Narita over the next few days to discuss these findings with a man I believe can help us.”

“Then I’ll come with you,” she said firmly.

“As the museum’s representative I expected no less.”

“We can go tonight.”

“No, that will not be possible.”

“As I explained, this project is of the highest priority.”

“Yes I know, but I have priorities of my own I need to attend to first. We’ll go in two days’ time; on the weekend.”

Sorano looked to the mountains. “I think we’re close.”

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"I hope so," he said walking past her. He looked up once more, this time to the south seemingly drawn by something.

"Tell me Sorano, what lies in that direction?"

"Over there? Umm I don't know, lots of things. You're looking in the direction of Chiba city I suppose. Why?"

Something she could not discern crossed his face. "No reason. I was just curious. I'll see you in two days' time," he replied wandering down the hill to the main lab complex.

"Two days," Sorano muttered. *"If he only knew."*

Even after all this time Sorano was not entirely sure why she'd been instructed to seek out Takumi Sato to assist her. True he did possess knowledge about an arcane group (in Sorano's view) of Earth myths and histories which might prove useful in her present search. But his primary expertise lay at the crossroads of biology and physics, relating to matters of human life and death, skills whose utility in the current matter were not readily apparent to her. To be honest she didn't even think he looked much like a professor, his angular features having more in common with a day laborer than a scholar. Somehow gave him the appearance of looking younger than his years. It was only his eyes which gave away his true age, possessing a certain sadness or perhaps weariness with the world. She knew from the records she'd been allowed to see that in addition to his academic training he'd spent a good part of his youth living and working in a small dojo, receiving training in what Sorano could only assume was some primitive form of human combat. During that time he'd been schooled in an old system of Earth spiritual beliefs somewhat akin to her own. But that was years ago. Now he appeared to have no affiliation to any of these. Though Sorano had come to trust his judgment, in truth she knew little more about the inner workings of the man now than when she'd first met him eight months ago.

For Takumi Sato, Sorano had come into his life as something of a whirlwind. She had been introduced as a special representative from the National Museum, tasked with recovering a particular artifact, and willing to finance those with knowledge of how it might best be retrieved. Curiously

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she'd requested that he personally assist her in the matter. Wishing to maintain good relations with the Museum, the University had urged him to help her in any way possible. She was bright, young (Takumi thought too young for such an assignment) and energetic. Her appearance at the lab had caused more than a few heads to turn when she started showing up at all hours of the day and night. The fact that he had developed a rather protective attitude toward her likely did little to help matters. But Takumi Sato never really thought about outward appearances or the proper way to fit in. For him there was only what must to be done, nothing more, nothing less. From his perspective he had an obligation to ensure that young representative stayed out of trouble. From the University's perspective the sooner the artifact was located the better. As for the project, time seemed to be of the essence to her. This suited Takumi since the item she was looking for was thought (at least in myth) to be linked to something *he* had been looking for for a *very* long time. Indeed as he explained at one of their initial meetings a principal reason he'd returned to Japan was to hasten its recovery.

Down in the office Takumi continued to pour over the symbolic correlations and make arrangements for the equipment they would soon need. As he carefully re-checked the iconography from the latest set of inscriptions, his assistant Terry and Professor Aki Sakai burst in, immersed in yet another heated discussion. He nodded. He was fond of Terry, he had a quick mind and seemed to get on well with everyone in addition to possessing a good technical understanding of the laboratories computational systems. Like Takumi he too was an outsider to the University having arrived with him from the West little more than a year ago. "*Sure Aki -*," Terry boomed with a wave of his hands, "*they're all over the place.* Just like that weird group you used to belong to, eh boss?"

...And yet there were times Terry's presence could be trying.

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“You know I appreciate your skills Terence, but would it kill you to *occasionally* read more widely than the search subroutines once in awhile?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Don't know? Why?”

“-Because then you might discover that people in *this* country don't consider Zen Buddhists to be some ‘weird group’.

Actually they have a rather a long and considerable -.” Aki laughed as Takumi's annoyance as he launched into an overly long-winded explanation of . . . *something*. She rolled up her shirt sleeves preparing the tea.

“Yeah sure -,” Terry replied eventually accepting his cup.

“But seriously, aren't most of those places really father-son scams nowadays? You know, set up for the tourist trade?”

“*Father-son-what?! No*, not the ones that -,” Takumi muttered something undecipherable under this breath rubbing his temples. “Are you trying to get me upset?” he said suddenly feeling tired.

“Umm, no,” Terry replied shaking his head. He had learned it was reasonable unwise to upset Sato.

“Good! Then go do something useful and help arrange for this upcoming meeting.”

Terry wandered to the other end of the room diving for his chair. “I mean you know I think it's great and everything,” he said trying to redeem himself. “I'm just saying that stuff you're into goes *way* beyond meditation; that's all.”

“Oh, and how is that?” asked Aki suddenly interested in her colleague's extracurricular activities.

“I mean like you should see this guy! Like this one time we were at a bar in Yokohama, and he just -.”

“*Terrence!*”

“Yes?”

“*Meeting!*”

“Yeah, yeah, okay . . . arranging for meeting,” he said taking a seat behind Aki. “Where, when, and with whom?”

“*Naritasan, this weekend, with Sensei Tenori Nukura.*”

“Two days? Kind of short notice.”

“Tell him it's me and that it's important. I have a feeling he'll be able to work something out,” he said opening the folder containing a small but very peculiar set of symbols.

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At Sorano's residence preparations were going less smoothly. "No, no, I completely understand!" Michio replied mischievously. "You urgently need to gather the *correct* clothing for your *research trip* with Professor Sato... with whom you've been working on this project for the *past eight months!*"

"Michio," Sorano complained irritably, "I don't control the rate at which things happen here do I?"

"How would I know? You're the one entrusted with the sacred task," she said flopping down at the side of the bed. Stop doing that! "Remember when you were told to assist me in this endeavor? It's not the same-."

"As what?"

"*As irritating me!*" she exclaimed. "Now think of everything I might need for such an excursion."

"Yeah okay. You'll probably need your umm - *lips*," she teased, jumping from one bed to another with unearthly grace. Sorano returned to her packing after throwing the nearest loose object at her. "I mean like clothing you, *you clown*."

"Why don't you ask your cousin about that, she seems pretty fashion conscious," Michio shot back sarcastically.

"Note to self: do not bring idiot along friend next time, no matter how much she begs. Believe me, if I could communicate with someone other than you at this point I would. By the way have you thought for even one second what'll happen to us if we don't get there first?"

"Don't even joke about that," replied Michio jumping off the bed to land beside her. "I don't want to think about it," she said shivering.

"Then I say again, help me find all -," Sorano continued hurriedly looking through their collective belongings.

At the appointed hour Saturday morning, Sorano and Takumi headed southeast toward the Narita temple complex. After the rush to get things ready the drive out was a pleasant distraction. The sun shone brilliantly as it warmed the cool morning air. Sorano looked out the window watching the row after row of cultivated fields pass them by as they sped

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down the highway. *Spring is finally starting to take hold in the land*, she thought. Indeed the closer they got to the temple the more she could see the power of the plum blossom giving way to that of cherry trees scattered across the plain.

It's so peaceful here. If only it could stay that way.

"Well, there's our destination," Takumi announced as the road arched to the right snaking its way toward the distant temple complex. Once off the highway they began to navigate the narrow city streets approaching the complex. They traveled several blocks before Takumi finally pulled over stopping. "Alright, from here we walk," he said taking up his pack and plunging into the crowd through the myriad of shops. Checking her gear Sorano quickly followed him moving toward the temple's main gate. Up ahead she could see the archway standing at the head of a series of steep sloping stairs. Above them, standing in the shadow of the Niomon gate the man stood gazing back silently, calmly pulling the black kesa over his shoulders. He scanned the ever approaching crowd of visitors, pausing as he caught sight of Takumi before stepping out from the gate to signal them, "*Sato sensei!*" he called.

Takumi looked up. "*Sensei Nukura!*" he replied bowing low as he reached him. "Sorano this is Sensei Tenori Nukura of the Narita temple. He is familiar with the historical records of this complex and may be able to help us in some of the background matches we've identified." Nukura bowed patiently. He appeared several years older than Takumi, but there was something about the way he stood and moved that reminded her of him. He put out a hand to her shoulder introducing her, "Sensei Nukura this is Sorano, the special representative from the National Museum of whom I spoke." "Yes of course. Please come this way," he said taking them through the central gate to the courtyard beyond. Following the central path for only as short distance he then veered to the left leading them past several stands of ancient cypress revealing a more secluded group of buildings tucked off to one side. "I thought we might meet here to discuss the records of interest," he said climbing the steps to the largest of these. Sorano followed them silently, carefully analyzing

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their gestures and movement. Together they passed down the dim wooden corridor to reach an intersecting hallway at one end. Approaching the heavy inner wooden doors Nukura turned as they continued in conversation, "As I told you, our rules regarding examination of these documents -".

"There is no need to explain," Takumi interjected quickly.

"I'm sure Sorano understands the situation completely," he said with a quick glance. They had of course discussed this possibility earlier at the University. "It may be that they allow only one person at a time to view the temple documents," he had said. "Besides, the information we *really* need may not be in the documents they provide. In either case I think it best if I try to speak with Sensei Nukura alone in order to get the information we need."

"And why should that be?" Sorano asked suspiciously.

"Ah, you know these temple types Sorano. Some of them can be a bit old fashioned – chauvinistic," he had said. Sorano had no idea what he was talking about but had gone along grudgingly. As long as it provided them with the information they needed what did she care? Besides, neither of them had any idea how far *she* could really see or hear. And so it was that Sorano was led to an adjoining anteroom while Takumi and Nukura closed the doors on what appeared to be a kind of temple library. As she sat alone now in the chamber she couldn't help but feel that something was not quite right. But what could it be? Concentrating she began to replay everything she had seen and heard that morning. Before long she had it. *They know each other!* This isn't the first time they've met. The revelation made her uneasy. Why would he hide something like that? And why don't they want anyone else to know? She turned focusing her attention on what lay beyond the closed doors. But it proved surprisingly difficult for as she now realized, there were many other thoughts emanating throughout the building. Listening closely she could now hear the dim sound of clashing weapons around her. Creeping from the room to find the source of the commotion, she quietly walked the hallway pressing aside one of the shoji doors. Inside she saw several dozen students, most of them little more than boys seated

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around a central square. Several older instructors stood in the middle. They all appeared to be clad in some form of armor, with the instructors demonstrating how to perform various blows to the body with wooden sticks. To Sorano's horror a moment later at the instructor's signal the little ones began emulating their actions on each other! *What should I do?* She thought, realizing that any action she might take could be difficult to explain later. "I'll never understand these people," she said shaking her head, quietly shuffling back to the library. Standing at one corner of the intersecting hallway now she pressed herself against the wall, concentrating all her effort on the conversation inside.

"- And you're certain it's from here?"

"You can read it as plainly as I can," replied Takumi. "The record clearly indicates the bone's origin maps to a pre-war excavation of this site in the 1920's."

"And this piece is the critical match to your database?"

"Yes, the text and several symbols on it are identical."

"How do we make sure it's correct?"

"The records say that the rest of the remains are here. You first need to make sure that information is accurate."

"Meaning?"

"Check to see if you have a set of remains here missing the bones indicated in the records. Also-."

They stopped, hearing movement outside as the teak flooring beneath Sorano's feet creaked in her attempt to move closer. *Dammit*, she thought. She held her breath staying perfectly still. After a moment they continued.

"I'm listening," replied Nukura.

"-Also check to see if any other remains are inscribed with patterns similar to this fragment."

"Hmm, that may not be easy."

"Don't tell me that Tenori, I *know* you can do it."

"I'm simply saying that kind of poking around may not go over so well."

"I *assume* you're interested in recovery?"

"Of course. That's not what I'm saying."

"Good. Then simply do your best. That's all I'm asking."

She heard Tenori pacing. "Anything else?"

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"If I'm right we'll need to determine the date of the remains as accurately as possible," Takumi replied pensively.

"And if it turns out this hunch of yours is correct, where would the items be located?"

"I have no idea," chuckled Takumi.

"*Oh come on.* You're lying. You can't be serious!"

"No it's true. I have no idea. But it would narrow the search region down considerably. In either case you'll know when we've found it, since it'll be registered with the National Museum and brought back here."

"Alright. And these mysterious symbols, the ones you haven't been able to identify. You think they're the key?"

"I'm convinced they are."

"And the girl?"

"She knows things Tenori. Things I don't. She's provided information on the Abyssian myths I honestly don't see how she could know."

"Hmm. And she is helping you *why* exactly?"

"I believe we need each other to solve the problem."

"Alright. I'll call you when I know."

"Thank you," Takumi said heading for the door.

Sorano stepped back, quietly heading down the hallway. She could hear the tone of their voices change as they came closer to the door.

"You know we have a practice hall here Takumi."

"*Several* I assume," she heard him sigh.

"Indeed. It's been a long time. Perhaps -."

"Let's see how Sorano feels first," he said cutting him off.

"I'm sure she would enjoy touring the grounds. They're magnificent this time of year," suggested Nukura.

"I'll ask her."

"It's good to see you after all this time Takumi-san. How long have you been here?"

"I've been in Japan almost a year now."

"Strange isn't it? After all this time, each of us returning here."

"Perhaps it's fate."

"Except that I know you don't believe in fate Sato. So?"

"Yes?"

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“Have you gone to see *him* since you arrived?”

The tenor of Takumi’s voice changed. “I don’t know if he would even -.”

“-*Can I help you young lady?!*”

Sorano jumped as the monk spoke from behind.

“Oh of course!” she replied in an overly loud voice as the monk looked back at her puzzled. “*I was just going down this hallway here to find my colleagues who I believe are in this room - right - here,*” she said continuing to shout.

“I can hear you miss,” replied the monk.

“Hah, hah, yes of course,” she said as the doors behind her opened and Tenori and Takumi entered the hallway.

“Sorano there you are. Not getting bored out here are you?” asked Takumi.

“No of course not. I was just sitting here. In fact, I was just thinking of having a look around the temple.”

“Excellent idea,” remarked Tenori. “But first I’ve taken the liberty of having some lunch prepared,” he said directing them to the building across the courtyard.

Sitting across from one another other now, Sorano and Takumi quietly ate lunch at the low formal table. The East doors of the room had been opened revealing a glorious view of the graceful outer pond and gardens, together with clusters of curious temple visitors. Sorano stared at Takumi silently as he ate.

“*Is there something?*” he asked without looking up.

“No” she said quickly returning to her food.

“You’re certain?”

“Yes... certain,” she replied stubbornly.

“You know Sensei Nukura was thinking you might want to have a look around the temple gardens.”

“And what would *you* be doing?”

Takumi looked up taking in waters of the pond. “I think he has something else planned for me.”

“And what would that be?”

“Exercise I suppose. I think he wants to see if University life has slowed my reflexes, made me soft.”

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Suddenly Sorano understood. “No. You mustn't go with him!” she said alarmed. “You don't know what kind of things go on here,” she whispered to him.

He leaned down. “What kind of things?”

“There are rooms in the back where they make young boys beat each other with sticks,” she replied looking around in a conspiratorial whisper.

Takumi smiled patting her. “Yes, I think that’s the kind of entertainment he has planned alright.” Her eyes widened.

“Don't worry. I'll be fine. I'll see you in a little while,” he said rising.

“Of course,” Sorano replied sullenly. “All the same, I'd like to know what if anything you discovered during your conversation with Mr. Nukura.”

“I told him we'd identified a fragment which matches information about our items of interest, and that I believe that fragment originates from this temple. I've asked him to confirm whether that information is accurate and to determine if there is anything else available regarding its origins.”

So far so good, Sorano thought. At least it matched what she had overheard; though it still didn't explain why he'd not told her about knowing Nukura.

At that moment the rear doors slid open and Tenori entered.

“Well?” he asked expectantly.

“Sorano said she would like to explore the temple gardens. I told her we could meet back here in about an hour's time.”

“Excellent,” Tenori replied leading them to the outer gardens.

When they reached the main path he motioned to Sorano,

“The central gardens are in that direction. I understand you are an expert in ancient writing, so you may be interested in the calligraphy museum at the far end of the complex. As for Sensei Sato and I, we'll be in the building behind you. Oh and you should probably give us an hour and a half,” he said winking at Takumi.

“I see. Well then gentlemen I will leave you,” she said disappearing into the crowd.

Humph! You think I don't know about flowers and trees? As soon as it was safe she darted from the path, springing to a secluded corner of the building adjoining the practice hall. In

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two swift motions she was up on the roof, crouching behind its uppermost peak. Deftly she jumped to the adjacent building containing the practice hall before reaching down to hang over the roof's back edge like a bat before locating the building's ventilation duct. A moment later she was inside sitting quietly among the rafters 30 feet above the practice floor. Several minutes passed before she heard the sounds of them entering the hall. They had changed now and were wearing outfits similar to the ones she'd seen earlier. As they roamed the hall she saw Nukura pick up a kind of sword woven with bamboo strips while Takumi drew forth a staff some six feet in length. After completing their stretching they knelt side by side for a moment in silence, concentrating it seemed before rising to their feet. Bowing to the front of the hall they then turned to each other putting on their headgear. As they began circling one another she saw to her relief this was not true fighting; rather some ritualized form of combat. Still, these thrusts and blows were much harder and faster than those she'd witnessed earlier. There was something about all of it she found deeply unsettling. Listening from the rafters they seemed to be taunting one another.

"You know I forgot to tell you how cute you looked in that kesa Tenori, though I don't buy it for a minute. How is it the monks let you to get away with that?" Takumi asked.

"Administrators who work for the temple and actively seek enlightenment are given a degree of latitude," he replied simply. "Why, you don't think I'm sincere?"

"Oh it's not that," Takumi said circling. "It's just that I remembered you as being rather more attached to things of the flesh to make such a transition easily."

"I see. Well, 12 years -," Tenori struck instantly causing Sorano to jerk almost falling from her perch. The strike seemed to have been aimed to cut diagonally from his opponent's right shoulder to opposing hip. Takumi, who'd been holding the staff at Tenori's throat parried fluidly in response. Sliding his feet slightly to the rear he moved beyond the range of the Tenori's Shinai, sweeping his staff in an upward arc in response around the oncoming Shinai for a

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reversing blow to the side of Tenori's head. Matching his movement within their mutual arc, Tenori countered with a reverse swallow cut. "-can change a man," he continued as though nothing had happened. "You're proof of that. Just look at you, grown soft and respectable at the University." Takumi smiled circling once again, testing the limits of Tenori's willing defense. As his opponent came again Takumi feinted, turning in a tight backward arc to narrowly hold him off.

"You're sure about that are you?" said Takumi.

But Tenori continued, "And as for things of the flesh, now that your young assistant is no longer with us perhaps you can enlighten me as to what she *really* does for you," he said grinning. Sorano peered down tightening her grip on the rafters.

"Well -," Takumi began but Tenori was ready for him, easily parried his lunging attack. The sound of their weapons echoed in the hall as Tenori struck strongly with a fire and stones cut. Takumi moved quickly to hold him, positioning his staff obliquely against the base of Tenori's Shinai. Though it held momentarily, it was Takumi's stance which faltered first. He dropped to one knee as Tenori continued his downward pressure. "Same old Takumi," Tenori breathed pressing down. "You still don't know when you're beaten. What do you think this is; beginner's class? You never push a bad position like that - or it'll cost you." But Takumi continued resisting as each weapon sought to find its way around the other. As Tenori pressed his advantage, Takumi instantly shifted his grip, causing the Shinai to sweep narrowly in front of him as he moved to his left suddenly rising to his feet. He attempted a shoulder strike but Tenori anticipated him as their weapons slammed together once more. As Tenori stepped back attempting a flowing-water cut, Takumi ducked wide of the blade moving to Nukura's right. As his opponent attempted to counter Takumi reversed his staff yet again instantly sweeping under Tenori's legs taking him to the ground. As he hit the floor Takumi jumped wide to avoid the low defensive sweep of his Shinai replying, "Since you're interested it was *she* who approached me. Not

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to mention she's probably 10 years younger than I am. And since when is it such a bad thing to be employed by the University? Patient though you and your comrades might be, I think it would take you a veery long time to translate, organize and compare all the available information without aid of our computational systems. The important thing -," Recovering Tenori feinted a jab at Takumi's throat following by two quick passes at the level of his collarbone. Takumi turned fluidly bringing the end of his Jo up and across in response but Nukura parried. As he moved in once more Takumi's body strike pushed him off, spinning tightly to engage him on the opposite side. Freeing himself from the entanglement Nukura stepped back giving his appraisal. "If we ever have ballet night at the temple I'll know who to call," he said sarcastically. That kind of acrobatic crap won't serve you well. You never turn your back on an opponent," he said stalking him once more.

"Oh is that what we're doing? Your movements were so slow I thought this was the warm-up period," Takumi replied. Sorano winced at the sound of the furious series of strikes, sweeps and counterstrikes which ensued. After one particularly fierce encounter Tenori stumbled slightly only to hear Takumi call, "*Mushin*," to Tenori's reply of, "*Fudōshin*."

In time she became all too accustomed to their shouts of "*Men, Kote, Do*," and "*Tsuki*," and the sound of their rhythmic clashing echoing in the hall as each moved and adapted to the other's style, each searching for weakness and an opportunity to strike. She watched with a kind of sad detachment. "These creatures are more primitive than I thought, but perhaps it's necessary in the world they inhabit," she mused. As their time came to a close she waited patiently for them to exit the hall before climbing out the ventilation duct to the roof. Walking along the back edge she sniffed the air wafting up from the south. Cautiously she crept to the peak staring down at the temple grounds. Below her the Goma fire ritual had begun. She watched mesmerized as glowing embers rose like fireflies in the late afternoon sun. Folding her arms beneath her she stretched out taking in the

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scene. *Now I would have liked to have seen those gardens*, she thought. Moments later she jumped from the roof unseen, mixing easily with the temple crowds as she wove her way past the fire alter waiting patiently for the men to emerge. When Takumi appeared she ran to him, feeling strangely relieved to see him again. She noticed he seemed to be favoring one shoulder. "Are you hurt? Perhaps I can heal that," she said reaching out a hand. Takumi pulled away casting a subtle glance at Tenori who looked on smiling. "Yes *do* take care of him. After all he's getting old, frail," he said nudging his friend.

"I'm fine Sorano," Takumi replied stubbornly pushing ahead of them. As the three approached the Niomon gate they said their goodbyes against the setting sun. Takumi bowed low to Nukura. "Remember what we have discussed."

"I will," he replied.

"Then until we meet again." Takumi and Sorano descended the steps to the winding road, making their way past the line of shops (several of which Sorano insisted on stopping in so she might buy gifts for Michio). Returning to the car she sat quietly for a moment before asking, "Did you have fun?" "Such experiences are - *illuminating*," he replied pensively. "I'm tired. Let's get something to eat. Besides we need to get ready for tomorrow." They drove east to the coast eventually stopping at a small seaside restaurant. Pulling up Sorano announced her need to make a phone call. "I'll drop you here then and I see if I can't find something for tonight." Sorano nodded disappearing inside.

The phone rang several times before Michio finally picked up. Sorano could hear the music blaring in the background and Michio jumped happily between the beds chewing on . . . *something*. "Hello? Sora is that you?!"

"Of course it's me."

"Well how did it go?"

"Fine, I think. I'm at a restaurant on the coast beyond Narita. We are going to stop for the night and -."

"You're not coming back here?" asked Michio sounding slightly disappointed before crashing into the night table.

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"I don't know. I don't think so. We met a man named Tenori Nukura at the temple. He is going to check to see if the remains we matched really came from there."

"Sounds good. What are *remains*?"

"I have no idea. That's one of the things I want you to find out. I'll call you tomorrow when I know more."

"Okay," sighed Michio. "Stay out of trouble - *if you know what I mean*."

"Alright," replied Sorano. "And try not to turn our place into a disaster area . . . *and you know what I mean*."

"Yeah okay," replied Michio. And with that she was gone. Sorano slid into the booth waiting for Takumi's return. Soon however she began to feel as though she was being watched. Looking around she saw three men approach her. "Hey you, you looking for someone? You alone here?" asked one sliding into the booth beside her.

"Umm no, I was just... I'm fine," Sorano said as the men crowded her uncomfortably. Uncertain of the appropriate course of action in such a situation, she began to glance around the room.

"*Making new friends?*" said a voice behind her suddenly.

"Well umm -."

"We thought your friend could use some entertainment pops," snapped one.

"She doesn't," replied Takumi.

"Shouldn't she be the one to decide that?" echoed another.

They were still standing between he and Sorano.

"He's right I don't," said Sorano firmly. "Besides you smell like beer," she added, not quite knowing what to say.

"C'mon, we'll show you a much better time than you could have with this old man," they continued.

"In case you haven't figured it out yet, playtime's over,"

Takumi muttered lowering his voice.

"I don't think you know who we are. We're known around here. People respect us and stay out of our way," said one.

"If they know what's good for them," added another.

"It's not out of respect. It's because you're dirtbags,"

Takumi said irritated. "If you don't know the difference at your age I feel sorry for you."

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"You're the one who's going to be sorry," snapped the leader. "Doubtful," Takumi replied moving to sit down.

They pounced but Takumi had the advantage in speed and experience. He swept the first man from his feet quickly, taking the second with scarcely more effort before closing his fist around the leader's throat. "Perhaps you'd rather entertain me," he said softly, a sudden darkness rising in his voice as he slowly began to squeeze the man's windpipe.

"It's okay," Sorano urged tugging at him.

Yet Takumi did not let go. He seemed somehow different from the man he'd been at Narita. Darker, less in control of his emotions.

"Professor I said it's okay!" she shouted.

Takumi looked up coming out of his reverie. "Yes of course," he replied tossing the man aside. "It's been a pleasure gentleman, but I think it best we do not meet again," he mused grimly. No one in the group seemed to disagree. Their discussion over, he dragged Sorano up from the table. "I think we should take that food to go."

Together they walked alone down the empty road leading off the main highway. Sensing her unease Takumi threw his coat over Sorano's shoulders to keep the evening chill from her. She looked back irritably. "You know I can take care of myself," she stated.

"I don't doubt it," he replied keeping pace with her, his hands in his pockets staring straight ahead.

"Seriously."

"Of course. Come on, let's find a place to stay. Tomorrow may be a busy day." But as they approached the hotel he seemed to hesitate. "Umm, is it alright to get a room here tonight? I thought we should be close in case we heard something from Narita tomorrow. But if it's a problem -." Uncertain as to his meaning she replied, "Oh it's no problem; I do stuff like this all the time."

His eyes narrowed opening the door to the lobby. Before long the evening's arrangements were made and Sorano assumed she had everything well in hand. However entering the hotel room she realized there were several things about

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human behavior she wished she knew more about. *I'd call Michio but I'm sure she has no more idea than I do*, she thought.

"Umm so I'm going to sleep in this bed over here," she said trying to sound as authoritative as possible.

"Of course. That's absolutely what I had in mind," he said quickly.

"Oh good. Because you have no idea the energy I give off when I sleep."

Takumi gave her a curious look. "Yes - well I'm just going to have to take your word for that Sorano."

She saw him wash up and get into bed, wondering what the proper thing to do was. "Okay so - I'm just going to tuck myself in," she said hesitantly.

"Sounds good," he replied turning off the lights.

She lay in the darkness but found she could not sleep.

"Are you asleep?" she asked after a time.

"No."

"Do you think we're close?"

"Huh?"

"To the stone."

"Oh. Depends. We'll see tomorrow."

She lay back quietly for several minutes. "Can I ask you something?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why were you angry tonight?"

He grew quiet. "I don't like - certain kinds of problems," he said finally.

"Hmm. I think you don't belong to this age."

"Why do you say that?"

"The rules you live by belong to a different time."

She heard his voice rumble low in the darkness. "Times change, fashions change, what matters most . . . does not change."

As the morning sunlight filtered into her room at Tariki Hongan temple Urd awoke irritable as she had for the past several days.

Hidden

“*Good morning*,” Belldandy called to her as she stepped into the hallway. “How are you today?”

“Mmm, mmm, mmm,” Urd replied wandering down the hallway in her nightgown.

“Did you have a bad dream?”

“No, not bad, just -,” she ducked outside into the sunlight of the courtyard looking east. “There’s something, something I can’t quite place.”

“You feel something?” asked Belldandy coming beside her.

“I don’t know,” she said stubbornly, staring at the horizon.

“I’m sure everything’s fine,” Belldandy said putting her arms around her affectionately. “I don’t feel anything.”

“You’re right, it’s probably nothing,” she said looking at her sister’s smiling face.

“Why don’t I go and make us some tea,” Belldandy offered heading inside. As she reached the kitchen Keiichi stuck his head out from the tea room. “Urd?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said lowering her voice.

“She seems kind of out of sorts these days.”

“I think maybe she’s just, well sometimes I think she gets lonely,” Belldandy replied softly.

“Really? She doesn’t seem like the lonely type to me,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She turned looking at him with her sapphire eyes. Her smile made him feel as though time itself stood still, as though only this moment existed, his body bathed in golden light from her mere presence. Somehow every time he looked at her he felt as though he were seeing her for the first time.

“You know it’s possible you just don’t know her the way I do,” she whispered coming beside to him.

“Umm yeah that’s probably it,” he replied weakly. Her warmth made him feel as though he resided in some earthly paradise.

“*Hey perv!* Could you stop ogling my big-sis for one second?” cried the small irritated voice behind him, jarring him from his daydream. “You know it’s really disgusting having to see that kind of stuff first thing in the morning!”

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Or rather it would be paradise if not for one thing.

“She has a point,” said Urd leaning in from the front doorway.

“I mean as one not continuously bathed in a sea of love I sometimes feel as though I need a life preserver around here.”

Make that two things, he thought soberly.

“Well I’m sure it’s something you’ll get used to,” Belldandy said handing her sister the tea.

“Hmm I suppose,” Urd replied turning back to the courtyard. She sipped her tea slowly, her eyes looking once more to the east. She continued to stare for several more moments before shaking her head. “Ahh this is a waste of time, I have more important things to do,” she said ducking inside to join the rest of the household for breakfast.

Chapter 2

Second Sight

The next morning Takumi awoke to the sounds of the ocean above Katakai beach. Rolling over he discovered he had acquired a visitor sometime during the night.

“Hey,” he said poking Sorano as she lay curled up beside him.

Sleepily she opened her eyes. “Oh sorry. I was just curious. I heard the girls at the University talk about it so much I wanted to know what it was like. You know - *sleeping together*.”

Frankly I don’t see what the big deal is,” she said sitting up.

“Thank - you,” Takumi muttered heading for the shower.

“Though I think you may have heard an abbreviated version.”

“What?”

“I said let’s go get some breakfast,” he replied shutting the door.

After breakfast they spent the better part of the morning walking the beach waiting for news. Takumi thought they should visit the Marine Park in Kamogawa and so lunchtime found them staring side by side at several large glass tanks as the minutes ticked by. It turned out they spent most of the day that way, touring the aquarium and the surrounding coastline. If not for the events before them it might have seemed like any other day; just the two of them together. Except she knew there had never been a day like this, not really. For it had never been just the two of them. And she couldn’t help but feel that today was not going to be any ordinary day. *Why is he doing this, wandering around with me? It feels as though he’s working up to something, like the calm before the storm.* She glanced over catching him looking at her as though he were weighing his options. *He’s preparing himself for the next step. And by the looks of it he knows it will be soon.* Sorano found herself wondering if he would ever think about her when this was all over.

That afternoon as they climbed the narrow path from the beach to the main road Takumi’s phone rang. “Yes?” he answered

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expectantly. "I see. When? Uh-huh. Please do so. Yes I will let you know. Thank you." He hung up staring out to sea.

"Nukura," he answered in response to her expectant stare. "He says the fragment *did* come from Narita and the time-frame's correct."

"So?"

"We need to get some gear for tonight."

Sorano felt her heart race as she jumped in the car asking no further questions. They drove south along the coast road until they reached a sporting goods store. Moving purposefully, Takumi quickly collected the items he needed. As the clerks bundled the gear together Sorano eyed their purchases with a growing feeling of uncertainty.

"What exactly are we doing?" she asked looking over the items.

"Camping," he replied.

Half an hour later Takumi found the spot he was looking for west of Katsuura. By the time they parked above the windswept coastline the amber hue of late afternoon was quickly giving way to the turquoise of twilight. For a moment each of them stood on the narrow bluff above sea, lost in their own thoughts yet somehow comforted by the other's presence. The ocean echoed around them as they descended the path setting up camp on the beach. It was almost evening by the time they finished bringing down the last of the gear and lit the small campfire. Takumi once more quiet as they practiced roasting marshmallows under the starlit sky.

The time has come, she thought. But how to begin?

"Are you sure I'm doing this right?" she asked examining her marshmallow as she sat next him.

"No I'm not. I have very little formal training in this," he replied. As if in proof at that moment his latest work burst into flames falling into the fire. Sorano smiled standing up to face the dark sea. "Can I ask you something?" she inquired.

"Ask. I will answer if I can."

We must start with something simple. "Why do you look at the ocean the way you do?" she said watching the incoming swells.

"I was born by the sea." When this answer didn't seem to satisfy her he added, "A long time ago I had a dream. But in the fullness of time..." his voice trailed off and Sorano was

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unsure if he would continue. Soon however he began again saying, "When I came to these lands I started to feel that dream again. A face somehow familiar, yet I know I have never seen it before." He stared into the fire. "When I look at the sea sometimes I feel as though I can almost touch it."

Sorano considered this. *Not terribly helpful*, she thought. She turned again asking him pointedly, "Do you trust me?"

"Of course."

"No I mean do you *really* trust me?" she said taking up the blanket and pulling it up around herself. "Not in the way you trust strangers but the way you would trust - your family."

"I don't know, I don't really have a family," he grinned.

"Oh? I think you do," she said leaning in, looking carefully into his eyes. "Didn't you belong to a family when you and Tenori were young?"

She could see he was trying to suppress any hint of surprise. Looking away she continued. "It's important isn't it? Those who help us, believe in us, guide us as we grow. When I was young I had mentors who affected me deeply. I tried to live by their example. Yet sometimes . . . it's so hard to know the right thing to do."

Takumi looked into the firelight reflected in Sorano's eyes, eyes now clouded with emotion. A part of him sympathized with the girl, for was her struggle so different from his own? Or did her eyes reflect something else? Concern about something she was doing perhaps, or was about to do? He looked at the night sky putting a hand to her shoulder. "It will be alright Sorano. Believe in yourself and it will be alright."

Looking at her he thought he saw kindness in her eyes as she shifted placing her head on his shoulder. "Just remember, no one can ever know with certainty those in whom they place their trust. You must simply use your best instinct."

"I know," she replied turning slowly. "As I know now that you have not told me everything. What I need to know is, *why*?"

His eyes shifted. "So you think I've been holding out on you? Or is it something else?" he asked, his tone changing subtly. Sorano stood silent. "Well in either case given the circumstances perhaps it's best if we *both* quit playing games," he replied.

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“Believe me, this is *no* game,” she countered, a sudden sharpness coming to her voice.

“No it’s not, just like you’re no museum representative,” he muttered his eyes narrowing.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about. I know the museum confirmed -.”

“*Please*. You can’t possibly think I’m that much of a fool,” he said beginning to circle. “Or did you think your looks and your innocent smile would fool me so completely?”

“Why did you let me stay all this time then?!”

“*Because those items need to be found*. And I know you know something about those glyphs. The ones not even our computers seems able to place. How is that *exactly*?”

“What makes you think I know anything about them?”

Takumi leaned close gritting his teeth. “Because you’re *wearing* one of them.” She looked at him puzzled. “Center ring on your right hand,” he said growing impatient. “Oh it may not be an exact match but it’s *definitely* in the same symbol group,” he said raising her hand to the firelight.

Dammit how could I have been so stupid? The inscription on the seal!

“So I ask you, why should I help someone whose motives are so unclear in retrieving such an important artifact?”

“How can you be so ignorant?! You don’t even know what could -.” She stopped, realizing her words. Takumi watched as she paced back and forth in the firelight considering her next move. “Suppose I told you a story?” she said finally.

“Suppose you did. Though I’ve noticed that stories have a tendency to serve their masters,” he replied throwing more fuel on the fire.

“I’ll let you decide,” she said sitting low by the fire. “A very long time ago -.”

“Oh I like stories that start like that,” he replied sarcastically. Sorano furrowed her small brow continuing, “There was once a powerful family -.”

“With a powerful ruler not doubt,” he added.

“*Who with any luck will soon send you a message not to interfere with my stories*,” she muttered. “The truth is my employer isn’t really fond of delays in such matters.”

Second Sight

"Perhaps you should tell him -."

"How do you know it isn't a *her*?" she offered.

Takumi shifted position quieting.

Staring into the fire Sorano began, "This family ruled a territory which was vast beyond measure, as were its treasures. Among these were six sacred stones, each valued because they helped govern particular form of knowledge and wisdom.

"What kind of knowledge?"

She shrugged, "That which guides the heavens, the earth, the seas - and men's hearts. For many centuries the members of this family shared this knowledge and power." Her eyes grew almost iridescent now against the flame as she spoke. "But in the fullness of time there came to be two rather different ideas as to how to best organize and rule this territory. In one, personal freedom became the dominant virtue. In the other, harmonious co-existence. Eventually these competing philosophies grew farther apart until they could no longer be contained within the same realm. As members of this family became divided, so too were their vast possessions so that a kind of equilibrium might be maintained."

"How deep was this division?"

Sorano gazed at him through the fire appearing somehow older.

"Quite deep. In some cases individual families were split. As you can perhaps imagine, the more time passed following separation, the more members of each side began to view the others as rivals; considering their ways to be corrupt. So too some began a desire reclamation of those possessions held by the other side. After all they knew much about the nature of these objects and how to use them since they had shared their power in the past. Which brings us to the present situation."

"Meaning?"

"The items of legend."

"So you're saying you're a representative of this family and that these items belong to you?"

"Something like that."

"Yes, well it's the *something like that* which concerns me. By the way, which side of this conflict do you represent?"

"The side which stands for right of course," she said proudly.

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“Uh-huh, somehow I had a feeling you would say that. But legends referring to the spear of heaven and the stone don’t say anything about coming from a faraway land or belonging to some particular family,” he replied warily.

“Because of the nature of their power, this was the only -,” she seemed to search for the right word, “-*domain* where the true potential of the stones could be realized. So yes it’s true they were located here. But believe me they do come from my family *originally*,” she said holding his stare. “Following division three stones were held by each branch of the family, thus balancing their native distribution of power.”

“In that case I don’t see the problem.”

“If things had remained that way perhaps,” she said coming closer to the fire. “But as I said there have always been those who have sought to return them to their *rightful* place.”

“In other words steal them.”

She nodded. “And while the choices men make may alter the balance of power one way or the other, the effect which the loss of even one of these objects could produce would be very . . . *unsettling*.”

“What kind of effect?” he asked feeling a sudden chill come over him despite having little idea what she was talking about. “Even I do not know the full extent of their power. But what I do know -.”

“Yes?”

“Let’s just say the stone we seek can alter the nature of *entanglement*,” she whispered hesitantly.

“And that’s not good?”

She shook her head.

“But isn’t that what you’re trying to do? Find the stone, take it, and change things?”

She turned once more to the ocean. “*No*. I’m attempting to recover a stone which was lost from our sight.”

Takumi shook his head. “In that case you’re a little late. We have are stories concerning these objects beginning in the late 1200’s.”

“They’ve been lost *longer than that*,” she said solemnly, staring into the darkness.

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Takumi looked at her in disbelief. “You’re saying you know the *exact date* it was lost?!”

“Yes. It was -,” she thought for a moment, “roughly eight hundred and twenty-five years ago.”

“How could you possibly know that? No one knows that!”

“That doesn't matter now. What matters is finding the stone. Does that information help you?”

“Well, having a precise date does *tend* to be helpful in these matters,” he observed.

“How?”

“It would mean that it was lost during the latter part of the Gempei War.” Strangely this information did not seem to mean much to Sorano, who was now watching the pattern of the fire’s smoke drift skyward as though telling her something. Her luminous eyes looked back at him. “In that case there’s more. It’s time I tell you all that I know from the beginning,” she said tugging the blanket around her as she came to sit by the fire. “The stone was originally housed on a sacred mountain close to a temple.”

“Yeah - that doesn't help much. Did this place have a *name*?”

“Yes – yes I know that,” she muttered to herself thinking. “The mountain was called umm . . . Mt. Koya! And the stone was originally located at a place called Oki-, Oku -.”

“*Oku-noin*?” he offered grimly.

“Yes! That’s it!”

He was beginning to understand why he might have been sought out for this assignment.

“How exactly was it lost?”

“It became hidden from our view.”

“But if it was so important to you, how could it become hidden? How could you lose so valuable an item?” he said puzzled.

Sorano tucked in her knees under her looking at the sky. “It was a time of great confusion. And remember it was but one of the great treasures we oversaw.”

“Yes but still -.”

Sorano grew flustered. *Why is it so difficult for him to understand?* “It was disturbed from its alignment. And so its

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path became clouded - hidden. How much more clearly can I say it?"

To Takumi it wasn't clear at all. "I understand it was lost, but . . ." He tried a different approach. "You told me once you were chosen for this task."

She nodded.

"But why? Why *you* specifically?"

She thought for a moment. "I am gifted to see those things which are hidden; gifted with the second sight."

"But what does that mean exactly? That you have ESP?"

"ESP?"

"Let me put it this way. If I hid something from you right now like the car keys, could you find them?"

"Car - *keys*?"

"*These!* These things," he said dangling them in front of her with a certain frustration. "You're certain you're the best person for this project?!"

"*I didn't say I was the best!* I said I was chosen to go," she replied defensively.

"Could you find them?"

"Of course."

"How?"

"I would concentrate on them forming a picture in my mind."

"But what if you'd never seen the object I'd hidden?"

"That would make no difference."

"Why?"

"Because obviously I'm not asking the keys, I'm asking *you*," she replied speaking as though it were common knowledge.

"Yeah . . . *obviously*," he replied hesitantly. "But what if I didn't want to tell you?"

"That too poses no problem," she replied confidently.

"You mean you could read my mind?"

"Something like that."

"Can you *really* do that?"

"For most men . . .," she said peering at him oddly.

"But if that's true why didn't your family just do that when the stone was lost?"

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Sorano was beginning to understand his confusion. "As I said, it was a time of great crisis. The minds of the people were greatly disturbed."

"So you told me. But what difference would that make? That interfered with your ability to locate it?"

"Of course," she replied, again as though it were common knowledge. "We could not locate a person with a specific memory of its removal. Therefore -."

"Well what if *no one* removed it? What if it simply got knocked loose and rolled down the mountain?"

"*Do you think this is funny?!*" she shouted glaring at him.

"No I'm - just trying to understand," he said raising his hands.

"We could easily feel its presence if it were *that* close," she said annoyed.

"Uh-huh," Takumi nodded with less than total confidence.

"How close exactly?"

She shrugged.

"Well, from here to that cliff for example?" he said pointing.

"Farther."

"How much farther?"

"I don't know. Maybe twice as far. Even in its quiet state.

"Hmm, so perhaps a thousand feet," he muttered. "Well then how do you know the other branch of your family doesn't already have it? That they haven't had it for more than eight hundred years? I mean, if your people have been looking for it all this time it must be well hidden."

"Indeed. But I do not think *they* have the stone."

"Why?"

"They would have used it by now."

"Meaning?"

"The object allows control over certain forms of knowledge and power. They definitely would have tried to use that by now if they possessed it."

"Which brings up another point. You say that you're part of a family who values this stone. Yet you're the *only one* trying to retrieve it?"

"Others have come before me," she replied thoughtfully. "But it is important that at any one time only a few of us search for it."

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“Why it that?”

“If large numbers of my family began to search our actions would quickly be detected by our counterparts on the other side. They would then know for certain that the stone was missing. *That alone* could cause problems. And of course they too would then begin to search for it in earnest.”

“You mean they’d sense your weakness and use it against you?”

“Yes.”

He looked at her shaking his head. “Is there anything *else* you think you should tell me about all of this?”

“Yes. To assist us an individual was chosen who could mix unnoticed with those who might have knowledge of the stone. It was to him that the Spear of Heaven, that which you know *Abyss* was given, both for his own protection and to aid in recovery of the stone. He was asked to seek it wherever it might be, and to contact us if ever he found something.”

“And what happened to him?”

“In truth we never knew what became of him after he left Mt. Koya,” she said sadly.

“Who was this individual, and how could he find the stone?”

“He was a monk, what you might call a yamabushi skilled with weapons similar to *Abyss*. If he were close to the stone he would know, for in its presence *Abyss* would feel its power and respond,” she said raising her hands to the fire.

Of course. That would explain why legends of a lone warrior armed with a sacred naginata are intertwined with those of the stone, thought Takumi.

“Of course members of my family searched for him long ago. But neither he nor *Abyss* were ever found, and we never knew what became of them. From that time on we’ve learned little else beyond myths regarding the spear and the stone. Naturally we have looked into these, but have come no closer to determining their location - even after eight hundred years.”

“Thank goodness you haven’t been holding out on me!”

Takumi said stretching out by the fire.

She stood up pacing once more. “Everything I’ve told you tonight concerns a past that happened long ago. None of it would have helped you to find the stone now. In truth we now

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believe our best hope lies in cross-reference analysis of the tens of thousands of digital documents contained within your system. When you began to examine all of the data concerning these events we hoped you might find something, anything, which could lead us to the stone.” She stepped close. “I’ve now told you everything I know, even those things which my superiors might not wish me to say. You cannot imagine what is at stake. Tell me, does any of it help you?”

He said nothing walking to the water’s edge. Kneeling he concentrated, listening to the sound of the waves for several minutes. *This could be a mistake, but ultimately I have to try* he decided finally. Returning she saw he was holding the object she’d seen earlier on the East Lawn. He held it up, turning it over in the firelight. “Do you recognize any of these inscriptions?”

Sorano took up the object studying it closely. “Yes and no. It seems to be a form of our language. But it doesn’t really say anything. Symbols I recognize are mixed with ones I don’t. They’re nonsense.”

“It tells us one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Our evidence suggests that this item is one of those most closely linked to the stone, and it’s marked with your strange symbols. Today Tenori confirmed to me that this bone came from an elderly monk who was buried around 1240 in Narita. It’s possible he may have been alive at the time of the stone’s disappearance. The fact that you recognize these symbols suggests he’s somehow connected to it.”

“Bone?” asked Sorano.

“Yes, you’re holding a human scapula. You know, a shoulder blade,” he said pointing.

Sorano’s face grew pale, quickly placing it down at the edge of the fire pit. “Umm yeah that’s interesting,” she said wiping her hands. “*Wait*. You think this is from our yamabushi?”

“I doubt it. Tenori said records indicate this person came from Mt. Hiei.”

She looked back blankly.

“Let’s just say he was from different ‘family’ compared to your yamabushi. And these inscriptions were obviously made some

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time after he died. *Wait.* Maybe that's why some of symbols don't make sense. Maybe the person who copied them did so inaccurately from some older or damaged document."

"Possibly. This symbol here would definitely have been on Abyss. *That's it!* These symbols along the upper edge would not have been on the spear, but *definitely* would have appeared on the stone!"

"Then it seems reasonable to assume whoever wrote the original copy actually saw both the stone and Abyss. Still, I suppose it could have been made by someone who saw the stone long before it was actually lost."

"I don't think so," replied Sorano excitedly. "The symbol at the center is definitely unique to the spear, which wasn't created until *after* the stone was lost."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"What does that symbol mean?"

"It's a name."

"What name?"

"*Lind.*"

"Hmm doesn't sound like that information helps us much," he mused.

"You think there's any more information on – err the rest of him?"

"No, the shoulder blade was the only bone which had any inscriptions on it. It's strange. It's one of the reasons it first came to the attention of the translation department. I just don't understand why someone would inscribe only on a shoulder blade," he muttered.

"Yeah . . . weird," Sorano said glancing around nervously.

"Sorano I want to ask you -."

"*Look*, I have no idea why anyone would write on a shoulder blade. It's not like it has special significance or something!"

He looked back at her puzzled. "Umm yeah that's not what I wanted to ask. Can you tell me what *this* symbol is?" he said pointing to the lower margin of the bone.

"Uh yeah that's the symbol for *tear*," she replied relieved.

"Tear?"

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“Yeah, it's another symbol which definitely would have been on the stone.”

Takumi rubbed his neck searching the backpack for something else to eat. As he did Sorano pulled a piece of burning wood from the fire to examine the bone more closely. Looking from all angles she began to mutter, “Yes, yes I think it is.”

“What?” he ventured cautiously.

“Look at these small holes.”

“Oh,” he shrugged disappointed. “I guess you haven't seen many human bones. Those holes are a natural feature.” Yet still she persisted, busily flattening the sand around her as she looked up at the stars. Taking up small pieces of stone she began throwing them down in front of her in an ever-growing pattern.

“What are you doing?”

“Some of these small holes aren't natural; they were formed. Look, you see how smooth they are? Their relative position on the bone is not unlike our astral maps.”

“Astral maps?”

“Yes, sometimes on a flat surface we represent a given position in terms of the stars seen from that point at a specific time. Takumi thought he saw several problems with this approach but kept them to himself. “Is that what this is?”

“No it's not a star map. But this *is* the way we would indicate North and East,” she said, pushing the triangular bone grudgingly so its primary apex now faced away to the left.

“Well what does it mean?”

“Huh? I don't know? I was hoping you might,” she replied squinting. With her finger she began to draw a line in the sand connecting each of the stones in front of her.

Unfortunately to Takumi it looked like nothing more than a squiggly line moving this way and that across the sand. “Okay, so it may be a map or indicator some kind. But without a proper reference it could be anywhere. What does this say toward the center?”

“The only two words I can make out are *East* and *boundary*.”

He wrinkled his nose. Well what do you think this is at the apex of the bone?” he said pointing to the set of concentric circles.

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"I'm not sure but it might be an indication of height."

"If that were true how high do you think this point might be?"

"Typically one line is about, oh maybe ten times higher than those cliffs over there," she replied.

Takumi felt his heart race. Jumping to the edge of the fire pit he stared down at Sorano's line in the sand from above. "Of course! East, boundary . . . *EAST OF THE BOUNDARY! Hakone* - it has to be!" he cried rushing to pack.

"Are we going somewhere?"

"Your drawing is an outline of the coast from the Sagami Gulf to Eastern Tokyo Bay! The marker must be Mt. Fuji!"

"*Fantastic!* But I don't see any specific spot indicated. How big an area does that represent exactly?"

"About a hundred and fifty square miles."

"I see. So I should bring comfortable shoes then."

"No. *I know* where the stone is. *It's in Kamakura!*"

"You've known where it is all along!" she said accusingly.

"No. Take another look at the bone. Pick it up."

Tentatively she took up the edge of the scapula. "I don't see anything."

"*Turn it over.*"

Now Sorano spied the subtle etching on the back surface.

"It's a serpent!"

"Not just any serpent. *A water serpent,*" he grinned continuing to pack.

"So? There must be a thousand serpent shrines in this country."

"True. But in Kamakura? Eight hundred and twenty-five years ago?! *Not so many.*"

Sorano couldn't quite believe her ears. Could it be? She looked at him with eyes suddenly brimming with hope. He grabbed the last of their gear tossing it over his shoulder.

"What you seek is at Zeniarai Benten," he said dousing the fire.

Sorano stared up at the sky for a moment taking it all in. Then dropping her blanket she raced up the hill after him.

Departing the Chiba headlands they set out across Tokyo Bay over the Aqualine Bridge. The further they drove the quieter Sorano grew quiet. Takumi too was busy reflecting on the

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evening's events. He really didn't know what to make of everything she had said. Few families could reliably trace their lineage back 800 years. So the family she'd spoken of probably represented a religious group. The rivalry she'd referred to could have been between the Hiei and Koyan Buddhist monasteries. As for her beliefs regarding the stone's 'power', he'd always known it was valuable - though not necessarily for the reasons she'd mentioned. And she was certainly entitled to her own beliefs. Didn't his own people believe that Abyss held great power? But what was beginning to trouble him was what might come next. On the one hand everything seemed fine. Everything Sorano had told him to a point had matched his own information, even those things he'd chosen not to disclose to her. *Everything but one.* And it was that which concerned him now. It was the inscription written on the monk's *other* scapula, the one he'd made sure was not entered in any database and of which he alone knew. It read: *Keep Abyss ever at hand, for there are those who will come seeking the stone - and they are the incarnate of evil.* At that moment crossing the waters of Tokyo Bay a strange feeling of dread descended upon Takumi. But looking around he saw nothing, only but Sorano smiling quietly up at him.

Chapter 3

The Dig

They approached Zeniarai Benten weaving up the narrow tree-lined road hemmed in by rock embankments on either side. Pulling over Takumi checked the time. It was almost midnight.

“What are we doing?” asked Sorano.

“Waiting. We’re not exactly walking into a deserted area you know. There will be security. If we want to have a look before getting any permits we’ll have to be careful. Leaving the car behind they walked down the road to the shrine, hand-in-hand as though lost tourists. Just short of the tunnel serving as the shrine’s main entrance Sorano stopped, spotting a telephone pole rising close to the thirty foot high natural rock wall. In a matter of seconds she was on top of it.

“*Sorano what are you doing?*” he hissed. “Be careful,” he whispered glancing up and down the street discreetly.

“I’m just going to check and see if it’s safe. Stay close to the entrance.”

“*Safe?*” Takumi pulled himself into the shadows of the tunnel gate and waited. A few moments later Sorano appeared from inside the tunnel unlocking the gate.

“How did you do that?”

“I’m surprisingly good with locks,” she said closing the gate behind them. Moving through to the passageway they soon emerged in the central courtyard. Surrounded on all sides by rocky embankments, Takumi could see the area was penetrated in a number of spots by a series of caves and caverns, only a few of which were normally open to the public. To his surprise however regardless of the barriers they encountered Sorano seemed able to bypass each with ease.

“Careful,” he cautioned. “There might still be people around.”

“Don’t worry. They’re sleeping.”

“You think so?” he replied uncertain.

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“Trust me,” she said looking into his eyes. “Everyone’s asleep now.”

As he approached the entrance of one of the larger caves he realized that now that they were here, they really had no way of further defining the location of Abyss or the stone. Sorano on the other hand seemed busy frantically rushing from one cave entrance to another muttering to herself. “*Here, no - no, over here,*” she said racing through the complex. Ten minutes later she seemed to have settled on a particular passageway. “Yes I think something is in here,” she announced finally.

Takumi ignited the chemical lights entering the passageway.

After several twists and turns Sorano stopped twenty yards down a branch of the main cavern. “Something’s back there,” she said placing her hands against the stone.

“Do you know how far back it is?” he asked watching her curiously.

“Maybe fifteen or twenty feet.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

But Sorano was already rushing back past him into the main passage once more. “I can feel it,” she whispered, “there is a more direct route.” She ran into the courtyard with Takumi following as fast as he could. He almost lost sight of her in the darkness as she circumvented yet another barrier entering a passageway adjacent to the one she’d just exited. “Yes, yes,” she muttered rushing into the cave reaching a small side passage sloping downward. After moving on about fifteen feet she called out excitedly, “Back here, I can feel it!” she shouted. Carefully she moved her hands up and across the wall as though searching for something locked inside. She seemed confused for a moment until her gaze flew upward. “Up here!” she shouted putting a hand to the low ceiling overhead. “It’s only a few feet above us. Stand back I’m going to open it.”

“*Open it?* How are you going to do that?!”

He watched as Sorano traced her fingers over the bare stone muttering. Then a second later the imaginary lines burst into brilliance as the roof exploded sending a thousand of pounds of rock crashing into the passageway. To Takumi’s amazement and horror Sorano swept the stone aside with a mere motion of

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her hands before climbing into the opening. Cautiously he followed her, illuminating her from below.

"Takumi, come quickly."

Looking up in awe he saw the hole she had created opened onto a small irregular cave she was now anxiously searching. Pulling himself up his eyes searched the cavern, soon spotting the massive central stone block. Upon it he could see a set of human remains lying beside an object wrapped in decaying cloth. Quickly pulling aside the wrappings he saw it - *Abyss*. Carefully he picked up the weapon feeling its weight. "*I can't believe it*. After so much time, it's revealed at last! Look Sorano!" But as his light moved over the room he could see she was crouched at the far end of the cave in tears. "IT'S NOT HERE!" she cried. "How could it not be here?! After all this time - *all for nothing!*" she said bitterly.

"We don't know that. Today we found a very important piece of -."

"You found what you wanted!" she sniffed sagging against the wall in despair.

"*More than 800 years*. Yet it looks as though it could have been forged yesterday," he thought turning the blade in amazement. Sorano's only response was to place her head on her knees and close her eyes. A part of her wished she could go to sleep and never wake up.

Takumi's hands moved carefully over each of the inlaid symbols along the spine of the weapon. For several minutes all was quiet in the cave. Then she heard his hesitant call, "Sorano, I think you'd better have a look at this."

Opening her eyes she found the cave was now pitch black. Or at least she had thought it was. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness saw now that a symbol along the spine of the weapon was glowing dimly. "Look Sorano. Do you see that? Does it help?"

She scrambled to her feet staring down at the symbol. *Lind*.

"It's not lost, it's not!" she said hope returning to her voice. "It must be close by!"

"How close? Close enough that you could feel it if you tried?"

"Well I don't think so but -," she focusing intently on the walls around her. "No. No I can't. Let's take it outside. Picking up

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the weapon Takumi followed her out of the cavern and down the narrow passageway. But as they entered the main passage he felt Sorano lag behind. Turning he saw her at the junction, hands outstretched. An instant later there was an intense burst of light, then all fell to darkness. *"I almost forgot.* I must make certain I leave no trace," she mused turning toward him. "No one should ever know we were here," she whispered through the dank silence of the cave.

Takumi turned away nervously continuing toward the exit. But he could feel she was gaining on him. The impact of everything he'd seen was beginning to sink in. Whatever she was he knew now it definitely wasn't human. So too he realized her next logical step. Walking ahead of he slowly concealed the chemical lights at his side, continuing for several more paces before turning to face her. Slowly he tightened his grip on Abyss.

"You are close to what you seek. I assume I'm no longer necessary," he said.

"I suppose you're right," Sorano replied easily, continuing toward him.

"Then let me ask you - do you intend to kill me here; or outside?"

Sorano said nothing approaching.

"I mean it's like you said, it's probably best to leave no trace." He stood ready, but after what he'd seen he had little doubt as to the outcome. He felt her moving toward him without any hesitation in the blackness.

"Is there something seriously wrong with you?" she grumbled brushing past him toward the exit. "Because believe me we don't have time for games. Throw me the guide and let's get on with it."

Relief washed over him as he turned to follow. Outside, Sorano climbed the rock wall above the cave. Holding Abyss she swept it in a wide circle, concentrating on everything around her. As Takumi too began to navigate the face (with considerably more difficulty than Sorano), he tried to think of where the stone might lie. By the time he neared the top he thought he had the answer. *"It must be,"* he said as Sorano

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peered over the ledge. “*Concentrate to the southeast, toward Jufukuji temple.*”

No sooner had he reached the top than Sorano grabbed him, scrambling to the far side of the rocky outcropping. “You’re right! There *is* something in that direction,” she cried excitedly. Wrapping her arm around him she jumped from the top of the wall over the narrow street to tumble down the slope on the far side. Together now they ran toward the open field, racing for the hill three hundred and fifty yards ahead of them hiding Jufukuji from their direct line of sight.

“It’s terribly weak, far weaker than I would’ve expected. But it’s there! I never would have found it if I hadn’t been concentrating on it, if you hadn’t been guiding me,” she cried happily running ahead to the base of the hill. “It’s close now. I can feel it.”

As they climbed, several sets of eager eyes sat watching them intently in the darkness. “*Quiet,*” hissed the grim voice to the others behind him. “*No one move.*”

Takumi gasped reaching the top of the hill, seeing the temple below. “I’m guessing it’s somewhere down there, hidden in the oldest part of the temple.”

“No - it’s much closer than that,” replied Sorano. “It’s right - *over here somewhere*,” she said making her way to a spot less than a hundred yards from the crest of the hill. “It’s difficult to place,” she said jumping across the uneven ground crisscrossed with numerous small cave inlets. “But I think it’s - HERE!”

The blow from her hand fractured ground beneath her revealing a narrow opening. Without hesitation she scrambled inside.

“*Come on,* there’s enough room for both of us - barely,” she urged as Takumi followed her into the tight space. Reaching the cavern he could see Sorano was on her hands and knees moving into yet another narrow passageway sloping downward at the opposite end. After some additional coaxing by Sorano and the activation of several chemiluminescent lights, Takumi also crawled into the second passageway. A moment later he emerged into the larger cavern which, based on the artifacts present, had not been occupied for some time. Sorano eagerly began examining the exposed walls of the cave, soon

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concentrating her efforts on a segment to the right. "IT'S HERE!" she announced finally.

Takumi raised his light revealing a small inlet but seemingly nothing more. "I don't see anything," he replied.

"Believe me it's here." Reaching out she grabbed hold of several almost invisible crags in the granite wall. Pulling and turning, a section of the seemingly solid wall gave away revealing a perfectly fitted piece of sculpted stone. Putting it aside she quickly thrust her arm into the opening as far as it would go. An instant later her body appeared to shiver, growing luminous as she pulled out the covered elliptical stone from the wall. She turned smiling brightly. "This is it! *This is what we've been searching for*," she said, relieve flooding her voice as she pulled off the covering revealing the stone.

Aside from the fact it was perfectly smooth and about the size and shape of an ostrich egg, Takumi didn't think their find looked very different from any other rock. "You're *sure* this is what we're looking for?"

She nodded placing her hand directly in contact with the uncovered stone. Suddenly it pulsed to life, giving off a brilliant glow which filled the cavern.

"Woah!" he cried stumbling back. "I see what you mean."

She returned the stone to its wrappings placing it snugly into her pack before making her way to the exit. "We should go quickly. The longer we are here -."

"I understand," Takumi replied following her into the upper chamber. Once there however Sorano seemed to hesitate, turning to face him in the closed space. Her eyes now clouded with emotion searched his. "It's been a long journey, but I know Abyss will be safe with you for the time being. You'll ensure it's protected?"

"Of course," he replied. *So she intends to keep her part of the bargain.*

She reached for his hand in what he sensed would be the last time. "There is much to say and little time in which to say it. We never could have found it without you. We - I will never forget you," she murmured. "But now it is important that -."

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"I understand. Please, waste no time," he replied as together they made their exit from the cave. Sorano stood up feeling the night air. "Stand back, I will open the -!"

Ultimately it was Takumi's reflexes which saved him. He flinched an instant before the bolt struck the ridge beside him exploding. Tumbling down the slope he instinctively tightened his grip on Abyss as he fell. Dazed and cut but not seriously hurt he looked up as Sorano burst forth in her true form, her tunic of white and blue generating a brilliant glow around her followed by something he could not clearly discern.

Quickly she drew her hands in a circular movement creating a form of defense between herself and the half-dozen creatures rapidly climbing the slope toward them. But it was Sorano who drew this attention. *What is she? A kind of angel?* And if she was - *what were the things coming after them?* But Takumi Sato's time to ponder such questions had run out, for they would be on them in seconds. "TAKUMI! Strike the core!" Sorano screamed from above alerting him to the oncoming threat.

"I -." But at that instant something dark and fast took him to the ground. With practiced skill he twisted breaking free of the creature, but only barely. Leaping ahead he ran down the slope through trees and broken boulders. But something fast and deadly followed close behind.

On the ridge Sorano had deflected most of Bessura's initial strike and destroyed the first of his demonic helpers with a quick sweep of her body. But now she knew the full extent of their predicament. Their enemies had trapped them, placing a seal over the region surrounding the cave. Its power blocked both sight and sound, leaving no way for her to call for help.

Dammit why didn't I let Michio know where we were going tonight? Me and one human trapped in here against them? We have no chance, she thought desperately.

Eighty feet below her on the slope a second demonic helper knocked Takumi to the ground. *He's strong - stronger than me,* Takumi thought. "*If I can just -*," he swept reversing his footing to throw his attacker off balance as he sprang forward with Abyss. With a quick thrust from the sacred naginata

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Takumi cut deep into his opponent's upper arm. The creature shrieked but seemed otherwise injured. *Definitely not human*, he thought noticing it was not blood which flowed from its veins. The creature leapt again as Takumi turned in defense, delivering two quickly cuts to the bone in the form of a swallow cut. The creature sprang back in pain but continued circling. *What the hell is keeping this thing up?!* he thought in disbelief. As he attacked once more, Takumi reversed his blow at the last instant, striking hard through his opponent's midline. The effect was instantaneous and devastating as the creature fell, dissipating to the winds. The others on the slope around him seemed to sense the effect as two more came quickly from above. But Takumi now understood Sorano's instruction and began to use it with lethal efficiency. As the first of the demonic helpers fell upon him he struck with all his strength in a circumferential blow slicing it fully in half at the midline. The second attacker followed quickly but Takumi rolled, striking at his throat with a reflecting blow. The creature staggered as Takumi quickly followed with a reverse swallow cut at the demon's center. As he too began to dissipate to the winds Takumi took to the slope climbing toward Sorano. But when he reached the ridge his eyes beheld a horrifying sight. Though one creature stood beside her, something noticeably larger and darker was holding Sorano by the throat in its taloned fingers.

"DROP HER!" Takumi shouted stabbing the creature in the back.

"RUN TAKUMI!" was all Sorano could manage before the creature's powerful arm caught Abyss, wrenching it from its back. Throwing both the weapon and Sorano aside he turned to face him. It was then Takumi saw its face, a large fanged demon possessed of burning red eyes. He felt weak, cold. The demon smiled back at him maliciously. "Do you think *a toy* like that could hurt the likes of me?" asked Bessura. "*No*. I will however show *you* the full meaning of pain," he said bringing up his hands in a spiral.

"JUMP!" screamed Sorano, turning to suddenly destroy the last of Bessura's helpers.

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Takumi did as he was told, tumbling, sliding, and falling down the steep slope before beginning to run. But the first-class demon seemed unperturbed, smiling back at Sorano. "Surely you know that will do no good," he said extending his hand malevolently toward the fleeing target.

Sorano leapt in desperation, throwing all of her power into the strike trying to displace Bessura's destructive blow. But an instant later she screamed as their arcs intertwine, the deadly bolt piercing Takumi body as he dropped lifeless to the ground. Her tears erupted as she watched in horror.

Bessura eyed her contentedly. "Well done. Is there anything else you'd like to help me kill?" Calmly he surveyed the scene which now left only the two of them alive.

"You know what I seek," he breathed. "Tell me where it is and I will be merciful. I will seal you and let Hild decide what to do with you. Perhaps she will even let you go . . . someday." Sorano made no move.

"Or -," he added closing his hand around her throat, "I can make you suffer in ways *you cannot imagine* my young goddess," he threatened.

Knowing she had no choice but to comply she reached out blindly taking hold of the pack.

"Excellent," Bessura said releasing her.

"It's here," she said humbly reaching inside for the stone.

Wary of a trick Bessura quickly snatched the pack from her.

Withdrawing the stone he greedily unwrapped its coverings as she looked on. As his hands touched the now bare surface she jumped, slamming her hand against his. "*HORO-BASU!*" she cried. Bessura screamed as his body ignited, and in that instant the entire region beneath the barrier exploded in brilliance. A second later all fell to darkness, becoming as quiet as it had been on so many nights since the stone's original internment centuries earlier.

At Tariki Hongan temple Urd awoke in her bed. She had the feeling she'd been in the middle of a dream, an old and rather unpleasant one. But now that she was awake she was once again gripped by a feeling, a feeling she couldn't quite place. Pulling on her nightgown she walked into the courtyard, then

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on around to the side of the house. The breeze outside was blowing gently through the trees, the night air perfectly clear. All in all a beautiful spring evening. For a moment she listened carefully to the sounds of the city below. Nothing out of the ordinary. *What is it?* she thought kicking several stones across the courtyard.

“*Urd*, you do know its 2:30 in the morning right?” Keiichi asked from inside the house.

“*Yeah Urd shut up*,” came the call from Skuld’s room.

“What is it *Urd*?” Keiichi asked coming to the doorway.

“I don’t know,” she replied stubbornly staring to the south.

“In that case some of us have to go to work in the morning. Could you practice being quiet please?”

“Would you like to practice being a lightening rod?” she inquired raising an eyebrow. Slowly Keiichi retreated inside only to be replaced by Belldandy several minutes later. “Oh *Urd*, you’re really worried aren’t you?” she said stepping off the porch to hug her sister.

“Knock it off *Bell*. I’m not crazy. Something’s not right . . . I just don’t know what it is,” she muttered hesitantly.

“*You just don’t know what it is*,” Belldandy repeated softly.

The two looked at each other in silence. “Well I have to tell you *Urd* I don’t know either.” She put her hands up to the evening breeze. “Because I sense nothing out of the ordinary.” “And I suppose because you’re a first-class goddess that should be the end of it?!”

“I didn’t say that. Honestly, I don’t see what you’re so upset about,” she said pushing back a strand of her chestnut hair.

“Are we having some kind of a club meeting out here?” asked the voice behind them. They turned to see Skuld sleepily wandering into the courtyard chewing a cookie. Belldandy looked at her frowning.

“Hey don’t get mad at me, Keiichi gave me this,” she said defensively.

Belldandy looked up tilting her head as Keiichi’s slowly recede in the doorway.

“So what are we doing out here anyway?” Skuld asked continuing to chew.

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Belldandy shook her head saying nothing, straightening her robe as she looked back at Urd.

“Oh is Urd in trouble?” Skuld asked happily.

“She thinks something is wrong,” Belldandy replied.

“*Still?* Hmm, I’ll bet it’s because you’re getting senile,” she suggested helpfully. “After all you’re pretty old.”

“I’m calling Yggdrasil,” Urd said finally.

“Now?!” cried Skuld.

“Why you think they’re *closed?*” she snapped.

The pleading look in Belldandy’s eyes silenced Skuld immediately. “Well perhaps that’s best,” she agreed as the two followed Urd into the house.

Minutes later within Yggdrasil, a familiar and very relaxed voice answered Urd’s call. “Hmmm, Yessss?”

“Peorth?! You’re on duty?”

“Huh, what? Urd?! The call was sent to my quarters. I’m here *with a friend*. And therefore *busy*. Now what is it you want?”

“I need someone to check on -.”

“Is this an emergency?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“Well then since you yourself are in fact a systems administrator, I’ll just ask you to come up here and check that out on your own when you get a chance,” she said hanging up. Urd cursed slamming down the receiver. “*Peorth*,” she hissed. “How is it going?” asked Belldandy as Urd came marching down the hallway.

“Peorth and I aren’t . . . communicating,” she replied.

“Do you want me to call her?”

“WHAT?! You think I can’t -.” But then another idea occurred to her. She smiled. “*Sure*, would you Bell?” she asked sweetly.

For the second time that evening Peorth picked up the phone.

“Urd I told you I’m with a - *oh hello Belldandy*. Yes it’s nice to hear your voice as well. Well of course as first-class goddesses we *always* think of others before ourselves.”

Listening in quietly to their conversation Urd heard a voice in the background ask, “*Is that really Belldandy? Can I talk to her?*” Peorth seemed to make several inscrutable sounds before begrudgingly handing over the phone. Urd heard several rounds of, “Oh, uh-huh I see,” and “well it’s very good

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to hear your voice too,” from Belldandy before their conversation finally ended.

“Peorth says she will check to see if anything unusual has occurred as soon as she’s able,” Belldandy reported ducking into the tea room.

“Thanks Bell,” Urd said retiring to her room.

“Oh and Urd, do you know what else? Do you remember that guy -?”

Urd smiled beginning to feel more relaxed already.

On a lonely slope above Jufukuji, the body of Takumi Sato began to stir. Rolling over he looked up at the darkened ridge in the distance. “Sorano?” he whispered hopefully. But above him there was only silence. In the dark his body felt strange, as though it had been torn open and left hollow and apart. At the very least he knew he had broken several ribs. Placing his free hand under his jacket to check the injury a chill went down his spine as he touched the front edge of a wound near the center of his chest. Noting its extent he quickly realized it was fatal. He lay back trying not to let his emotions or the pain or get the better of him, knowing that Sorano was probably hurt as well. *If I can reach her, then maybe I can do something*, he thought somberly. Slowly he began to drag himself up the rocky slope. Some time later, it seemed to Takumi much later, he reached upper ridge near the cave mouth. It was then he saw her, lying sprawled on her back on the uneven ground. Moving as quickly as his body would allow he reached down to touch her, but he knew she was gone. For much of his life Takumi Sato had had difficulty showing emotion. But alone now in the darkness he wept openly for the young girl which lay broken before him. Her body seemed light and he sensed that soon she would be no more. Still, he thought he should do something. Gently he pulled her into the small cave, laying her to rest in the cavern they had so recently opened. After making a small memorial he sat beside her for several minutes in silent prayer as a strange sensation came over him. *“Take the stone and the ornaments I wear and go. Quickly.”* “Blood loss,” he muttered. But no sooner had he said it than he realized he should be dead by now. *“How is it possible? I*

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shouldn't have even made it halfway up the slope." Reaching under his damp shirt he realized that his wounds were no longer bleeding. In fact he did not seem to be growing weaker but stronger with each passing moment. "She must have protected me somehow," he said touching his hand to her small brow.

With the warning fresh in his mind he finally exited the cave seeking his escape. But he quickly ran into problems. Moving along the upper edge of the ridge he soon realized he was trapped behind a kind of barrier. *Quickly you fool*, he thought fumbling in the dark for an opening. *It's completely sealed above ground, but below?* After several minutes of searching along the eastern and western edges of the field he located a segment of cave which seemed to run in the right direction. Though tight in several spots it proved large enough to allow him passage through. Once he determined it exited beyond the barrier he returned to where Sorano lay, kneeling quietly beside her. *"You gave me life Sorano.* It doesn't matter what the legends say, I know you were a force for good. I will find your family if I can so they might know what you did here. I'm sorry I cannot do more." With that Takumi whispered his final words and removed her seals. A moment later he picked up Abyss and the pack and crawled beyond the barrier. Making his way down the dark hillside and across the field to Zeniarai Benten he pondered his options. *Where do I go now?* His instincts told him to get as far away as possible, but where? If more of what had attacked them really were seeking the stone, or him, or both, they would certainly find him in Tsukuba. The Northern dojo was a possibility, but it was a long way from here and he didn't think he had the strength to make it. Besides, what would he say to his old sensei after all these years? *'Hello, I know we've not spoken in more than a decade but I'm being pursued by something . . . not human. Could you give me a place to stay for the night? Oh and I should probably mention I have something they're willing to kill for. Also my traveling companion is dead so the police might come around looking for me.'* No, even if he survived the trip to the dojo, the look Okubo would give him would certainly kill him from shame. *Narita Temple?* A possibility, at least Tenori would

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understand the background. But for Takumi the real question was could he keep any of them safe? Or would he simply be getting more people killed in the process, bringing them trouble they neither wanted nor asked for. The more he thought about it the more he realized the logical thing to do was to drop both the stone and Abyss in the nearest deep pit and forget about all of them. But in his heart he knew it was impossible. Too much had been sacrificed in their recovery; he was obligated to see things through. Besides, if Sorano's family had been searching for the stone for more than 800 years because of fear over what it might be used for, he wasn't anxious to leave any subsequent discoveries to chance. So too he considered whether he just might need his new-found weapon for whatever lay ahead. "No, the best thing to do is lie low for a few days and see what happens. If I survive I can bring Abyss to Narita and contact Sorano's roommate. If not - at least I won't get anyone else killed." Reaching the car he checked the time. It was just after 5:00 am.

Setting off alone toward the Aqualine Bridge he decided to head for the beaches of eastern Chiba. Yet as he emerged on the Boso peninsula above Tokyo Bay the he was gripped by a sudden overwhelming sadness. "*Don't think about it -*," he said shaking his head trying to block it out. But he knew in his heart this was the spot where only a few short hours ago Sorano had sat beside him looking up with such hope. Now she was gone and there was nothing he could do about it, nothing that would make her alright again. Just this morning she had awoken beside him, now -. "*Stop it!* Your pity and remorse won't change anything. The important thing now is to finish what has begun." But in truth he wanted to stop. He wanted it to end. He wanted to go back. As he ascended the mountains of the Chiba headlands passing the ruins of Kururi castle Takumi Sato began to feel distinctly unwell. Twenty minutes later he knew with certainty he would never reach Maebara on the coast. Was it a poison? He felt his time running out. He needed to stop and soon. Seicho-ji temple lay not far ahead. "A Nichiren temple? Well it can't be helped I suppose. Besides, anyone looking for me would not think to

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look there.” He made the final miles quickly, parking the car where it would not be immediately noticed. Then crossing the mountain slope he approached the temple discreetly from below. Walking into the shadow of the valley he began to feel a little better. Could it be the light itself? Crossing into the path of the approaching sun a moment later he had his answer. Pain struck throughout his body as he desperately made his way into the lower level of one of the temple’s more isolated outbuildings. Crawling inside he felt a terrible weakness take hold of him. With the last of his strength he sealed off the opening, dragging himself into its most protected corner with Abyss at his side. Moments later as the morning sun rose over the coast Takumi lapsed into unconsciousness - never knowing that the hunt for him was already well underway.

Second visit to Jufukuji

It was early morning when Lind awoke in her room to the urgent request. Pulling on her tunic she began securing her deadly implements before venturing out into the Valkyrie subsection of the massive Yggdrasil complex. As she strode along its corridors the members of her team silently fell in behind her like ghosts. Never among the more popular residents of the sanctuary, a number of the morning workers elected to take alternate routes upon seeing their approach. Behind her Lind heard the fearful whispers of “*one-wing*” as she passed, but she had long since grown accustomed to these. Reaching the lower council chamber she was met by a young administrator.

“Thank you for coming. I know that -.”

“What is it you require?” Lind replied without ceremony.

“We have a matter that needs your attention,” she replied pushing open one of the massive inner doors. “We had a report that something may have occurred in the region outside Tokyo this morning. We need you to determine if anything is amiss.”

“From where does this report originate?” asked Lind.

“I understand it was *Urd* who made the report.”

“Urd? And what additional information is there?”

“None,” said the administrator. “Just a . . . strong feeling of concern.”

Lind muttered something under her breath before replying, “And you believe it is necessary for my team to go and investigate such a matter?”

“Well . . . yes. Currently we have several operations ongoing in that area. If something is wrong the Valkyries will be needed. I should also say that you and your team were specifically requested to go.”

“By whom?”

“*The Almighty*,” the administrator replied simply.

At this the Valkyries immediately began making preparations to depart. “What exactly we are looking for?” asked Lind.

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“I was told that you would know when you found it.”

The news provoked several more utterances behind Lind but she silenced these with a glance turning once more to the administrator. “I see. In that case we shall leave at once.”

The administrator eyed her coolly. “Of course commander. The gate stands ready for you.”

In the predawn stillness in the skies over Tokyo Lind and her team began to search, looking for anything that might be amiss. Though it took the better part of an hour eventually they found the anomaly at Jufukuji. The group came down not far from the crest of the hill just before sunrise. Moving quietly on foot they approached the slope from the far side. “Sir there’s a barrier -,” warned her lieutenant, but Lind crushed the obstacle with a blow from her axe without slowing her stride.

“Let us begin. Search the entire area. We must know what happened here as quickly as possible,” she called to them. Bending low she moved her hands over the grounds, feeling for traces of both friend and foe. Within moments the team had identified most of the battle’s participants. “Two demonic helpers fell here,” Lind said kneeling with several others at the base of the slope. “Yet the presence on the ridge was that of a first-class demon. I don’t understand why -.”

A shout came from above. “*Commander. Inside a cave! One of ours!*”

“Alive Rota?” she asked throwing back a long strand of her hair.

The Valkyrie looked back shaking her head. “*There’s more. Her seals are missing.*” At this several Valkyries gasped.

Quickly a second Valkyrie appeared from within the cavern.

“Sir you need to have a look at this right away.”

Moments later as she emerged from the cavern, the team stood huddled around Lind in stunned silence. “You’re correct Sigrun,” she said to the nearest of them. “*It is Sorano.*”

The Valkyries looked at one another in shock as several of the younger members shed quiet tears. Expectantly they looked to Lind but she said nothing. Finally one spoke. “Sir we all -.”

Second visit to Jufukuji

"I know," she said walking alone back to the battleground, continuing to piece together the events in her mind.

"I just don't understand how *everyone* could have been killed," said Sigrun.

Somberly Lind's eyes surveyed the gray horizon. "They weren't. There's a survivor," she said tracing the ground as it ran east. The group exchanged glances as she turned to address them. "Let me ask you, how long have we been together?" she said putting her hands on the shoulders of the two closest to her. "A long time."

"Indeed. We've been friends a long time," she said, though at that moment neither her expression, demeanor, nor the tightness with which she gripped the Valkyrie's shoulders suggested such. "So I ask you all as friends here and now, did any of you know about this? Did anyone know what Sorano was up to?"

The Valkyries shuffled nervously about her.

"I didn't hear anything," said Pogn.

"Well -," ventured Mist said haltingly, "You hear rumors all the time."

"The nature of our work requires secrecy," said a Puror. "If Sorano was sent, I'm sure it was deemed necessary from the highest authority."

"Yes," Lind interjected. "And I'm sure I'll have the opportunity to discuss the matter with the authority very soon. For now return and report all that you've seen. Upon your return however I would ask each of you to do your utmost to discover whatever information you can regarding the details of this matter." She turned to leave walking away down the ridge as Sigrun her second in command followed close behind.

"Can I ask you something?"

Lind nodded.

"If you didn't know about the mission, where did you think she was all this time?"

A golden glow grew in Lind's eyes as looked back over the now silent battlefield. "Doing research in human history . . . at *Tsukuba*," she replied grimly.

"They sent her alone?"

"I think not. But it's time I found out for myself."

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As Valkyries continued searching the grounds several looked up to see Lind walking away, heading for the rapidly forming portal.

"Where are you going?" They asked.

"*To find the survivor,*" she said entering the portal without a backward glance.

At the University there had been the usual gossip regarding Sato's sudden disappearance at the beginning of the school term. So it was perhaps not surprising when Aki spotted the young woman nosing around his office late Monday afternoon.

"May help you?" she asked.

"Perhaps. I'm Yuki," said the girl slowly curling her finger around a long strand of her hair. "I was wondering if you knew where Professor Sato was."

"Yuki huh. No, I'm not sure where he is," she said taking note of the girl's somewhat curious appearance. "I understand that he was called away unexpectedly."

Something crossed the girl's face but vanished just as quickly; her eyes carefully scanning the room.

"Perhaps I can help you with something?" Aki suggested.

The girl thought a moment. "Well you see I'm a *friend* of the professor's, and I *really* need to find him as quickly as possible."

"Ah . . . I see," Aki replied blushing at the girl's candidness.

"Well I'll see what I can find out and let you know." In truth Aki was herself a bit curious as to the nature of Takumi's absence. So she was not displeased to have a reason to 'officially' look into the matter.

"Oh thank you so much," sighed the girl. "I'm sorry about all of this. I wouldn't bother you if it wasn't *really* important," she said looking up earnestly.

Aki sympathized with her. After all she had been young once too. Still, for her own good she thought it best to add, "I hate to say this but maybe you shouldn't put too much emphasis on Professor Sato. I mean he's been working quite closely with another young woman for some time now."

Yuki's eyes narrowed but her tone remained light. "That must be Sorano," she offered.

Second visit to Jufukuji

Aki nodded leaning closer. "And I probably shouldn't tell you this, but another young woman came looking for him just this morning."

"Maybe Sorano's roommate?" the girl suggested.

"No I've seen that girl. This one was *different*."

Carefully Yuki surveyed the surrounding terrain her pulse quickening "Well it certainly sounds like he's popular," she replied smiling.

"Yes, perhaps you see my point. Why don't you come by my office tomorrow afternoon and I'll let you know if I've found anything. Would that be convenient?"

Yuki fingers tightened around the straps of her backpack. "Oh you can count on my being there," she replied.

Aki relaxed smiling. "You know I must be getting old. I can't keep up with the trends you students are into. Is that hair the fashion now?"

The girl looked back at her blankly. "Umm yeah - *fashion*," she repeated.

"And you have the most unusual eyes. Are they contacts?"

"Oh no," the girl replied now staring intently at the main lab complex. "They are quite natural . . . assure you."

Peorth began her morning with yet another call from Tariki Hongan temple. "Hello Earth Help Center, where we spend all our time answering inquiries from goddesses with far too much time on their hands," she yawned.

"Well? Did you actually *do* something or did your *entertainment* schedule last night prevent it?" Urd snapped in reply.

"Yes Urd, as a favor to *Belldandy* I filed it, with all the importance I usually attach to unsubstantiated reports from *second-class* goddesses," she muttered wearily.

Urd stuck her head out from the porch, staring like a hawk at the heavens, wondering if she had sufficient power to hit Peorth from her present location. *Hmm difficult, maybe if I got up on the roof*, she thought tilting her head. "And?" she gestured continuing her interrogation.

"- And they said they would look into it."

"And?!"

The Twilight Hour

“And I’ve heard nothing since. Which frankly doesn’t surprise me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It means second-class goddesses may not always possess the necessary skill to determine what *is* and what *is not* important.”

“Why you little -,” Urd seethed as she was interrupted from behind.

“Oh what are you yapping about *this* time Urd,” Skuld sighed pushing past her on her way to breakfast. “Yap, yap, yap, that’s all we hear from you lately,” she said continuing on into the tea room.

“I’ll finish this conversation with you the next time Peorth,” Urd said chasing after her younger sister.

“Yeah I’ll be up here just counting the minutes,” Peorth replied tossing the phone aside.

Urd ducked into the tea room to see Skuld sitting smugly beside Keiichi eating at the low table.

“*I do not yap!* Keiichi do I yap?”

“Umm well I wouldn’t say you yap really,” he replied having no desire to join in their argument.

“*Good Morning Urd,*” Belldandy called coming to sit beside Keiichi. “Did you contact Peorth?”

“Yes,” she muttered crossing her arms.

“And were they able to -.”

“No,” she said irritably.

“Well then maybe there was nothing to find,” she said taking a sip of her tea.

“*Something’s* out there,” she said shaking her head. “Look Bell I can’t help it. I’m a systems administrator. It’s my job to spot problems before they become catastrophes.”

“Umm yeah... systems administration. Been doing a lot of that lately have you?” Skuld asked chewing on a rice cake.

Urd glared back at her. “Why is it every time I see you lately you’ve got something shoved in your mouth? You’re sure you’re not *pregnant* or something?”

Skuld’s turned three shades of red before exploding. “Shut up you idiot!” she bellowed.

“Can we please just try to have a pleasant breakfast?”

Belldandy pleaded putting an arm around Skuld. Both quieted

Second visit to Jufukuji

yet each continued their attempts to intimidate the other with their glares.

“The news said people in Kamakura reported seeing a flash of lightning under a clear blue sky last night. You weren't out there torturing anyone were you Urd?” Keiichi said trying to lighten the mood.

She looked at him slowly sipping her tea. “Only in my dreams Keiichi, *only in my dreams.*”

“How much longer?” asked Michio from the back seat.

“About twenty more minutes I would guess” said the driver.

Michio slouched back against the door continuing to stare at the trees rushing by one by one on the highway in the afternoon sun. For her it had been a long and uncomfortable night. She had not heard from Sorano at all yesterday even though she'd stayed up most of the night. At first she was happy, imagining all the trouble she might be getting into. But when she finally closed her eyes she'd been plagued by terrible dreams.

Thoughts of Sorano calling out to her, of people chasing them . . . and worse. Awakening that morning she resolved to go to Narita and try to pick up Sorano's trail. After searching the campus for several hours she eventually convinced Terry and one of his friends to take her out to the temple complex.

“Do you want me to try and call the guy they went to speak with again?” Terry asked from the front seat eager to help the attractive young woman.

“No, no it's alright. We'll be there soon enough,” Michio replied. She knew from experience people were easier to read when you surprised them. “Did you hear anything more from Professor Sato after they met?”

“No. The last time I spoke to him was the morning they left.”

“What did he say?” she asked hopefully.

“Umm, not much. The usual - don't blow up the lab.”

Great, thought Michio. If I can just get to Narita and find this Nukura maybe - !

The shockwave from the impact in the field beside them struck the car instantly. Silently Michio extended her power trying to control the car as it slide off the road into a ditch.

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“*WHAT THE HECK WAS THAT?!*” shouted Terry as a hundred yards away a great swirling dust cloud appeared in the field. “Must have been a meteor or an earthquake or something,” cried the driver.

Michio said nothing crouching low in the back seat. For she had seen such things before. A moment later a young woman emerged from the dust cloud heading straight for them.

“Wow look at that! Do you think she’s hurt?” shouted Terry.

Damn, Michio thought sliding down farther in the seat.

The woman continued her steady approach. Reaching the car she peered into the back window. “Michio?”

“Yes Commander,” Michio replied weakly looking up from behind the seat.

“Who?” asked her companions.

“Umm, just someone I work with,” Michio said nervously.

“Come with me,” commanded the Valkyrie.

“Of course sir,” Michio said getting out of the car.

Walking away Lind turned to the boys in afterthought, “Thank you for your - *assistance*,” she nodded.

“Where are you going?! We don’t feel right just leaving the two of you out here alone.”

“That’s kind of you. But we’ll be fine.”

“It’s okay,” insisted Terry. “The car’s stuck anyway.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we can change that,” Lind said returning.

“I don’t know, looks pretty jammed to me.”

“Looks can sometimes be deceiving. Let’s see if we can’t push it free.”

Predictably the boys were amazed at their strength in pushing the car from the ditch as the girls walked gently beside them. Somehow before they knew it they had said their goodbyes and were on their way. As the car faded in the distance Lind turned to the girl. “Report your status.”

“I’m sorry Commander. I was just going to Naritasan to find out what I could about Sorano’s current location.”

“Sorano is dead,” Lind replied grimly. “We found her place of rest south of Tokyo this morning.”

Michio stood in silent shock not fully comprehending her words. “That’s not possible. I spoke to her the day before yesterday.”

Second visit to Jufukuji

"I assure you I am not mistaken," Lind replied tersely. Michio felt herself trembling, gasping before falling to her knees. "It's not possible! It can't be - *it can't!*" she sobbed kneeling at Lind's feet.

Lind bent down slowly picking the girl up. "I'll have you back home soon Michio. But first I need some information. I want you to tell me everything the two of you have been up to the past few weeks. And I want to know everything, *everything* about the one named Sato."

Darkness had fallen by the time Mezzumura and his followers had picked up Bessura's trail into Jufukuji. Approaching the battleground they fanned out picking their way through the slopes just as the Valkyries had done that morning searching for any clue. Minutes later he stood at the head of the slope surrounded by his men. "Well now we know what happened to Bessura's party - *the moron*," Mezzumura hissed shattering the boulder beside him with his fist. "*You see what happens when my plans are not obeyed!*" he shouted to the group. "Stupid bastard probably wanted to take all the credit for finding the stone for himself!"

"Doesn't look like he'll be taking credit for the stone - or anything else from now on," said one of the demonic helpers. Mezzumura and his men chuckled. "When was the last time we heard from him?" he demanded.

"About a week ago," replied one.

"Hmm, he must have been on to something. If only he'd had the brains to notify me first," the demon fumed.

"Perhaps they were overcome too quickly to send word," suggested the second-class demon to his right. At this the group began to grumble.

"*Impossible*," growled Mezzumura. "Goddesses are inferior to us. They could never have overcome an entire group so quickly."

"Yet Bessura and five of his servants fell," muttered another.

"A product of their own greed no doubt. They fought, but failed to win," Mezzumura scowled unsympathetically.

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"It appears at they succeeded in eliminating at least one goddess," said a servant emerging from further up on the ridge. The news had an encouraging effect on the group.

"Good. Did you locate her seals?"

"No."

"Not surprising since we're not the first ones here. I sense the Valkyrie's stench upon this ground," Mezzumura remarked. Several members of the group exchanged nervous looks.

"They must now have the stone," said one sullenly.

"I think not," retorted Mezzumura. "For if they had retrieved it, why bother sending Valkyries here *after* the battle to sniff around like dogs? No, they are looking for it as well," he said assuredly.

"Perhaps Bessura has hidden it."

"*Perhaps*," Mezzumura replied dubiously. "More likely he -."

"*Over here!*" came the cry. "Another presence, one of ours I think! It leads off in this direction," shouted the demon excitedly.

"But if the Valkyries have been here, is he not destroyed by now?" asked one.

"No. It's as I've always said. They are inferior to us when it comes to tracking. I doubt they could follow such a weak presence. Now!" he shouted threateningly to all, "spread out and find him without delay!" As his followers scattered, Mezzumura watched them confidently. *This could be lucky. I may yet be able to have my revenge*, he thought.

As evening approached, Takumi awoke disoriented in the cellar at Seicho-ji. Gathering his belongings he exited the building heading for the car. From there he continued eastward, traveling until he reached the coast. Though he felt better than he had that morning he was still strangely tired. Yet forty minutes later as he walked among the evening visitors to Kamogawa beach his mood had improved. He was gripped by a feeling that somehow this night was different from all others he'd known. The terrain around him felt somehow more alive, the stars above more brilliant. As a boy he had loved wandering the coastline at night, but tonight he felt a special connection with the sea around him. *I have forgotten the dark*

Second visit to Jufukuji

beauty, he thought humbly. He wandered the sandy beach for almost an hour before thinking to re-check the status of his wounds. Reaching under his shirt he was surprised to find that the injury on his chest was now largely healed, leaving behind an irregular scar toward its center. *Explains why I'm not dead at least*, he thought. Another effect of Sorano's power? He didn't want to think about it. In fact there were many things he was trying hard not to think about. Like why he'd fallen ill that morning, and what it was that had really attacked them. And what might come looking for him now. Could he recognize such a danger if it appeared? And if not couldn't they just attack him here on the darkened beach before he ever knew what happened? Suddenly Kamogawa didn't seem like such a good refuge. Eventually he decided the more secluded terrain of the Namegawa peninsula seven miles up the coast provided better protection. "Its cliffs and rocky shoreline will give me solitude and a place to reflect. So too it will conceal me, forcing those that might come looking to negotiate its cliffs making it harder to take me by surprise. At the very least it will give me a chance to see what's coming."

By the time he'd parked at the Namegawa train station crossing the coast highway to the sea it was almost midnight. Searching for refuge he was amazed how swiftly he could now cover the terrain in the dark, moving deftly over the wet escarpments rising from the sea. Yet even as he scouted the shoreline he couldn't help but feel as though something was gaining on him. Several times along the slopes he stopped looking backward, waiting for movement in the darkness. But each time he told himself there was nothing. And yet the feeling would not leave him. "I'm too exposed out here," he decided finally. "I need to move inland." Re-crossing the coast road into the low lying hills he was once more gripped by the feeling. A feeling that something was coming. Something he would rather avoid. Ascending one of the smaller canyons he eventually found a spot where he could survey the surrounding landscape unseen. He slowed his breathing crouching in the darkness, waiting; hoping whatever was coming might pass him by in the night. Minutes passed in cold silence and then he heard it. The group

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came, approaching on the trail on his left. He pulled himself deeper into the shadows staying still.

"He's close," said one.

"Yes, over there I think," said another.

"Indeed. He's beyond those trees," exclaimed a third pointing.

"I see him," said the leader moving toward him as though in plain sight.

So much for hiding, thought Takumi.

"Who are you?" demanded the demon standing fifty feet below him on the trail.

Takumi stepped out unbowed. Sizing them up he could see there were five in all. A head demon and several helpers, not unlike the group that had attacked he and Sorano at Jufukuji. Panic began to grip him. *What do I do now?*

"I asked you a question!" growled the leader. Takumi knew from his tone his next response would dictate precisely how long he lived. *They haven't attacked yet, so they must be unsure of what happened. I could fight them here, but even if I weren't so tired they'd kill me before I got five feet.* Bluffing seems the logical option.

"My master became gravely injured and called to me from afar. And so I came," he said boldly, hoping there were no immediate and/or obvious holes in his story. Of course the fact he knew none of their names might pose a problem. He also rather hoped that none of them would ask him the name of *his master* any time soon, or what exactly he was doing in this canyon. Yeah other *than that* the story holds together perfectly – *idiot*, he thought cursing himself. Still he had little choice but to continue. "When I arrived only my master remained, though gravely wounded," he said.

"Bessura and five of his servants destroyed by a single Valkyrie? Impossible!" hissed one suspiciously.

"So Bessura didn't betray us," interjected another.

Bessura hmm, so far so good, thought Takumi. "He told me that an angel named Sorano fought ferociously with a spirit he'd never seen before," Takumi added trying to do her justice. "*Goddess*," Mezzumura corrected narrowing his gaze. "Now where is the stone? I know it's close," he said leaning forward clenching his fists.

Second visit to Jufukuji

Yep, they know about the stone, Takumi thought sullenly. He knew now they would never let him leave alive with it. With few remaining options he made a fateful decision.

“That is of course the reason I’ve been waiting here for you,” he retorted trying to sound confident. Taking the backpack from its hiding place he handed it to him. “My master told me to find you and give you this. What you seek is inside.”

Mezzumura's eyes grew wide.

“Take it. For it is of no consequence to me,” offered Takumi.

Mezzumura snatched the pack away looking inside. “You’ve done well little one,” he replied smiling broadly. “Why have I not seen you before?” he asked considering him closely now. Takumi drew a blank. Mezzumura’s eyes passed over him and in that instant he sensed something of creature’s truly horrific nature. Nervously he wondered what if anything Mezzumura could sense of him.

“Bessura must have drawn him using his own power,” said a servant behind them.

“Ha! It’d be just like that scum to try and get ahead by building his own private army of human converts.”

Takumi had no idea what they were talking about. But it seemed better than anything he was going to say. “Of course, I would have thought that much was obvious,” he replied with as much false bravado as he could muster.

Mezzumura smiled holding the stone aloft. “Now this is my kind of traveler!” he said giving Takumi a rough slap on the back.

Takumi noticed his words seemed to suffice for the whole group. But so too he noticed that none of them seemed to sense the presence of Abyss only a few yards away. “I’m sorry I cannot continue with you, but I am not well,” he said apologetically, hoping they might now leave him in peace. Mezzumura eyed him suspiciously. “Of course. I see it in your eyes. How long has it been?” he asked.

“For what?”

“Now you *are* kidding me,” laughed Mezzumura.

“My master gave me the power to find you,” Takumi said hoping this response would answer any outstanding questions.

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Mezzumura pondered this. "And so you have. In either case I think we need to take care of our new found friend," he said as members of the group smiled maliciously.

"Of course, of course," they replied in a manner that made Takumi shiver. He watched as Mezzumura directed his hands making a mandala on the ground which soon sprang to life.

"Come," he beckoned. Crossing into the portal it took Takumi several seconds to realize they were no longer in the hills, or even on the Boso peninsula. They seemed now to be standing in a section of greater Tokyo.

"Where are we?!" he asked.

"Roppongi," Mezzumura replied walking ahead of them down the alleyway.

"What are we doing here?"

"Visiting a client of mine," he said nodding to the busy pachinko parlor at the end of the street. "One who chose to renege on the terms of a contract he made with me some time ago. But we'll make sure he makes up for that delinquency tonight," Mezzumura stated merrily. "Here's what I with you to do. Go to the door and remind him of the contract he has failed to fulfill."

"And then?"

"Tell him you're here to collect payment," he said simply.

"Why should I? I think I've done quite enough for you already this tonight!" Takumi said sternly.

"That you have my friend; that you have. So trust me when I say this is something I can do for *you*. There's no need for worry. This client is a real piece of work. And if you should encounter any problems, *we* can more than take care of them," he said confidently.

That's the first thing you've said tonight I believe, thought Takumi. "How do I know this person is really the man you say he is - which is to say important enough to deserve my attention," Takumi said crossing his arms, hoping the bluff would relieve him of whatever duty they had planned.

"You are Bessura's kindred. Read his thoughts," shrugged Mezzumura.

"I'm not sure I can," replied Takumi.

Second visit to Jufukuji

Mezzumura smiled leaning over him. "When you're close enough, you'll know,"

Takumi did his best to suppress a shiver. I still don't see what *I'm* getting out of this," he growled trying to read Mezzumura's intent with his eyes.

"*You will,*" the demon replied with finality.

Alone Takumi crossed the street approaching the heavily tattooed men guarding the doorway. After insuring he carried no weapon he was taken to the master of the house.

"I've come to remind your debt," Takumi said confronting him.

"I see," replied the man behind the desk. "Then by all means let me repay you." At his signal several of his minions attacked without warning. Takumi's speed and experience allowed him to deflect the initial blows but soon a knife struck him in the liver, followed quickly by another to the chest. Striking the far wall he slumped to the floor, life draining out of him.

"Who sent you?! Speak quickly and I will be merciful," demanded the man. But as Takumi sensed he had no intention of honoring his words he remained silent. He shuddered gasping for breath. Yet even now as he lay still he could feel his bleeding beginning to slow. *It's just as before. I should be dead and yet -.*

At that moment the door burst from its hinges as Mezzumura merrily strode inside. "*Good to see you all again!*" he called, his voice booming in the narrow upstairs room. "But what's this?" he gasped in mock surprise as he peered over the desk. "*This is how you treat my guest? How are you little one?!*" he called. "Why don't you get up and show them who you *really are.*" Much like the stunned men now trapped in the room Takumi looked back saying nothing. But with continued encouragement from Mezzumura he slowly began to rise to his feet; much to the horror of those assembled. Placing a trembling hand on the blade piercing him he slowly drew it out. Fearful cries of realization now rippled through the room. The master of the house attempted to escape but was instantly pinned down by Mezzumura. "*No. You were foolish enough to violate my contract,*" he whispered darkly. "*Now I think it's time you introduced yourself properly to my friend.*" With inhuman ease he threw the man across the room to Takumi

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who drew out the remaining blade with greater surety now, tossing it to one side as he caught the man by the throat. "Are his thoughts more apparent to you now?" Mezzumura taunted grinning. Takumi realized there were indeed thoughts swimming in his mind; thoughts not his own. To his horror he began to see and feel those things which the man routinely oversaw. *Terrible things*. His body began to tremble uncontrollably. The effect was not lost on Mezzumura who stood to one side watching contentedly. Nodding now Mezzumura spoke to him, whispered something which Takumi's mind could not comprehend, yet his body told him to be true. In an instant, almost without consciousness realization, he snapped the man's neck and bit down quickly finishing the grizzly process. Cries of panic erupted throughout the room. But as the rapidly rejuvenating Takumi stared into Mezzumura's eyes he knew it was far too late for any of them. In little more than a minute was over. Soon after, the group exited through the lower levels of the club taking several suspiciously cumbersome packages with them. Takumi saw on the faces of the staff they passed that none cared to investigate the matter further.

Sitting astride the iron moorings of the concrete dock, Takumi watched the watery reflection of the nearby Rainbow Bridge as Mezzumura's servants finished depositing the last of their cargo into the depths of Tokyo harbor. Hearing them approach he turned warily.

"Now I must leave you," Mezzumura said gathering his sordid flock around him. "Don't forget to make yourself a snack whenever you get hungry," he smiled.

Takumi nodded soberly. "I'll try and remember that."

"You did not tell us your name," said one of the helpers. He decided there was no reason to lie, particularly after the evening's events. Even if they did eventually discover his connection to Sorano he could simply say he was doing Bessura's bidding all along. "*Takumi*," he said eyeing the group, thankful to be rid of them. But then he realized their departure presented him with an entirely new problem. "Err,

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where will you go now?" he said trying to sound as disinterested as possible.

"Let's just say I'm the guest of honor at an altogether different gathering tonight," Mezzumura replied courteously. For Takumi the response was not exactly illuminating.

"Indeed, Lord Hild is not always so patient," chuckled one of the flock before being silenced by a glare from Mezzumura.

"Well, what if I find something else? How will I contact you?" Mezzumura chuckled. "It is *I* who will call *you* if necessary. Pray I don't do so too soon. You need time to recover and regain your strength." With that they were gone, disappearing through a gate similar to the one he'd seen earlier.

For the second time in two days, early morning hours found Takumi crossing the Aqualine Bridge to the Boso highlands. At the back of the bus he sat quietly closing his eyes, trying to block out all he had seen and felt that night. As for the stone, that too he attempted to put of his mind. Of course he'd failed, utterly betraying all of Sorano's hopes in less than a day. But there was little he could do about that now. Fighting them in the hills would have been pointless. They would still have the stone and there'd be no one to warn Sorano's kind, if indeed more really existed. No the worst thing he did tonight was not asking more about these angels, or goddesses, or whatever they were. Well - *perhaps not the worst thing*, he thought awkwardly. Where do they live, how can they be contacted? Surely I could have been smart enough to extract such information without arousing their suspicions. *Yeah*, knowing where Sorano's people are would come in kind of handy right about now; he thought angrily surveying his surroundings once more. Yet it may have been wise to not tempt fate too much. Difficult to know how much that Mezzumura can really sense; or how powerful he really is. They didn't kill me, which may mean they can't read my thoughts as readily as I can theirs. In either case there are more urgent matters to address. How did they find me, and what is it I've become? The wounds, the attack in Tokyo. What was it the demon said? "*One of us.*" Is that what is I've become - *one of them*? "No!" he cried causing several of his fellow passengers to eye him curiously. *Don't*

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think like that! The priority now is to get back to Namegawa and reclaim Abyss . . . and find a safe place to rest before morning. *I have a bad feeling that will be critical.*

Leaving the bus at Kamogawa Takumi walked the shoreline for a second time that evening in the hours before dawn. As he walked northeast along the shoulder of the coast road he felt certain now that something had changed. The sensation he'd felt earlier had returned, but far more powerfully. A feeling of never seeing the night, the sea, or the stars quite so beautiful. Of everything looking the same, yet somehow being different. His eyesight felt more acute, his hearing more attuned. He walked for several more miles in quiet contemplation, listening to the sounds of the night in ways he never had before as he considered his last imminent problem. If Mezzumura is right *nourishment* is going to be a real problem. But in that moment carried on the distant winds, he thought he heard the sounds of struggle in the distance. He continued to walk thinking - *but then you never know.*

Miles ahead of him high in the moonlit sky another creature of the night was also busily searching. "I know I felt something in this direction earlier but now - nothing," the rider said frustrated. After one final sweep over the low lying hills, Stringfellow and its owner departed to the northwest, anxious to be home before the others awoke. Behind them Takumi exited yet another tunnel enclosing the coast road as he too began to realize that time was getting short. Departing the road for the hills he was astonished at the speed and distance he could now cover. *That was why they fell so easily to my hands tonight.* Moving past stone and tree he crossed the final miles quickly, soon reaching the spot where Mezzumura had intercepted him. With considerable relief he discovered Abyss unperturbed right where he had left it. "*Good*, now for some accommodations." Crossing the road to the sea he reached the complex of ruined buildings he'd spied earlier. After some searching he settled on a segment of tunnel set into the hillside lying above the main complex. "Not great, but it will serve my needs for tonight," he said sealing off a segment of the inner core with several large concrete slabs. It was only now as he

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sat huddled in the dank stillness of the tunnel that he truly began to feel alone. For he knew for certain his old life was gone now. He rocked back and forth as fear, failure and sadness got the better of him for some time. "No, now is not the time to be thinking of this," he whispered finally. "For there are things which need to be done, things which *must* be done, if I am to have any hope of correcting the mistakes I've made."

The early morning sunlight burst intermittently through the clouds as the young Valkyrie swept over the eastern face of Mt. Fuji. *I don't see her but she must be there somewhere*, she thought bracing herself against the cold mountain winds. She turned soaring gracefully back toward the north face of the summit as she focused her eyes closely against the snowy ground. Finally she saw her, perched like some majestic eagle on a ledge three hundred yards below the north face. Quietly the Valkyrie landed behind her as Lind continued staring silently toward the sunrise.

"Sorry to interrupt you."

"No it's alright," Lind replied continuing to gaze east.

"No one - has heard from you in over a week," said Pogn.

"We - were concerned."

"I've been here," Lind replied as though it should answer all questions.

"Has there been any sign?" asked Pogn.

"No," Lind replied, her eyes now watching the hills of Kamakura.

"It's really gone then?"

"Yes," she replied somberly.

"They've taken it -."

"I believe so."

"Then we have failed. There's nothing more we can do."

"*For now*," Lind said patiently, walking to the edge of the precipice surveying the steep slope below. "But they will have to return it to this realm if they are to truly use it. And that is when we must strike. Until that time . . . we must be patient."

"Will you return with me sir?"

Lind stepped back stretched her shoulders. "Home would be a welcome change." Together they dove over the cliff face,

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gliding for several hundred feet before soaring out and over the mountain expanse. But even as they flew Lind was haunted by the same question, *Why wasn't I called to search, to finish what was begun? To them it was more than 800 years ago; to me . . . I remember like it was yesterday. Have they forgotten all that was lost? Or do they fear what I might do to get it back?* The Valkyries soared in the light of the rising sun for several more minutes before finally turning toward homeward.

Mezzumura made sure that word of his triumph reached the demon realm well before his own arrival. So it was no surprise that by the time he appeared a great multitude had gathered, each anxious to see if the long sought treasure had indeed been recovered. Coming through the portal he entered the infernal realm at the foot of a series of steep marble stairs leading up to a magnificent ancient fortress. He moved quickly and with purpose, for he knew he was expected. High above them stood Hild, the great demon lord of the realm. Dressed in all her finery her long red robes billowed slowly behind her from unseen winds. As Mezzumura climbed the steps she surveyed the subjects below sensing a mixture of envy, greed and fear. Indeed of all those gathered only Hild seemed completely at ease. "*Come, come*" she said descending from her dais as the group reached the main floor. She strode in easily, leading them back into the enormous inner courtyard where Mezzumura could see a number of high level demons had already assembled. As they moved aside at Hild's approach the demon spied Mara, standing quietly beside one of the courtyards massive inner pillars. Of greater immediate interest to him however was Hild's lavish collection of ancient and powerful artifacts which seemed to fill every corner of the inner sanctum. He noted with unease however that the items which she displayed most proximal to her throne were the sealed remains of those who had opposed her. What little he could sense of the tortured souls inside was enough to send chills into the depths of even his soul. Now at the far end of the courtyard, Hild ascended her throne sitting gracefully before him. He knew the moment had arrived.

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“Well, let’s see what you’ve brought us then,” she said motioning casually.

Mezzumura drew forth the stone placing into her hands. “Here is that which you have sought my lord,” he replied selecting his words for maximum effect. “Many sacrifices were made to retrieve it, but it is with you now.”

“Yes I noticed your flock seems somewhat diminished. But no matter. I will ensure that you are more than adequately rewarded for your effort; and your loyalty,” she said as he watched her greedily.

“*But now-*,” she said rising to address those before her, “I think it is time we consider how best to use this new found power.”

“In the removal of obstacles?” Mezzumura ventured eagerly.

“Yes. *The Goddesses*. But oh sooo hard to find they are. Here - *there*, who knows where they are at any given moment in the heavens. And even if we did, it would be difficult to take them in their own realm. *However*,” she added malevolently, “there is one place we can be *certain* to find them within our reach.”

“Indeed,” cried Mezzumura. “The capture of Skuld alone would give us power over -.”

“*Skuld?*” Hild retorted surprised. “Given your *prior encounters with her sister*, I would think *she* would be the target of your affections. Or have such meetings robbed you of any desire to face her once more?” she teased mockingly.

Mezzumura seethed but said nothing, instead replying simply, “If it is your wish, it would of course be my greatest pleasure to bring her before you.”

“*Good*. Make sure you capture her in such a way that the others will not immediately know she is gone. Do this for me,” she said leaning close so no one else could hear, “and I will grant your fondest wish with respect to Belldandy.”

Mezzumura stared back in wonder. “How is this possible?”

“Use the stone as I instruct and you will have the necessary power. Capture her and bring her to me, and I will let you dispose of her personally.” Hild smiled at the obvious pleasure reflected in Mezzumura’s eyes she spoke.

“I will of course do to all that you ask mistress!” he said his eyes now aglow.

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“*Excellent*. Now go - make your preparations whilst I do what is needed here,” she said taking up the stone. Holding it aloft she now addressed the crowd, “*Soon will those of the upper realm feel our power and tremble! Soon we shall cast our shadow upon the earth to begin a new dark era!*” The demons before her roared as her words echoed in the courtyard.

“And it will begin with that most troublesome of goddesses,” she whispered, “*Belldandy*”. She watched as Mezzumura and his retainers filed away continuing, “*Yes Mezzumura*, you are the perfect weapon to bring *Belldandy* to me - vicious, ambitious, ruthless. And so *Belldandy* will be yours when I am done. Of course if you also possessed *intelligence*, you might surmise what will happen the instant you destroy her. But given your nature I see little chance of that happening. Yes, possession of the stone will allow me to change much. And while it will not allow me to *break* entanglement, it will allow me to change the *identity* of those entangled. All in all a win-win situation. For I see now that you are far too dangerous to leave to your own devices for long *Mezzumura*. And so I will dispose of you and *Belldandy* in one fell swoop. Her violet eyes began to glow powerfully. “*Yes*, I believe it will be a most entertaining spring,” she said relaxing on her throne once more.

Once the main crowd dispersed it did not take Mara long to locate the dark abode where *Mezzumura* and his followers sat huddled in conversation.

“-that’s what we’ll do once she’s isolated,” *Mezzumura* commanded to the group. From their faces she could see his plan pleased some, but not all.

“Yes, yes, destroy her, burn her,” said one.

“If we do that we’ll have nothing to present to Hild,” argued another.

“Throw her a charred wing, I’ll bet she’ll be just as satisfied,” cackled a third.

“Hild’s orders aren’t the ones you should be concerned with; *mine are!*” glowered *Mezzumura*. “It will simply be the result of an accident, arising as a result of attempting to contain so powerful a goddess - unfortunately resulting in her death. And we will be rid of her once and for all!” he said firmly.

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"Risky," replied one. "After all, it's not what Hild requested." Several hissed as another spoke. "I thought you said Hild would allow you to dispose of her after she's done. Why not just wait?"

"Who knows when that will be," Mezzumura said impatiently.

"- or what she really means by *dispose*. If we finish her ourselves we'll be certain of the outcome."

"Except that the laws which bind the demonic and divine realms together strongly discourage such action," Mara said, walking slowly from around the far side of the pillar.

"*MARA!*" they cried in unison. But Mezzumura raised his hand for calm.

"What's the matter, *no taste for blood?*" he said taunting her.

"Oh it's not that. I'm just trying to get a clear picture whose blood it is which will wind up getting tasted."

He glared back angrily at his fellow the first-class demon. "Yes I'm sure we should all listen to your sage advice. What is it you're doing now anyway? Working at a convenience store isn't it?"

The group burst into laughter.

"Yes, I busy myself there - when I'm not trying to prevent the potential catastrophes of underlings," she said straightening her robes.

"What do you mean by that?!" Mezzumura snarled standing up to her.

"Simple. You're not as old as I am. You therefore lack the wisdom I do. You haven't seen what I've seen. If you did, you'd know the destruction of a goddess so highly placed is likely to have consequences *far* beyond what you and your mentally challenged lackeys can possibly foresee. For that reason alone you'd do well to obey Hild's orders to the letter."

"And I suppose now you're going to go squeal to her!"

"Do whatever you wish. I have no intention of interfering I assure you. Your efforts will no doubt entertain me. But you would be wise to remember what I have said."

"Of course she says this," quipped Mezzumura. "How long have you tried to defeat her - *always without success!*" There was a murmur of agreement from the group.

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Mara smiled tilting her head to one side, showing only a hint of her fangs, “Technically I’ve been battling *three* goddesses, not one. *Alone*. However if you think you can do better, by all means be my guest.” She tossed back her blond hair. “But there are reasons we have the rules we do - and consequences for breaking them.”

“With the power we’ll soon possess, we’ll have no need of the *old* rules,” he spat. “Soon we will change those rules forever.” “*Perhaps*,” countered Mara. “But when you’ve lived as long as I have you begin to understand that forever can be a *very* long time.”

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The evening mist had just begun to settle over the hills as the members of the Morisato household arrived at the main gate. No sooner had they come through the door than the phone began to ring. “*Moshi moshi*,” answered Belldandy. “Hi Bell. Is that *sister* of yours around?”

“Urd - it’s Peorth.”

Urd picked up the phone. “Let me guess, you’re calling to apologize for how rude you were the last time we spoke?”

“No, I’m calling about something termed ‘work’. You do remember you’re a systems administrator here right?”

“*Translation* - you’ve got a problem at Yggdrasil you can’t fix and you need the help of a real expert to solve it,” she replied smugly.

Peorth muttered something to Ex and Ere before replying,

“Yeah, something like that. We’re experiencing a bug in part of the system that’s *very old*. Naturally I thought of you.”

The members of the Morisato household then heard Urd make several less than helpful comments before hanging up to join them in the tea room.

“What was that all about?” Asked Skuld looking up only momentarily from the TV.

“Something’s going on at Yggdrasil they don’t understand. They’re going to need our help to fix it,” Urd moaned lying down dramatically on the table.

“How long will you be gone? Because you know we’re all going to miss you a lot,” Skuld mouthed absently continuing to watch her program.

Urd’s eyes narrowed watching the back of Skuld’s head. “I said *we* small fry. So pack your bags because we leave at dawn.”

Urd following Belldandy to the kitchen at the first opportunity, mostly to reduce the magnitude of Skuld’s cries of protest.

“I’m sorry the two of you have to go Urd,” Belldandy said putting the dishes in the sink. “Is everything all right?”

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"I'm not sure. It's hard to tell from what Peorth said. But you shouldn't worry. *You* should be thinking about all the time you're going to have alone with Keiichi," she said nudging her. Belldandy looked back innocently scrubbing the dishes. "What do you mean? We can be alone anytime we want, shopping, on our walks, at whirlwind . . ."

"Somehow I was afraid you'd say that," sighed Urd. But then she brightened. "Hey, I need to go say goodbye to Keiichi!" She felt Belldandy's eyes upon her. "You can do that tomorrow Urd. In any case please don't bother him with any *difficult* requests," she threw her sister a knowing glance.

"Oh Bell. It's completely unfair for you to constrain me with such limits. How else can I keep our lives interesting," she sighed skulking away down the hall. "*Or get myself any nieces or nephews,*" she muttered reaching her door.

Morning came all too soon and Urd and Skuld were on their way shortly after breakfast. After seeing them off Belldandy and Keiichi sat alone on the veranda. Both were suddenly very aware that it was just the two of them now. "You know it's quiet around here without them," Keiichi said after several moments of awkward silence.

"Yes," Belldandy agreed. "But I'm sure we'll enjoy ourselves even without them," she said absently placed her hand atop his. "Oh of course," he said looking back nervously. "Yeah, we'll just be having all kinds of fun around here," he said desperately searching for something to say.

By evening however he had only grown more aware of Belldandy's movements around the empty house. When she took her evening bath, when she folded the sheets, even when they sat quietly together alone in the tea room.

"It seems quite cold in my room tonight," Belldandy ventured finally, looking over her tea at him.

"Oh don't worry Bell. I'll go fetch you another blanket right away," he said rushing off.

"Um . . . okay," she said hesitantly. As Keiichi shuffled through the closet searching for the blanket however, he began to wonder if perhaps he might not have misinterpreted her

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meaning. Handing it to her he thought, *is she trying to give me a hint?*

Belldandy smiled back steadily before taking the blanket and heading off.

No I must be imagining things, he thought going to his own room. *But what if I'm wrong? Ahh it's too late, the moment's passed*," he thought sullenly. Lying awake on his futon he wondered what he should do next.

Forty minutes later in the now dark house Belldandy heard a knock at her door. "Yes?"

"Belldandy are you alright? I thought . . . I heard you call."

"No I'm fine," she replied sitting up.

"Oh," Keiichi sighed, slowly shuffling back to his own room. Belldandy lay back in the dark trying to think. Moments later she got up, quietly sliding aside the outer shoji door to creep out onto the starlit veranda. Curling her feet she pressed herself against the pillar looking up at the night sky. *Why is it so easy in the heavens and so hard down here sometimes? Is that what makes it all worthwhile?* She shut her eyes wondering what Urd and Skuld were up to.

Keiichi too was having no success getting to sleep. Half an hour later he thought he heard movement in the hallway.

"Keiichi?"

"Yes?!"

The door slid open as Belldandy entered. "I thought I saw . . . a mouse," she offered.

"But aren't mice your friends?"

"Umm . . . *yes that's true*," she thought hesitantly. "I didn't want to mention this, but it may have been a spider."

"A mouse-sized spider?!" Now it was Keiichi who was becoming concerned.

"Umm . . .," Belldandy furrowed her brow, realizing the story was rapidly becoming more complicated than she had anticipated. "I'm not really sure what it was. I was just wondering if I could put my futon in here tonight?" she asked. "Oh!" breathed Keiichi, relieved he would not have to be hunting down any mouse-sized spiders that evening. "Of course. Let me help you." Pulling the futon across the hallway, they found they could just fit both into Keiichi's small room.

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Curling up comfortably in their respective beds, Keiichi realized the arrangement still did not exactly remove the awkward feeling of silence between them. As he once more lay back staring at the darkened ceiling, Belldandy slid her hand from beneath the covers. Moving it back and forth across the floor she whispered, “Piku . . . piku . . .”

“What are you doing?”

She turned toward him. “When Skuld was little I used to play this game with her. I’d move my hand back and forth like it was a small animal and she would try to capture it.”

“That’s kind of a silly game,” he observed.

“So you don’t think you can catch me then?” she asked, looking back with her sapphire blue eyes as she lay against the pillow. For the better part of the next hour the two kept themselves entertained. And while Keiichi was never quite certain whether Belldandy let him capture her hand that night, or he did so through his own cat-like reflexes, they were soon both sleeping soundly, their fingers firmly intertwined between them.

Awakening the next day Keiichi felt as though completely rejuvenated. Any feelings of anxiety he may have had disappeared that morning as they both sat happily eating breakfast side by side. It seemed they had adjusted to it being just the two of them now, just as it had been when they’d first come at the temple years ago. They decided to use the opportunity to take time off work for some long overdue walks in the forest behind the temple, look at the exhibits of the city, and just spend time together. And so it was that on their second night alone neither brought up the subject of whether Belldandy should move her futon back to her own room. Not that they intentionally avoided the subject. It simply never came up. And so they spent a second evening talking late into the night side by side in Keiichi’s cozy room. By their third evening together Keiichi was beginning to hope that Urd and Skuld would never find the problem at Yggdrasil. As the night wore on their antics became more animated, as they now attempted to catch sweetened adzuki beans in their mouths as thrown by the other. As Belldandy sat happily chewing one of

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her recent acquisitions she suddenly stopped, turning her attention to the door. “Keiichi do you hear something?”

“No. It's probably just Banpei.”

“*Maybe*,” she said rising cautiously.

“Bell, can't it wait until morning?” he yawned following her to the courtyard. Halfway to the gate separating the house from the main temple something appeared to their right. But before either could move the creature was decimated by several rounds from Banpei's arsenal. As the flames subsided two more of Mezzumura's servants quickly appeared on either side of them. In a blinding burst of speed Belldandy turned, extending her arms outward in either direction to shield Keiichi and seal them in a single motion. But above them in the shadow of the temple roof something else watched and waited. As Belldandy turned to check on Keiichi he jumped, striking her as he hit the ground.

“*BELL!*” Keiichi shouted as she fell.

“*KEIICHI, GET BACK!*” she warned.

But the creature was already on the move. Belldandy looked up recognizing her attacker's face. “*MEZZUMURA!* But how?!”

“Surprised to see me Belldandy? Rest assured I have not forgotten *you*,” he said grabbing her by the hair. Now let us - *Aaaaugh!*” Mezzumura cried as Keiichi struck with full force, tackling him on the stony ground.

“*RUN BELL!*”

Mezzumura roared springing to his feet. “So the little human likes to play *rough*,” he hissed. Instantly he swept his hands, slamming Keiichi hard against the temple wall.

Belldandy screamed, running as she saw him collapse to the ground. Mezzumura whirled at the unexpectedly loud beep close to his left side. Instinctively he drew his left hand up defense but Banpei had already locked on, firing an intense barrage of high velocity shells. Struck repeatedly and enveloped in flame, Mezzumura angrily drew his hand together tumbling to the ground. A second later Banpei exploded, falling lifeless on the walkway.

But the diversion had allowed Belldandy time to recover. As she now knelt beside Keiichi she struck, ripping Mezzumura from his feet and crushing him to the ground with lethal fury.

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"I do not know how you came to be free, but it will *not* happen again!" Rising she moved toward him as her body became luminous, her sapphire eyes aglow with fearsome intensity. Spinning she struck Mezzumura with the full force of her attack, continuing her circular motion to seal two more of his servants instantly. But to her disbelief she saw Mezzumura begin to move. *That's not possible*, she thought with growing dread. *There's no way he should be able to stand up to power of that magnitude.*

"You'll find I'm full of surprises these days," he said watching her expression of disbelief, clutching the satchel close at his side. "Which it is now time for you to learn in full measure - *DOWN!*" At the command Belldandy dropped to the ground, encumbered by a force more powerful than any he should have been capable of. She felt as though she could not breathe, could not move so great was his power. Resisting with all her strength she slowly began breaking free of his grip. Through her dimming vision she searched to find Keiichi. She saw him now, crawling, trying to reach her from across the courtyard. *No Keiichi!* she thought seeing Mezzumura catch sight of him. He waved his hand as flames encircled him.

"*DON'T!*" she screamed.

So it's true, that is her weakness. "Then do not force me," he replied.

"WHAT IS IT YOU WANT?!"

"Leave with me now and I will let him live. If not -," he closed his hand as the flames drew in around Keiichi.

She nodded beginning to tremble. "Alright! I'll go with you. Just let him go. PLEASE JUST LET HIM GO!" she cried.

"*Belldandy don't! DON'T GO WITH HIM!* Keiichi shouted, their eyes meeting through the dying flame. For a moment she felt the last embrace of his courage before Keiichi fell silent from the cruel blows of Mezzumura's remaining servants.

"*KEIICHI!*"

"COME!" Mezzumura commanded as more of his minions gathered around them.

"Just - *just let me say goodbye*," she cried rushing to Keiichi's side, throwing her arms around his unconscious form. Much to the amusement of Mezzumura's followers, she fervently kissed

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his head desperately checking to see if he was still breathing. Then she embraced Banpei. "I'm sorry I won't be able to take care of you anymore," she said tearfully returning to Mezzumura.

"Look at that stupid goddess," Mezzumura muttered watching the scene. "Only their kind would waste feelings on an inanimate object. You've wasted enough of my time Belldandy! Now you must go to that place which has been prepared for you," he threatened ominously. Stretching forth his hand the gateway began to appear before them. Surrounded on all sides now, she took one last look at the temple before descending into the void. For several minutes all was silent in the courtyard as Keiichi and Banpei lay motionless together on the ground. Then, as per his master's hidden instruction, Banpei began bursting a rapid series of electronic pulses.

The first stars of evening shone brightly as Takumi Sato climbed the bluff overlooking the sea. He sat down dejected staring up at them, the words of his past continuing to torment him: - I believe in you, -it will be safe in your hands, - this road has been set before you for a reason. *I've betrayed all trust placed in me. What a mockery I've made of my training. I deserve my isolation and my fate,* he thought. *The only thing I can do now is wait, wait for an opportunity. Yet what good had waiting really done?* "Two weeks and I'm still no closer to that which I seek," he grumbled impatiently, hands tightening around Abyss. "I must train more diligently. My old self would have never been so -," he sprang to his feet quickly scanning the hills. He sensed their approach. A minute later two of Mezzumura's servants silently emerged from the tree line at the far side of the road.

"There you are," one shouted. "We thought we might find you here."

"What is it I can help you with today," he replied warily. "I've found no additional treasures, if that's what you seek."

The servants laughed. "Well keep looking. But we've come tonight to provide *you* with some entertainment."

"Oh? Don't tell me - you have another delinquent client?"

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Again they laughed. “No for some reason our best potential customers seem to keep *disappearing* these days,” said one mischievously. “But that is another matter. Come, we have something far more enjoyable for you this evening.”

“Yes, you’re lucky to get in on this,” advised the other.

Based upon his experiences with the group so far, Takumi had good reason not to share their enthusiasm. Nevertheless it might be just the opportunity he’d been looking for. Picking up his weapon he followed them cautiously into the hills. They climbed for several minutes along the trail before the leader commanded, “Come and stand beside me.”

“Not if you were twice as handsome,” Takumi murmured.

“*No stupid*, we must travel quickly. Stand here and move with us through the portal.”

He nodded reluctantly. “And exactly where are we going this evening?”

“To a slaughtering field,” one replied cheerfully.

“*Wonderful*,” Takumi muttered disappearing with them through the gate.

Deep within the Yggdrasil substation, things were not going well for Urd. Three days of checking the system architecture and supporting subroutines had revealed little to them. They had found anomalies and even track them, but every time they thought they had the problem cornered it seemed to appear in a new divide of the sector. Urd stood up from the console, stretching as she wandered the admin level which looked out onto the massive central atrium. Several levels below her in the engineering subsection she could just make out Skuld’s small shape asleep in her chair, head lying back surrounded numerous empty ice cream cartons. Issues of Dobon and pages of mathematical printouts lay scattered around her on all sides. Bending low over the edge of the platform now she could just make out Peorth sitting next to her, leafing intently through several pages of her magazines.

“*Hey!*” called Urd. “Whatcha doing?” After several rounds of “*I’m not talking you*” to puzzled administrators on neighboring levels, Peorth looked up to give her a ‘*don’t bother me I’m busy*’ wave of her hand.

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"You're not stealing ice cream again are you Peorth?" she shouted down at her.

"I wouldn't dream of it," she yelled in reply. "After all, *Skuld* works tirelessly. The senior systems admins love her."

"As opposed to her screwed-up older sister?"

"You said it not me. Oh and you still owe me 200 from last night's poker game," Peorth added smugly, returning to her magazine.

"Yes, I should have known better than to play one of your games."

"It's not *my* game it's a human game," she said looking up.

"And I'm surprised you're not better at it. After all, it's all about deception and strategy. You never understood that part. That's why you fell to a superior opponent such as myself," she snickered happily.

"Yeah either that, or the numerous shots of sake I had," Urd said rubbing her temple. "Well tonight we're going to play one of my games," she shouted returning to her terminal.

"Urd no offense, but the last time we played one of *your* games, half the system staff didn't show up for work the next day."

Urd shrugged looking at the screen. *I shouldn't be losing to the likes of Peorth*, she thought. *After all, my talent for decept -*, she stopped, scanning the output pattern of the current sector intently now. Quickly she began pulling up all the system anomaly data for the past three days. "*Chrono*, I want you to start reserving capacity on as many sono-optical lines as possible without impairing our execution capabilities," she muttered to the goddess beside her.

"Alright," replied Chrono initiating the necessary requests.

"What is it you're trying to do exactly Urd?" she asked looking back a bit concerned.

"Prepare a backup plan."

"For what?"

"In case the anomaly isn't what it appears. *ERE!*"

One level below, Ex and Ere looked up.

"*YES?!"*

"I want you to begin running simulations on the data I'm forwarding to you now in the affected sector."

"Sonographic wireframe or fully rendered simulation?"

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“*Full simulations.* Try to make it look as real as possible. But only use resources *inside* the affected sector to execute.”

“That's going to start chewing up an awful lot of capacity within the sector,” Ere replied anxiously.

“True but that shouldn't be much of a problem, at least not for the moment. *Ex*, as the simulations initiate I want you to seal all the data input/output lines in the affected sector, and lock out all terminals with access to it.”

“*For the entire sector?!*”

“Yeah. Better to lock out an entire sector than an entire *system*, which we may have to do if we don't start making progress soon.”

“Umm Urd, are - we going to tell anyone about this?” asked Ex.

“Certainly. *Right after we do it.*”

“You think this is a smart thing to do?” Ex muttered to Ere.

“Urd may have her own way of doing things but she's averted catastrophe around here more than once.”

“*Chrono*, do we have a complete backup of all the data in the affected sector for oh - say a week prior to when the anomaly first appeared?” queried Urd.

“*For the entire sector?!*”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? *YES!*”

“Maybe, but you're talking about a gigantic amount of data.”

“Do we *have* it?”

“Checking . . . yes. The iterative backups haven't begun overwrite at that level yet.”

“Put a lock on all those clusters and start bringing them up into our harmonic reservoirs.”

“To do that we're going to need *a lot* more capacity than our section has Urd.”

“Start locking down capacity wherever you can throughout Yggdrasil.”

Hesitantly Chrono looked back at screen. “Urd, why do I get the feeling you're going to ask me to route the reservoirs directly into our sono-optical lines?”

“Because it would be the fastest way to replace all the data in the affected sector if we implode it.”

“Urd, if we implode *an entire sector* of the Earth operations it would take a week to restore!”

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“Five days, 22 hours, and 18 minutes, assuming the sono-optical lines operate at full capacity.”

“Seems like an awfully drastic step to take to deal with this problem. The anomalous behavior we've seen doesn't seem to justify such an operation.”

“Exactly.”

“Meaning?”

“I think we're being deceived. (A) We've already spent three days on this and are still no closer to a solution. (B) The nature and behavior of the anomaly keeps changing, not enough to set off any major alarms, just enough to keep our attentions focused on these subroutines. (C) If this is something else and it's actually trying to access a lower part of the system, we should destroy it before it has a chance to do so.”

“(D) We could be using up a BIG chunk of system resources and inconveniencing a number of operations in the process,” retorted Chrono.

“So? Whose side are you on?!”

“Yours of course. But I mean, do you have permission to do this?” she whispered.

Urd shrugged. “They called me back from the surface. I assume that means they want the problem solved.”

“Okay, alright” sighed Chrono. “I’m only asking because it might be handy when the upper council is deciding how many years to seal us away for.”

“I promise I'll get permission before we actually use it. But for now I think we'd better start setting things up just in case.”

After completing the necessary calculations Urd lay down at her desk closing her eyes, determined to get a few minutes rest. At least she thought it was a few minutes. Awakening however she noticed Peorth standing over her, looking irritated.

“Huh, wha-?”

“I said, *pick-up-your-phone*. Skuld's been trying to reach you. Can't you hear her?”

Listening Urd did think she could hear something far below in the atrium. It sounded like cursing. She picked up the phone.

“WHAT?!”

“Look at your monitor and tell me if everything is okay at the temple!” Skuld shouted back.

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“What? What temple?” Urd asked still a little fuzzy.

“The one we live at you idiot!”

“Why?”

“I don't have time for stupid questions! Banpei is signaling that something is very, very wrong.”

Urd moved to bring up the correct sub-screens. “No, everything is okay,” she said looking over the data. “Probably your stupid robot just crossed electrode or -,” she gasped seeing the power output at the temple over the past half-hour; her eyes locking the pattern of the power signature before flying to the screens monitoring the anomalous Yggdrasil data. It all seemed clear now.

“Sorry Chrono,” she said apologetically, instantly slamming her hand on the console to initiate implosion of the sector.

Workers throughout the substation immediately began looking in their direction as the system notified them of the lockouts and the enormous change in data flow. Ex and Ere looked up as one after another the massive harmonic generators began to kick in, feeding data through the sono-optical lines at the highest possible rate to replace the lost data.

Chrono sighed putting her hands to her head. “Just go Urd.”

“What did you just do?!” yelled Peorth rushing down the hallway as Urd raced past her going the opposite direction.

“They may be trying to access our command structure! Start checking for any other anomalies within the system,” Urd shouted rounding the bend.

“And where are you going exactly?!” called Peorth.

“Tariki Hongan Temple. Skuld get to the gateway!” she shouted reaching the atrium. Moments later they arrived at the temple grounds.

“I see Banpei! Skuld said running for the robot. Urd had almost reached them when she spotted a second form lying on the ground.

“KEIICHI!” she cried rushing to him. He moaned trying to speak.

“Bell, they have Bell.”

“What? Who's got big-sis!”

“Quiet!” snapped Urd. “See what Banpei can tell us.”

The Attack of Belldandy

Recalling the data, they watched the terrible scene unfold. “Mezzumura! But how?” Urd said stunned. Skuld stood in tears watching her sister disappear through the portal. “They’ve taken her to the demon realm.” But Urd shook her head. “Replay the last part – *stop. Right there!* You see the symbols on the outer edge of the gateway? They didn’t take her to the demon realm. They linked somewhere on earth, somewhere to the north.” “Why would they do that Urd?” Skuld asked anxiously. “Wouldn’t they just -.” “I don’t know, but knowing Mezzumura it can’t be good. They’d need someplace quiet, isolated,” she said muttering. An instant later she was off. “URD DON’T GO!” “Stay with Keiichi. I’ll be back when I can.” And with that she was gone.

Mezzumura and his followers exited the portal deep within the mountain forest. Belldandy shivered in the cold mountain air as they crowded around her in the lonely valley. Held by the crushing force of Mezzumura’s strange new power his servants quickly overpowered her, pushing her to the center as they encircled her in restraints. “Take no chances,” said Mezzumura. “Don’t let her angelic face fool you. You can’t imagine what she’s capable of.” “Why have you brought me here?!” Mezzumura had no intention of telling her the truth, instead replying, “I would think that is obvious. You’ve humiliated me greatly over the years. But I intend repay you in full now. Which reminds me, I promised my friends they could make your acquaintance.” With a wave of his hand his servants approached, eager to do the young goddess harm. “I acted only to protect the innocent, those you sought to harm,” she said defiantly as they closed in around her. But Mezzumura had no interest in listening to his numerous crimes. He drew her to him smiling, “When you have suffered enough I have a gift for you. A sign to all that I have become your true master.” He raised the iron brand showing it to her. “You will wear this symbol as a reminder of me for all to see,”

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he said happily. Belldandy's eyes went wide, realizing in his thoughts what truly awaited her. Yet far more disturbing to her were Mezzumura's thoughts of Keiichi. She knew now he had no intention of leaving Keiichi in peace; it had all been a trick to get her to come quietly. She began to struggle furiously against their combined hold.

"Don't let her break free!" shouted the demon. "For she will certainly kill you all if she does." For truth was not important to Mezzumura, only results. And he could see his comments were indeed providing the proper motivation as his minions now began to attack Belldandy without restraint. He saw her struggle to release her seal, attempting to unleash her full power. But he quickly pinned her to the ground, binding her hands with his own restraint. "We can't have you doing that now can we my dear?" he hissed malevolently. *"No.* Now it is time for your punishment to begin in earnest."

The first sound Takumi heard entering the valley was like that of a wounded dove. Standing at the edge of the portal now he could see what looked like a young woman in the distance, shrouded in a light illuminating the outer darkness. Looking closer he thought he sensed something else around her, moving erratically like some feathered ghost. Now he knew. *There are more of them! Sorano wasn't the only one. She really did belong to a group of these beings.* He saw the creature was cornered, outnumbered and struggling against Mezzumura's servants slowly wearing her down with their repeated attacks. At that moment she glanced across the field. There was something about the look in her eyes that pierced his heart; that reminded him of who he was. It was only for an instant, then she was gone from view. His lowered his hand, tightening around Abyss. "There's no time to lose! *Let's get her,*" he cried charging forward.

"YES!" shouted the servants on either side of him, racing toward her at top speed.

"It will be the end of this troublesome goddess," said one. *One hundred yards lie between us,* thought Takumi.

"They've got her!" shouted the servant happily to Takumi's left. "Let's wound her."

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Eighty -.

“She cannot escape,” the servant to Takumi’s right shouted excitedly.

Sixty -.

“The end will come soon,” they murmured.

Forty -.

“It will come – *now!*” Takumi cried striking the demon to his left with the full force of the blade. As the creature buckled he turned executing a tight reverse arch, taking his head in one fluid motion. To his right the servant screamed through the air in murderous fury. Takumi pivoted and thrust as Abyss found his mark, skewering the attacker in mid-flight. As the bodies dissipated, Takumi raced on toward the last rise separating him from Mezzumura.

As his followers continued to attack, Mezzumura came forward. “It is time,” he said touching his finger to the demonic iron seal which instantly became white hot. He closed on Belldandy, “Here is my gift to you - for all time,” he said as the group pushed her to the ground. “*Prepare yourself.*” Belldandy looked away shutting her eyes as he came forward aiming the brand for her throat. Takumi saw Mezzumura’s motion but realized he was too far away to reach him. In a final burst of speed he leapt, lunging with all his strength toward the target. So focused was Mezzumura on his lovely prize he did not see him until it was too late. In an instant Abyss struck home, piercing Mezzumura through his right forearm as the iron brand dropped to the ground. As the demon roared in pain, Takumi withdrew the blade and swept upward in a blur. But Mezzumura dodged the lethal blow and the blade went wide, slicing him beneath the jaw. Turning in a tight arc Takumi swept downward, cutting across Mezzumura’s left thigh. “*YOU!*” he howled venomously stumbling back in pain. He swiped for Takumi but he jumped beyond reach, disappearing into the forest underbrush. In his mind the plan had been simple, *distract Mezzumura and run - allowing trapped girl to escape.* But looking behind it was now clear he had not anticipated the pace or ferocity with which Mezzumura might follow, and who was now gaining on him with frightening

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speed. To save himself he made a quick right cut, diving between several fallen trees as Mezzumura crashed headlong into them close behind. But Takumi had also failed to properly anticipate Mezzumura's servants, several which were closing in ahead of him. The pursuit had however momentarily relieved Mezzumura's grip on Belldandy. "*Holy Bell,*" she whispered from the ground. As her angel streaked upward Belldandy rose to her knees, her bindings beginning to burn before shattering under the strain as she burst free of her restraints. The servants around her leapt to attack but she flung her arms outward as she rose, instantly incinerating them in a single devastating blow. Looking ahead through the trees she saw that the one who had slashed Mezzumura was now nearly cornered by them. "*Hikari!*" she shouted focusing her power. The ensuing wave struck its target as the servants ignited, their remnants blowing away like ash in the wind.

Takumi tumbled to the ground from the force of the blast as did Mezzumura who looked back wildly. "Impossible!" he shrieked reaching out to contain her once more. A second later Takumi saw the young woman fall to the forest floor.

"*Dammit!* Silly girl why are you still here?!" he cursed darting into the undergrowth. Kneeling silently he tried to gather his thoughts. "*He's too strong. Just like the other one, I can't beat him,*" he panted. But looking down at the blade now he saw that the symbols along its spine were glowing - intensely. "The stone!" he cried enraged. "Mezzumura has it, either with him or nearby." Peering through the twisted underbrush he saw him moving off, rushing back toward the goddess in the distance. He paused, but a moment later made his decision and was gone, racing ahead of his opponent under cover of the fallen trees. As he heard the demon's lumbering form fall behind, Takumi vaulted up and over the surrounding bosk to land on the far side of the path. The cold mountain winds swept over him as he twisted, coming to rest only twenty yards from Mezzumura. Seeing him appear suddenly from the shadows Mezzumura did not hesitate. He charged.

"*Shield!*" The voice behind him cried as Mezzumura's body slammed into the unseen barrier tumbling backward. In the

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momentary respite Takumi stepped back looking for a better defensive position from which to strike.

“He’s too strong, I can’t hold him,” said the voice behind him. Takumi nodded. “*Tell me when!*” he shouted facing Mezzumura who began to rise.

“*What?* Yes, I understand,” replied the woman.

“WHAT? I didn’t say anything!” cried Takumi looking back. But he could see the young woman was not speaking to him. She seemed to be talking to . . . thin air. “HEY!” he called, the panic apparent in his voice.

The young woman stared back at him steadily. “Stay where you are!” she commanded.

Takumi turned to see a furious Mezzumura begin to charge. But as he did the winds above them began to howl at terrific speed. High up on the mountain a group of dying trees suddenly gave way under the force. As they fell so too did the mountain around them, thundering down like an enormous lethal wave. Takumi’s position behind the rock outcropping protected him from the full onslaught of the deluge, but for Mezzumura on the open slope there was no escape. As he leapt to shatter the shield he was struck by a thousand tones of rock and debris as it plummeted down the slope.

For several minutes in the aftermath Takumi stood silent in disbelief. Then he carefully walked to the edge of the slope surveying the damage. “*YEAH!*” he bellowed. “Not so tough with a mountain on top of you are you?!!” Returning to the path he took is first real look at the woman who sat resting on her hands and knees behind him. She was young . . . and utterly beautiful. He smiled shaking his head at her. “You fight well White Wing.” But as he came closer he could see just how badly injured she really was.

She peered up weakly. “Who -?”

The sudden sound of tumbling rocks behind them caused both to freeze. For a long moment neither moved as they held their breath. “It’s okay,” Takumi said finally, “I don’t think -.” But a second echo of tumbling stones had him rushing to the edge of the avalanche. He scanned the slope carefully. A moment later to his horror he saw the unmistakable signs of something trying to extract itself from beneath the rocks.

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"*Oh you've got to be kidding me!*" he muttered watching Mezzumura slowly emerged from his rocky tomb. "It's alright," the girl behind him said faintly. "You've done all you can. Please go now." Takumi looked back, knowing the creature's power was almost spent. But what more could he really do? Reluctantly he moved off. When eventually Mezzumura came upon her Belldandy did her best to fend him off. But with another terrific blow he pummeled her to the ground. "Where's your little friend?" he asked reaching for her. An instant later he had his answer as Abyss struck at his unprotected right side. Quickly Takumi withdrew the blade but otherwise remained motionless. For this time he knew no retreat was possible. "*I failed before,*" he said bitterly, "I won't fail again."

Mezzumura turned to face him, pitilessly fury in his eyes. "I grow tired of this game," he said gritting his teeth from the pain. "*As do I,*" nodded Takumi. Knowing his best chance for a killing blow lay in an attack at the demon's center he stepped right. Feinting left, Takumi thrust with all his strength. But he was no match for the demon's speed or power as the blade was deflected from its target, slicing only superficially through Mezzumura's chest and shoulder. As it did however, the strap holding the satchel was cut away; its contents tumbling down the slope. Takumi saw the stone fall and dove.

"*NO!*" shouted Mezzumura, striking him with three swift successive blows knocking him to the ground and Abyss from his hands. With his remaining strength he fought but his efforts mattered little compared to the demon's far superior power. Seizing him by the throat Mezzumura easily lifted him into the air, dragging him before Belldandy. "Before I finish you my dear I want you to see what happens to all those foolish enough to protect you." Despite her efforts she was now helpless to protect him. He drew Takumi close. "I knew you were a liar from the start, but I thought you would be smarter. I thought you would choose the correct side."

"*It's done,*" was all Takumi could say.

"Indeed. I would have let you live, to kill as you pleased. What do you think *their* kind would do to the likes of you?" Takumi fell silent.

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“Unfortunately we will never know for our time has come to an end,” Mezzumura said closing his fist. Just before Takumi fainted he had the strangest feeling the sky itself was being torn apart.

The streak that burst from the heavens rapidly materialized into the form of Urd. She struck the ground beside Belldandy so hard the earth trembled.

“BELL!” she cried reaching her.

“*Be - hind,*” she wheezed.

Urd dropped and struck in the same instant. Mezzumura’s blow missed by a fraction of an inch but hers was dead on. The stony slope echoed with the sound of the catastrophic explosion as lightning struck his body and he was thrown to the valley floor with terrifying force. A short distance away Takumi fell to the ground gasping for air. Disoriented he crawled to retrieve Abyss as his vision slowly cleared. Confused and semiconscious, he could see from his refuge in the trees that the young woman was now at the mercy of some new dark fiend. With the last of his strength he stumbled forward, attempted to approach them from above. When he’d come as close as he dared he threw himself over the ledge, aiming the blade at the center of the fiend’s back.

Working quickly to save her sister, Urd sensed the attack only at the last second. Without pausing to looking up she waved her hand behind her, slamming Takumi into the nearest tree.

“Hold on Bell,” she muttered rising angrily to her feet.

“There’s something I need to take care of.”

“*Get away from her!*” Takumi snarled weaving as he attempted to point Abyss in her general direction.

Urd considered her rather pathetic attacker. “*Drop that!*” she demanded.

The attacker made no move continuing to glare at her.

Fluidly she moved her hand as four large boulders rose in response, positioning themselves until they were directly over Takumi. “Do you really want to know how this ends? I’ll give you a hint... *badly.*”

Still the man did not move.

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"I don't know if your deaf or just stupid by I'll explain this one last time," she said as the boulders descended.

"No," moaned Belldandy. "*With me.*"

"Yes Bell I'm with you," Urd muttered in agreement.

"No, I mean you Urd."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"He's with us," she said, her voice now barely above a whisper.

"What?!" Urd surveyed the shambles that was Takumi. "Bell you've got to start getting better help. I mean weren't there any forest animals that could've assisted you? You know, deer, chipmunks, *field mice*. "It looks like they would have been more useful."

"Nonsense," Takumi answered unsteadily clutching Abyss for support. "I'm in my prime."

"*Yeah* I can see that," Urd replied dismissively returning to her sister. "Bell I need to get you out of here right now," she said raising her hand to prepare the gateway.

Belldandy nodded putting out her hand. "Urd?"

"I've got you kid."

"What about him. We need to take him with us."

"What?!" She cast a suspicious look back at the man. "I think that's a bad idea Bell. He's not one of us."

"*If we leave him they'll kill him for sure.*"

"Do we really need an *extra* problem right now?"

"*Please,*" she said, her eyes melting Urd's grim face.

"Aww don't use the eyes, it's not fair. Alright we don't have time for discussions right now. "*You!*" she said facing Takumi.

"You're coming with me."

Takumi nodded barely conscious. "Just let me - *hey!*" he cried as Urd caught him by the foot, dragged him toward the gate. With one hand firmly on Belldandy and the other on their new-found guest she opened the portal. A moment later they were standing safely in the confines of Tariki Hongan temple.

Tariki Hongan Temple

To be sure Urd had her hands full that first night at the temple. As soon as she arrived she was set upon by both Skuld and Keiichi who came running from house. “Bell, BELL!” Keiichi shouted, knocking Urd aside as he dove to hug her. Skuld’s commands not to grab her sister went unheeded as he held her tightly. “*Belldandy!*” he screamed shaking. “Keiichi put her down! You’re in no condition to be out here yourself!” shouted Urd. “Let Skuld and I work on her here for a moment. Then we’ll bring her to the house.” As Keiichi laid her on the ground Urd continued her work from the mountain, attempting to staunch the damage from Belldandy’s most serious injuries. Skuld’s knelt close beside her, assisting her power with her own.

“What are you doing Urd?” Keiichi cried looking on helplessly. “*Trying to save her life Keiichi!*” she replied grimly without looking up. She worked hurriedly but with skill few even in the heavens possessed, doing her best to protect her sister from harm. Keiichi knelt beside her, tears of gratitude in his eyes. “Thank God you found her Urd. How did you get her away from those creatures?”

“It’s a long story and we don’t have time for it now.”

A moment later Belldandy moaned, opening her eyes.

“*Keiichi,*” she whispered as their hands intertwined as he once more dove down to hold her.

“What did I tell you about those hands mister!” yelled Skuld.

“Okay let’s take her to her room,” Urd said ignoring her.

Picking her up Keiichi rushed Belldandy to the house with Urd and Skuld close behind. After dragging her curiously misplaced futon back into her own room (causing Skuld to eye Keiichi suspiciously for the rest of the evening), they eventually had her warm and comfortable. As Urd had feared, the next half-hour gave way to increasingly vocal discussions of who loved Belldandy more and what the evening’s sleeping

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arrangements should be. Skuld had parked herself at Belldandy's left side and could not be moved, insisting that everyone else should leave. But Keiichi had come far too close to losing her that night, and the fear, exhaustion and injury clearly showed in him. In a rare moment of anger he spoke in a voice that shocked them both, "*I don't care! I don't have time for this nonsense! I'm going to look after her because - because she is my -*" He broke down in tears saying no more. He lay down on her right side, clutching his arm around her as thought trying to protect her from some unseen danger.

"*I understand Keiichi,*" said Urd feeling a bit envious of her little sister. In the end it fell to her to make the peace, saying that only the two of them were important enough to watch over Belldandy that night, and that she would sleep in her own room. In truth after everything that had happened she was thankful to crawl into her own bed for some rest. But no sooner had she done so than Keiichi and Skuld called for her once more.

"What?" she asked poking her head into the hallway. "I told you we've done all we can for her tonight. What she needs now is rest. I'll make the necessary curative agents tomorrow."

"No stupid!" Skuld snapped pushing past Keiichi into the hallway. "It's big-sis. She's calling for you."

Urd rushed in kneeling beside her sister. "What is it Bell?"

"That man," she whispered. "Is he - alive?"

"*Oh dammit! I knew* there was something I forgot! I'll go seal him now," she said.

"It doesn't seem right," Belldandy replied looking up.

"Oh all right. At least let me put a barrier in place. Just in case. To make sure everyone's safe."

"Alright," Belldandy replied closing her eyes.

Outside Urd found their guest right where she'd left him, unconscious and on his back in the courtyard. Without benefit of the love and care Belldandy had received he appeared to be in rather worse shape. Grabbing hold of him she dragged him around to the back of the house pushing him into the storage shed. "Sweet dreams," she growled closing the doors and placing the protective seal in place. Five minutes later, an exhausted Urd was back in her much-anticipated bed, quickly falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

Tariki Hongan Temple

As expected, next morning Urd awoke once more to the sounds of Keiichi and Skuld. "Hurry Keiichi!" she heard her yell.

"I am hurrying," he said as the knock came to her door. "Urd?" "Yes?"

"Belldandy's awake and asking for you."

She pulled on her robe strolling into the corridor. Entering Belldandy's room saw Skuld in almost exactly the same position she had been last night.

"Here she is big-sis," Skuld whispered as Urd sat down.

"Skuld why don't you go and make us some tea," Urd suggested seeing Keiichi's harried expression.

"You can't order me around!" But a quiet look from Belldandy an instant later quickly sent her on her way."

Urd lay down beside her sister. "How are you?" she asked. But even now she could see she was beginning show signs of recovery.

"She has what looks to be bad bruises on her arms and over here on her left shoulder and ribs," Keiichi interjected quickly.

"I see. So you spent last night carefully determining where all her bruises were did you?" she asked raising an eyebrow.

"No of course not. It's not like that at all!"

"I'm just kidding Keiichi. I'm not concerned." She put a hand to Belldandy's forehead. "Not with Skuld around." Looking at him now she saw the deep lines of concern etched in his face from the long night's vigil. "*Don't worry Keiichi. Remember she has some of my blood - so she's tough,*" she said smiling, doing her best to hide her fears.

"I'm alright," Belldandy replied weakly, taking a hold of her.

"I just don't want Keiichi or Skuld getting sick from worrying over me."

"And what about me, can't I worry a little?" she said arranging the covers.

Belldandy smiled trying to sit up. "Urd I wanted to ask you about our visitor."

"Don't know, I haven't checked on him yet. Who is he Bell?"

The goddess shook her head. "He appeared out of nowhere rushing in with the others. But when they closed in on me and -," she stopped, reluctant to say more in Keiichi's presence.

"He attacked."

The Twilight Hour

“Sounds like someone who just jumped in on the winning side of a fight.”

“No he helped from the start. There’s something else too. He dissipated two of Mezzumura’s servants before you arrived.” Urd looked at her puzzled. “A human taking out two servants? I don’t see how that’s possible. You were in pretty bad shape when I found you last night. Are you sure?”

“I know what I saw. But I’m not entirely sure he’s -.”

“Human?”

Belldandy nodded. “See what you think Urd.”

“Tea is ready!” Skuld chirped prancing through the door, teapot in one hand, a tray of cookies and cups in the other.

“Look big-sis I brought you something to eat. And later I can bring you whatever else you need - *like ice cream*,” she suggested.

Her sister nodded smiling. “Thanks for all your help Skuld.”

“*Of course*,” she beamed settling at her feet.

“Okay I’m outta here,” Urd announced rising.

“What?! You don’t want some of my delicious tea?”

“I’ll have some,” volunteered Keiichi.

“I didn’t make it for you!” she snapped sticking out her tongue, still incensed over the previous night’s arrangements.

Removing the seal Urd carefully entered the storage shed. Closing the door behind her she took her first good look at the new arrival. Initially on guard she determined after several minutes of persistent prodding that their guest was indeed as unconscious as he appeared. Sitting down she placed her hands over his head and chest trying to determine his true nature.

What she could sense surprised her, a strange mixture of demonic and angelic influences appeared bound within him. But what concerned her most was the haunting familiarity of his face. Do I know him? Have I seen him before?

“No, I’ve never met him,” she decided finally. Still something didn’t feel right. *There’s too much at stake. I need to be sure.*

Raising his shirt she saw that in addition to a number of more recent injuries he possessed a very serious scar at the center of his chest. One which certainly would have proven fatal under normal circumstances. Suspiciously she placed her hand over

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the mark focusing her energy. Slowly the images came and she began to sense the events of his recent past, of his loneliness, and his wandering. So too she began to see more clearly the nature of what he truly was - and what he now needed to survive. She was about to pull away when another image assailed her. A vision of eyes full of regret turning from her to look out upon the scattered islands of a calm eastern sea in the gathering darkness. There was something about him, some dark nobility that suddenly made her feel terribly alone. *What is it? Is there something more I should know?* Placing her hand directly over his heart she extended her power deeper. At first she saw nothing. But slowly the image came, of a forested trail passing through mountains blanketed deep in snow. A rider on horseback approached through the trees, rising over the crest of a small hill as he headed for a nearby cabin. Descending the slope he turned, calling to the woods from which he'd come. A moment later a second rider emerged on a beautiful white horse, clad from head to toe in a thick white hooded robe. Reaching the top of the hill the gusting wind suddenly tore back the rider's hood. Urd gasped recognizing herself as the second rider. Concentrating intently now she saw she was smiling, moving serenely off down the slope to the small cabin. Somehow she appeared younger than she did now. She tried to see more but at that moment -."

"What the heck are you doing Urd?" said the small voice behind her suspiciously.

"Aack - *nothing!*" she cried yanking her hands away. "I - was just checking to see if he was umm -."

"Urd?"

"Yes?"

"Do you really think you should be undressing guys in the back of the utility shed? I mean you hear about these things all the time but you never really imagine it will be your own sister," Skuld said shaking her head pensively.

"Ha ha, very funny. *Now listen you!* I need to determine if he's dangerous. And doing that requires someone with ability," she said trying to sound authoritative.

"I see so rubbing your hands all over a guy's naked chest is your *dangerous person* scanning technique? Hmm, I'll have to

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write that one down. Look Urd if you're lonely I'm sure the guys at the auto club would be happy to -."

"And If you spent as much time practicing your skills as you do working on your smart remarks you might actually be of some use someday," she snapped her eyebrow twitching.

"Come on, I need to go speak to Belldandy."

"So go."

"Oh no. You're coming with me. *Nobody* stays out here with him alone."

"No one but you," Skuld corrected falling in line behind her.

"Oh shut up and get inside," she said re-sealing the shed.

By mid-day Urd had completed the calculations necessary for Belldandy's healing salves and had, with Skuld's help, managed to get Belldandy into the tub to let her soak her aching muscles. After applying the healing wraps and moving her back to her own room (with Skuld diligently attempting to shield Keiichi's eyes from the whole process with her free hand) they tucking Belldandy into bed. Urd saw Keiichi had pulled the television into her room, allowing her to watch whatever she wanted (though she suspected it was mostly a ploy to keep Skuld occupied). She was about to lie down herself when Urd heard yet another argument erupt about who should do what for Belldandy. As she got up making mental calculations as to amount of voltage each should receive, she heard Belldandy's voice rise above the fray;

"Today is not a day for fighting. I know you're tired and afraid. But today is a day for sharing, for being thankful that we're all together and safe," she said pulling them close.

"Well said Bell," Urd remarked coming to the door. And so that afternoon as they gathered together in Belldandy's room, each told their story of to what had happened while they had been apart. They laughed nervously as Urd told them of the problems at Yggdrasil and her solution to them. Skuld beamed with pride as Urd relayed all the positive comments that the system administrators had made regarding her work. There were somber moments too, as when Keiichi and Belldandy relayed the events at the temple, and of their separation. Skuld said she'd only just begun to repair the damage to Banpei. But

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the most difficult moments that afternoon came when Belldandy relayed all that happened in the mountains. Despite several hugs from Urd and their own best efforts, quiet tears fell from both Skuld and Keiichi as she spoke. Looking down Urd saw Belldandy's trembling hand clinging quietly to Keiichi's underneath the futon as she spoke. When she had finished Urd did her best to lighten the mood by pantomiming the effect of Mezzumura flying through the air from her lethal strike, and of their visitor mistaking her for a demon.

"-You should have seen the look on his face when he hit that tree," she continued. "I tell you he looked like some angry raccoon that had already been run over by a car several times, standing there pointing that stupid spear at me." Skuld laughed, and even Keiichi seemed to get some of his color back. When she had finished Belldandy added, "There's one part of the story we still don't know yet."

"That's right," replied Keiichi. "Sounds like we owe him a debt of gratitude. Do you have any idea why he helped you Bell?" "No. Urd?"

Her sister jerked looking back nervously. "Huh? Why would I know who he is?" she said glancing anxiously at Skuld. "But don't worry. We'll have our answers soon enough."

"Why would demons come to the temple and attack us in the first place?" asked Keiichi.

"I don't know but it may have something to do with *who* attacked us," said Urd.

Belldandy nodded. "Yes I've been thinking about that as well."

"Who attacked us?"

"Mezzumura. A very powerful demon with whom Belldandy has had dealings in the past."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Belldandy. "He's is a very destructive spirit who tried to harm a number of innocent people in the past. I was sent to seal him years ago so he could do no further harm. I don't know how he could have been released."

"I think that's obvious," replied Urd. "*They* must have exchanged him for one of our own."

"Without telling us?"

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I'm beginning to think there are *several* things we haven't been told," Urd said warily. "When I checked the Yggdrasil archives, I found that an hour after I called Peorth they sent a whole group of Valkyries down to investigate. Did anyone tell us that?"

"Oh then you weren't imagining-," Belldandy stopped, realizing her words.

"Yeah that's right Bell. I told you I wasn't crazy."

"I don't think we can rule that out completely," interjected Skuld. Urd's eyes narrowed.

"There's something else -," Belldandy said hesitating.

"Mezzumura seemed *impossibly* strong. I should have been able to fight him but I couldn't. It was as though . . . I don't know."

"But if that's true how was I was able to defeat him? Though I suppose I am an extremely powerful goddess," Urd confessed.

"Maybe I just don't know my own true strength."

"We need to be more careful from now on."

"What we really need are answers," said Urd.

Though Keiichi, Urd, and Skuld didn't possess Belldandy's cooking talent, they did manage to create a pretty fair dinner that evening. Before long they were all seated around her once more watching TV. At the end of her program: *Samurai sushi slasher* Urd rose to her feet.

"Where are you going?" asked Skuld.

"It's time to get some answers. Watch Bell you two. I'll let you know what I find out."

"No I'm coming with you," insisted Keiichi. I want to meet the person who helped Bell."

"Hmm, well suit yourself. I just hope he's – *well rested*," she muttered walking to the shed.

"Is he asleep?" Keiichi asked as they entered.

Urd scanned the room carefully. "*No*. He just wants us to think he is. *Isn't that right mister?!*" she shouted in his general direction. When that got no response she added, "How would you like me to prove my point on you the way I did on your *friend* last night?"

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Takumi sat up so quickly it caused them to jump. "I thought Mezzumura was *your* friend," he replied rubbing his eyes.

"So you know his name!"

"Oh I know his name alright," the visitor said beginning to look around. "What I don't know is - *yours*," he said rubbing his head painfully. "And where I am now."

"You're at Tariki Hongan temple," Keiichi said helpfully. "Urd brought you here last night with Belldandy."

Urd raised her hands incredulous. "Keiichi perhaps it would be best if we *didn't* tell the stranger anything more than he -."

"Urd? What's an Urd?" Takumi asked squinting in the direction of the voice.

"I am Urd!" she said fiercely. "Remember me? The one who almost crushed you like a bug last night?!"

Takumi looked up, his mouth suddenly agape as he saw her clearly for the first time. He had the uncomfortable feeling that all the breath had been taken from him, in no small part because he'd never seen a more a stunningly beautiful woman. But there was something else. Something about her eyes which seemed to mesmerize him. Eyes which looked as though they were carved from solid amethyst, yet were far more brilliant. He now saw the indigo eyes were staring at him intently, and the effect was hypnotic. As though he were utterly under her spell. He felt as though he could not speak or even move. Certainly she was an angel. And one he was beginning to notice which did not seem particularly happy to see him. She seemed to be saying . . . *something*.

"Did you hear what I just said?!" she repeated.

"Huh?" he replied dumbly.

"Real genius we have on our hands here," she said to Keiichi.

"Hmm I think I recognize that look," he replied.

Still dazed but beginning to come around Takumi grumbled irritated, "Listen indigo I don't care if you *are* the most beautiful woman on earth. I you don't have a right to -."

"-Urd."

"What?"

"Her name's Urd. And mine's Keiichi. Keiichi Morisato."

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As Takumi broke from Urd's stare he began to come to his senses. "Oh I see," he replied struggling to his feet. "I'm sorry Mr. Morisato. I did not mean to insult your woman."

"*WHAT!*" cried the goddess, now appearing even less happy to see him.

"Oh no it's not like that," Keiichi said quickly raising his hands. "Urd's just well umm . . . actually it's kind of complicated," he admitted finally.

Looking her over from head to toe now, Takumi was beginning to take notice of her rather unusual apparel. "*Yeah*, I'll just bet it is," he replied smiling. Looking at this *Urd* however he could see she was definitely *not* smiling. In fact she seemed to be frowning. Or perhaps it was glaring.

"My name is Takumi. Takumi Sato. Or at least it was," he said feeling Urd's stare upon him. "*WAIT!* The one in the field - White Wing. Is she alright?" he said suddenly concerned.

"You mean Belldandy?"

"Who?"

"Belldandy. She's the one you saved in the mountains."

"Didn't look like he was saving much of anything when I arrived," Urd scoffed.

Takumi turned bringing himself to his full height as he addressed her. "Perhaps that's because you arrived *at the end*," he said looking eyeing her. "Hmm White Wing, Bell-dan-dy.

Yes, she was the one being attacked," he said to Keiichi.

"She's better. She's recuperating," he replied.

"Good. That is good," he said beginning to move about the shed. "And it is true that Indigo here arrived just in time, saving us both from certain death."

Urd began to smile but it turned out to be short lived when Takumi asked innocently, "So you are a servant of the White Wing? Of Bell-dan-dy?"

Keiichi did his utmost not to smile. For his part Takumi noticed that the angel seemed to be looking at him with the same irritated expression again.

"Serve her? I certainly DO NOT serve her!" Urd replied indignantly.

At that moment Skuld called from the veranda. "Urd, Belldandy needs you."

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"Alright tell her I'm coming." It took Urd a moment to catch Keiichi and Takumi exchanging silent smiles. "Tell her I'm coming - *but not to serve her!*" she shouted in reply.

"Huh?" asked Skuld.

"Oh and Keiichi, while I'm inside why don't you stay here and get better *acquainted* with our new guest."

He looked to Takumi. "Wonder why she wants me to do that?"

"I don't think she likes you," he replied sitting down.

"No, no, she likes me. *Sometimes*. Why do you say that?"

"I have a strange feeling she's guessed my eating habits," he replied leaning against the far wall.

"Oh and what's that?"

"*People*."

"WHAT!"

"Yeah I eat, *well actually I don't eat*, I consume -- you know what, I probably don't need to bore you with all the details," he said observing Keiichi's growing expression of concern.

"Well that's - *interesting*. But you're alright now?" he asked hopefully.

"It's been a long couple of days to be sure," Takumi said closing his eyes. "But not to worry. I'm in control of it . . . *most of the time*," he muttered.

"Oh of course," Keiichi nodded now listening intently for anything indication he might be needed inside. "I mean I know we've just met but you seem to be a decent enough -."

"*Keiichi*" came the call from the courtyard.

"Oh well - too bad but I should really should going to find out what that's all about," he explained jumping for the door.

"*Of course*," Takumi nodded watching him go.

As he came around the corner of the shed, Keiichi saw Belldandy followed closely by Urd. Urd seemed to be smiling. Belldandy was not.

"You shouldn't be out of bed," he said rubbing her shoulders.

"*Mister*, hands! How many times do I have to say it?" Skuld called from the porch behind them.

"Skuld, please go back inside," Belldandy urged motioning.

"Keiichi are you okay?" she asked turning to him worriedly.

"Me? I'm fine. After all I know how to handle myself."

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“Clearly,” Urd agreed smiling. “I was just informing Belldandy about our new guest.” Belldandy continued to look on less than pleased. “She doesn’t seem to think my safety precautions are - well sufficient. But as you see Bell, Keiichi is fine. It’s just as I told you. If need be I could be there long before anything could happen.”

“*She does appear quite fast,*” mused the low voice directly behind them. Urd jumped along with the rest of them. Tripping she stumbled as Takumi caught her. “Whoa Indigo! It’s alright. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he replied cordially. “You *did not* frighten me, she said pulling back indignantly. “And who gave you permission to touch me? And why does he keep calling me Indigo?”

“Forgive me,” Takumi said stepping back. “But it was you who fell into *my* arms.”

“Do you have gross teeth?” asked Skuld peeking from around the corner of the house.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you come and check?” said Takumi, bending low and opening his mouth obligingly.

“Err, no thanks,” she said shrinking back.

Urd waved her hand shushing Skuld. But she would not be so easily silenced. “Well, how often do you have to, *you know,*” she said doing a horrendous impression of draining a victim.

“I suppose that depends upon on the size of the container,”

Takumi replied, eyeing the girl who raced inside the house.

“And who was that?” he inquired curiously.

“I’m not sure. I think she’s some poor waif we picked off the street one night,” Urd replied looking confused.

“*Urd!*” Belldandy and Keiichi both cried.

“Wait, it’s coming back to me now. I believe she is umm - related to me somehow.”

“I see. And how many people do you actually have back there?”

“Truthfully it seems to vary a lot from evening to evening,”

Urd said pensively. “But as for those of us gathered here, you of course already know Keiichi, the *lover* of my sister Belldandy,” she said, timing her words for maximal effect.

“*Urd!*” Belldandy and Keiichi cried again.

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“So Belldandy is your sister, and you yourself are married?” Takumi ventured.

“Yeah, sounds right. Now that we’ve got the introductions out of the way -.”

“She’s not married,” Keiichi corrected.

“Hmm I see. So you’re saying Indigo has trouble discerning the truth sometimes?”

“For total strangers? *Yes*,” she replied.

He turned his attention to Belldandy. “I’m pleased to see you are recovering White Wing.”

“You as well Mr.-?”

“Sato,” he replied with a glance to Urd.

“You assisted me and for that I am grateful,” Belldandy said rather formally. “You knew the one who tried to harm us?” she asked holding this gaze.

“Yes.”

“And yet you attacked.”

“He was evil,” Takumi replied simply.

“I see. And you?”

“*Bell*,” muttered Urd.

“It was necessary I cross his path,” Takumi said offering nothing further.

Then Belldandy quieted, though it seemed to Keiichi she continued in some silent form of communication with the visitor several moments as each took the measure of the other. Takumi spoke first saying, “It has been long day. You should rest while I - retire to this abode.” Urd sensed the attempt to convince her he would not move beyond the confines of the shed that evening. Then Belldandy too nodded, giving Takumi a pleasantly blank smile whose true intent Urd could not fathom.

“We should go inside Bell, you need to rest,” Keiichi urged putting his arms around her.

Takumi waited patiently, watching as they returned to the house. As Urd too turned to leave he spoke, “Angel Urd, may I speak with you?”

She smiled. *I kind of like the sound of that.* “What about?” she asked.

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"I wonder if you could take me somewhere. Back to the place you found me."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"I didn't ask if you *wanted* to do it, I asked if you *could*," he replied trying not to let his impatience show.

"Why didn't you ask Belldandy?"

"She's in no condition to travel."

She raised an eyebrow.

"-And because I believe she wouldn't do it," he admitted.

"Then what makes you think I will?"

"I don't know, I just thought - I just need to do this. And because I need to talk to you - *alone*."

Urd walked around the dark eyed stranger considering him. In truth she didn't *mind* speaking to him, and she did want to know more about him. Besides, she knew he posed no serious risk. At least not to her. "All right then," she agreed finally.

"So you can take me back to that same spot?"

"Oh yes," she replied snapping her fingers. As Takumi went to retrieve Abyss the gateway appeared. Moments later they arrived in the lonely mountain vale thirty miles northeast of Mt. Akagi. As soon as they arrived Takumi began combing the exposed slopes of the avalanche. But after minutes of frantic searching he returned empty handed.

"Dammit it's not here! Just as I feared," he cursed breathing heavily.

Urd looked on amused. "What are you looking for, nuts for the winter?"

"*No Indigo I'm not*," he replied irritably. "I'm looking for something your kind seems willing to get killed over. And if I'm not mistaken something that Mezzumura used against us the other night - and God knows who else by now."

"What are you talking about?"

"*That stone!*" Takumi shouted tossing the naginata at her feet.

"What stone?"

"Angel Urd, there are a few things I need to tell you." And so Takumi began to tell her of the finding of the stone (with the assistance of a divine agent as he put it) and of its eventual acquisition by Mezzumura (the details of which he also left

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rather vague). When he had finished Urd sat staring back at him in disbelief.

"A few things?! Do you know what that is?!"

"Yes. Maybe. Well no - not really. I was told it was critical."

"Sounds like one of the foundation stones," she mused. "But I didn't know one was missing."

"Would you speak of such a thing if it were?"

"If Mezzumura has the stone then -."

"The one I traveled with said something about changing the nature of entanglement."

"If that's true its possessor might be able to alter the nature of the doublet rule!"

"The what?"

"He could bypass a very important protection in our world."

"That sounds bad."

"You have no idea -," she said looking around. "*When* did you find the stone?"

"Several weeks ago. On the 12th I think."

"I knew it! That was what I felt." Examining the weapon at her feet now she spied Lind's symbolic glyph along the spine.

"Friend of yours?" she asked her eyes narrowing.

"We've been together awhile," he replied assuming she meant the weapon.

I see. He didn't come for Bell. He was simply trying to retrieve the stone. She stood up facing him.

"-And you didn't think *any of this* might be important to tell us?"

"When was I supposed to tell you? When I was unconscious?!" he said matching her tone. "When I first met you I had no idea who you were. Besides, I've told you now!"

"Yeah and thanks for that," she retorted gazing at him as he once more felt the power of her amethyst eyes. "Well we're not going to gain anything else by standing here. I need to return and tell the others."

"Oh . . . I understand," he said moving off forlornly down the slope.

Urd felt her stomach knot watched him go. *What is it about this guy that's so, so -?* "With you of course!" she shouted

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calling after him. The visitor brightened immediately though she could see he was trying hard not to show it.

“Then I may return with you?” he asked.

“Only because you promised Bell you wouldn’t leave the confines of the temple tonight.”

“A promise already broken. But if she asks I’ll say I was in your custody the whole time.”

“*You were,*” she said waking into the open as they stood side by side. As Urd worked to raise the gateway he quietly studied her delicate features in the ethereal light.

“Alright,” she said completing the portal. “Just -.” But Takumi had already taken her hand. *Can he sense my thoughts?*

Together they stood silently for a moment watching one another on the quiet mountain slope before Urd’s natural wariness returned. “Okay, okay don’t get used to it,” she said pulling him into the gateway, arising on the temple grounds a second later.

“I assume that last comment was a reminder to yourself Indigo,” Takumi said upon their arrival.

“*UGH!* And I assume *that* comment constitutes the limit of your wit you half -wit,” she replied jerking away, marching off to the house.

Takumi crossing his arms leaning against the shed as he watched her go. “Good night . . . *Urd,*” he whispered going inside.

The next morning Belldandy awoke feeling much better physically. But her mind was still troubled. She had of course sensed the disappearance of both Urd and their visitor the moment it had occurred - despite the fact he had promised he would stay put. That alone concerned her. But when Urd had awakened her in the middle of the night with talk of the potential loss of a foundation stone her fears had multiplied. For as a first-class goddess, she knew far more about the power of such items than the others. Lying on the futon in the morning light she concluded that Mezzumura must have used some property of the stone to draw power from her; weakening her while strengthening himself considerably. So too she considered their new visitor, whose sudden appearance had so

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fortuitously averted disaster. She couldn't help but feel both were connected to some oncoming danger, one which seemed to be closing in around them. It all served to heighten her protective instincts at all costs for those she loved. And so that morning as she prepared breakfast, she asked Keiichi if he could take Urd and Skuld with him when he went to the shop to work on the new prototype. Keiichi had wanted to put the whole thing off but Belldandy convinced him that she would be fine for such a short period alone. "Besides," she added, "they needed to go shopping."

"You're sure you don't want me to stay?" asked Urd. "It's no trouble."

"No I want you to go and watch over Keiichi. I know he needs to go to the shop, but -."

"Okay Bell, I get it. I'll go with Keiichi."

"And remember we also need to bring back some dessert," yelled Skuld running from the hallway.

"Yeah, yeah," moaned Urd. "Okay let's get going."

Keiichi rode into town with Skuld beside him as Urd looked on from above on Stringfellow. Arriving at the shop Keiichi dragged out the freshly forged stainless steel frame and began re-checking its dimensions. He worked patiently, insuring that the final form was perfect. But the idea of re-checking anything was both foreign and frustrating to Skuld, used to her own perfection. "Oh this will take all day!" she cried watching him. "I'd better help you."

As the two worked together on the bike, the lone figure watching from the rooftop slowly stood up. Instantly Stringfellow struck, the force of the impact slamming her onto the pavement below. As she attempted rise Urd hit the ground behind her. "Well, well, if it isn't one of the people trying to *kill* my little sister," she said hauling her up with both hands. "And what nasty things have you been up to today? Perhaps I shouldn't wait to find out," she hissed as Skuld and Keiichi came running.

"*Mara!*" Skuld shouted furious. "Hold her Urd, I think I've got a present for her here somewhere," she said reaching down her shirt for the nearest bomb.

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“Get off of me you cow!” Mara cried struggling free. “You know I wouldn’t do something like that. Only a naïve fool would employ such an amateurish approach.”

“Sounds like you know these *amateurs* intimately,” Urd snarled. “Speaking of which please tell your *colleague* that the next time we meet I intend to make his current injuries look *trivial* by comparison.”

“Then you admit I had nothing to do with it,” Mara snapped casting a wary glance at Skuld whose eager attempts to engage a detonator were being restrained by Keiichi.

“*Stay*,” he commanded finally wrapping his arms around Skuld. Though her protests continued she did not seem to altogether mind his hold on her and quieted.

“Certainly Mara,” Urd said shoving her. “And I’m equally certain you did just *everything* in your power to prevent those fiends from carrying out their plot.”

“Don’t you have people in *heaven* to deal with that? And with respect to injury; is Belldandy dead? No? Then I don’t see what you’re *complaining* about! Besides from what I heard it was you and Bell who did the injuring.”

“-Which is the only reason you’re still breathing,” Urd said swiping at her. “Now as for that trinket you stole -.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Mara replied innocently, a note of warning in her voice. “But as I’ve always said - *this realm will be ours*. Its acquisition is all but inevitable. You know it and I know it. For mankind is far more comfortable with chaos and killing than it is love and brotherhood.”

“We shall see,” replied Urd. “As for you and your minions, you should stay clear of my family. Otherwise it might be difficult for us to remain such *good friends*,” she hissed.

“If you’re wise enough to stay out of *our* way it shouldn’t be an issue,” Mara shrugged turning to go. “In either case I have places to be. I will see you.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Urd murmured watching her disappear into the clear blue sky.

As soon as she was alone Belldandy quietly made her way to the shed. She knelt beside Takumi’s unconscious for a moment hesitating. “No, there’s too much at stake,” she decided

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finally. "I must make sure." Placing her hand over his heart she focused her considerable power, only to be met an instant later by the most horrifying of visions. In it she saw her half-sister whom she loved with all her heart crying out alone and in pain as she attempted to break free of the flames encircling her deep within the core of the demon realm. "*NO!*" Belldandy screamed jumping away, her eyes wide with terror at the knowledge of the intersection between Urd and the visitor's fate. "NO," she cried resolutely, raising her hand over Takumi's still body. "That is not going to happen. I won't let it!" But in the end she could not bring herself to destroy him, even though she knew it might alter her sister's fate. At least not until she had tried all other means. Outside she paced for some time considering what to do next, eventually returning to the house to await the others. An hour later she heard Keiichi, Skuld and Urd arrive dropping their accumulated packages in the kitchen. As Urd began randomly tossing groceries in the refrigerator, she watched as Keiichi made his way to Belldandy's room. "*Bell I'm home,*" he called as she came running to his arms hugging him tightly. Though he didn't know the reason, he didn't need to. Urd watched longingly at the looks they exchanged, feeling inwardly lonely. *I'm home.* I like the sound of that. I wonder if I'll ever -

"*Urd!* The ice cream goes in the freezer not the refrigerator! I've only told you about a million times," Skuld cried protecting her prize.

"*Yeah, yeah of course,*" Urd said absently tossing the ice cream back into the refrigerator as she continued staring down the hall.

After gathering in Belldandy's room to relay the details of their run-in with Mara, Belldandy rose to prepare more tea.

"Do you want me to do it?" offered Keiichi.

"No it's okay. Urd could you help me please?" she asked signaling her sister.

"What's up Bell?" she said following her to the kitchen.

"It's about Mr. Sato."

"Is he alright?" Seeing her sister's response she added, "Did he do something to you?"

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"No it's not that. But I think he needs to go. I don't think he should be here any longer."

"What's the urgency? I don't think he poses any real danger to us. Besides, didn't he help us and tell us about the stone? And didn't you say they'd kill him if they found him?"

"Yes," Belldandy said hesitantly. "But now I sense he possesses a very great capacity for harm. Let us send him on his way Urd, please."

"Now? Just like that?"

"Urd he's evil!" she exclaimed.

"What?! What makes you say that?"

She looked at her incredulously.

"Well - I mean *besides* that."

"*Besides*?" Urd he feeds on -."

"Yeah but we all have our flaws. I mean Keiichi eats chicken and *he's* still your friend."

She could see her sister was not amused with her analogy. She tried a different approach. "Look this isn't new information. Why the sudden change?"

"I just think . . . it would be best for everyone if he left."

"*Everyone* huh? Is this about last night? We were only gone a short time Bell." Clearly Urd did not entirely share her sister's impression of their guest. But explaining why at that moment would have been - well difficult. "I don't think he should leave just yet," she suggested."

"Why?"

"It's complicated."

"How so?"

"I don't know Bell it just is." Yet seeing the fear in her younger sister's eyes she eventually agreed. "Alright. We'll talk to him at sunset," she said.

"Thank you Urd."

As evening approached Belldandy and Urd went to the storage shed to find Takumi waiting.

"You seem to be improving," Urd said looking at the wounds to his head and arms.

"I'm a fast healer," he replied quietly.

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“That’s not surprising,” Belldandy observed causing her sister to shoot her a sideways glance. “If you’re feeling better I assume you’ll want to be on your way soon,” she added. For a moment Takumi said nothing, calmly studying them. “Yes,” he said finally. “It’s been three days and I need to - well I need to be going,” he replied averting their gaze. “I didn’t know quite how to bring it up. Thank you for doing so now. And for your kindness.” Though he spoke to both of them his eyes never left Urd.

“Where will you go?” inquired Belldandy.

“There is a place I can return to,” he stated collecting his few possessions. Secretly she was relieved when he provided no further details. Walking to the courtyard against the deep crimson sky Takumi waved to Keiichi standing in the doorway, then bowed low to Belldandy. Finally he took Urd’s hand saying only, “Look after them, and yourself Indigo.” With that he descended out the main gate carrying Abyss in the bindings Urd had given him. Satisfied Belldandy returned to the house as Urd watched him disappear down the road. When he was gone she looked down pressing her thumb to her palm, focusing on the mental impression he had given her in the instant they had touched. *At least I know where to find him if needed*, she thought.

A week after Mezzumura’s encounter with Belldandy, Mara made a point of locating him in the outer boroughs of capital. “*I’m confused*,” she said circling his thoroughly bruised and battered body as he lay with what few of his followers remained. “Isn’t this where the ‘goddess barbecue’ was to be held? And yet *you’re* the one who looks rather crispy.” She placed a hand to his shoulder squeezing. “And your little group appears to be getting smaller every time I see it. Surely this isn’t all the result of you’re meeting with poor little Belldandy is it?” she asked in feigned surprise. “How many did you lose this time? Ah well I don’t suppose it matters. At least you got her. I mean - you did get her, right?” Mezzumura’s only audible response was something between a growl and a moan.

The Twilight Hour

“Really? After all your big talk I would have thought you’d have made short work of her. But I guess that’s the difference between talking and *doing*. Oh and if you’re interested, I heard she looks as though she doesn’t have a scratch on her. Hmm, somehow that doesn’t surprise me either,” she mused loudly to the group. “Maybe now you fools understand why I’ve had my hands full trying to battle *three* of them, *on my own!*”

“Yes . . . it is most unfortunate Belldandy was not recovered,” murmured the calm voice behind her. They whirled to see Hild standing easily beside the column. “But at least you remembered one important thing -,” she said coming forward to pat Mezzumura’s injured head a little too vigorously. “You remembered *to bring back the stone!*” she said grimly.

“Of course mistress,” moaned Mezzumura. “But Belldandy wasn’t alone,” he said eyeing Mara venomously. “It was him, *that night crawler*. He turned on us.”

“Really? Surprising given the kind of loyalty your personality no doubt inspires,” Mara smirked shaking her head.

“Either way it sounds like you’ve got some cleanup work to do,” observed Hild.

“Yes mistress,” Mezzumura replied bitterly. “I *guarantee* I’ll take care of it.”

Seaside Residence

For several weeks following Takumi's departure all seemed to return to normal at the Morisato household. Yggdrasil reported no further attacks and Belldandy recovered her full strength under Keiichi and Skuld's watchful eye. True, Urd did seem to have taken up a sudden interest in reading the newspaper. But when questioned about it she would simply reply, "We need to be aware of anything unusual happening in this area - it's just common sense."

A week later Urd had been enjoying the late afternoon sun on Stringfellow when she noticed, quite by accident, that she appeared to be over the region of the coast which Takumi had indicated. Looking around she tried to guess the exact location of his resting place, finally realizing that a decrepit tunnel leading off from a ruined complex onshore was its most likely location. Staring at the miserable solitary entrance, Urd felt herself gripped by an inexplicably feeling of sadness. *Don't make such a big deal of it. You don't even know if he's there.* As the sun set however, she soon spied him arising from the shadows. Crouching low to remain hidden in the hills above, she watched as he made his way down through the trees to the ocean bluff. Filthy from head to toe he stood quietly at the cliff's edge as though waiting, or perhaps praying, for something. Even in his current state she thought there was something regal about him. Takumi!" she called. He turned startled. Immediately she sensed his embarrassment about his appearance before her. "Excuse me," he said hurriedly diving into the sea. Moments later he emerged on the beach below wearing considerably less than when he'd entered. Urd leaned over taking a purely clinical interest in the makeup of his physique. "How are you angel?" he asked.

The Twilight Hour

“*Goddess*, and I thought we established my name is Urd,” she replied floating down beside him.

“Very well,” he said wringing out his shirt and tossing it over the cold rocks to dry.

“You know there *is* a faster way to do that,” she observed.

“Enlighten me.”

Snapping her fingers his clothes dried immediately under the influence of her power. On the rock his shirt grew warm, just before it burst into flames.

“*Err that sometimes happens,*” she said quickly shaking the shirt, only further fanning the flames.

“Impressive,” he said eyeing the remnants. “Now if you have folding powers you can open a laundry.”

She rolled her eyes, reaching back to toss him a newspaper. “I see you’ve been busy.”

He glanced over the page tossing back. “What makes you think I know anything about it?”

“Oh I think I’ve seen enough of your *low-key* style to recognize it when I see it” she said sarcastically reading the circled item:

‘Eyewitnesses report that Kangawa-area crime figure Kurano Shin was attacked Tuesday evening by an unknown assailant as he attempted to cross the Yokohama Minatomirai Bridge.

Bystanders say the attacker jumped a distance of more than hundred and fifty feet from the nearby Cosmo Ferris wheel before striking Shin, crashing into the waters below. Police have thus far found no bodies and have no comment on the case.’ “Really - is that a proper way to spend your evenings?”

Takumi shrugged irritated. “Your report leaves a few minor details out. Oh and since you’re so interested in current events, you might want to watch for a follow up item in the next few days. I have a feeling several of Mr. Shin’s playmates are also missing.”

“You think this is funny?!”

“No Indigo I don’t. But the creature you’re referring to was a supplier for what I’ll euphemistically call the water trade.

Look it up some time. And though the loss of any human life is regrettable I think you’ll understand why I won’t be losing much sleep over him.”

Seaside Residence

“And that was the quietest way you could think of going about it?”

Takumi looked away embarrassed. “As I say your report doesn’t tell the whole story. I sensed their transaction in the amusement park. I won’t bore you with the details but I thought it necessary to act immediately. I’m sorry I wasn’t more discreet but he ran into traffic and it took me a while to find him.”

“So you climbed the tower.”

“Something like that,” he muttered.

“And it was about *dinnertime*, right?”

Takumi crossed his arms frowning. When he spoke his tone was serious but Urd could see he was trying to suppress a smile. “You know Urd, its talk like that which makes it hard for me to believe we’re ever going to be friends.”

“I don’t think we *are* going to be friends,” she replied turning pointing her nose in the air.

“Nor I,” he smiled eyeing her with unearthly intensity. He wondered for a moment if perhaps their conversation had come to an end but then Urd added pointedly, “You need a real home. You can’t live in that hole.”

Takumi turned away bowing his head. Speaking now his tone was softer, “I know what this must look like; what you must think of me,” he replied humbly. “Please believe me, I wasn’t always this. *I was . . .*”

It was Urd who was now who was beginning to feel uncomfortable. She hadn’t meant to insult him. “Okay, I don’t need your life story,” she replied. “Let’s just get to work and make someplace suitable,” she said encouragingly. Takumi nodded and together they began to walk the windswept coast of the Namegawa peninsula scouting potential locations. Urd found most of what they explored to be rather depressing, however around a bend in the bluff beyond a group of abandoned buildings she spotted what she thought would be an ideal location. The remains of the small outbuilding sat set away from the shoreline, placed on a gently slope shrouded in trees. “That’s it,” she announced.

“Urd, if you want to build a summer home here that’s great, but I can’t live in that.”

The Twilight Hour

“Why not? Look it’s nestled on the cliff slope just above the sea. You like that don’t you?”

“How do you know that?” he asked turning to her suspiciously.

“Umm - no reason. I see it in your eyes,” she said quickly.

“We goddesses have powers you know.”

“Apparently,” he replied sounding less than convinced. He returned his attention to the building. “But this structure has no . . . well it won’t be secure against the sun.”

“I didn’t say we wouldn’t have to *fix it up*.”

“And how *exactly* are we going to do that?”

“Well, we’ll have to expand it and carve out a sub-chamber below,” she suggested.

Takumi looked at the ten by twenty foot structure in disbelief.

“Goddess, do you have *any idea* how much earth you’re talking about moving to make the sub-chamber alone? I’d guess 40 or 50 tons! You’d be better off starting from scratch.”

“*Hmm*, okay we’ll do that then. I’d like it to be a little farther down the beach anyway.”

Takumi grinned looking at her. “Did I mention we have *less than nine hours* ‘til sunrise?!”

“Ah it shouldn’t take that long,” she said with a confident wave of her hand.

Takumi walked the embankment examining the spot for Urd’s proposed residence. Sure enough it was solid rock - or close to it. He shook his head staring down at her. “Seriously I know you’re from heaven and all and you may not know this, but this is not exactly cloud-like material we’re talking about here,” he said clawing the ground.

“Then maybe we should do it my way,” she replied. “Could you move back about thirty feet?”

Takumi hopped down standing behind the goddess as he saw her grow deadly serious. Focusing her energy on the hillside she pulled her hands outward. At first he saw nothing. But then the ground slowly began to tremble, feeling as though it were being shaken apart. Slowly the earth moved under her command. Takumi looked on dumbfounded, utterly amazed by the lever of her power. “Urd?”

“Yes?”

Seaside Residence

"If I forgot to mention it, I'm glad I didn't fight you in the mountains."

Urd smiled. "You were fortunate. By the way you might want to move a little farther back for this next part." Spiraling her hands upward she summoned lighting from the clear night sky as the hillside exploded outward. After several minutes of patient work she announced they were ready for the next part of the construction.

"Which is?"

"We need to bring in heavy concrete slabs to fortify the walls and sub-walls and floor."

"That shouldn't be much of a problem," Takumi said looking at the abandon complex in the distance. "Assuming you have some way of shaping and moving them."

"Of course."

"I believe you," he nodded peering at the excavated hillside. In less than two hours they had fitted each of the massive nine inch thick concrete slabs into place and covered the entire subterranean section with earth. On the upper floor Urd had even decided where the window and door should be. Only one thing remained as far as she was concerned. "It needs a porch."

"Excellent," agreed Takumi. After locating the appropriate ten foot square slab they set it into place in front of the residence. That was when the problems began. Initially Urd angled the slab facing West. "From here you can see the lights of Kamogawa," she announced.

But Takumi had a different idea. "No, it needs to be face more to the East to better observe the ocean swell," he said redirecting the slab.

"I think I know more about aesthetic beauty than you do. The twilight hour will best be seen from here," she said pushing it back in place.

"Goddess Urd, if you and I are going to get along there's something you need understand, *it's - better - this - way*," he said stubbornly pushing the slab back into place.

"And there's something *you* need to understand," Urd replied raising an eyebrow. "*I am a queen.*" With a waggle of her finger the slab shifted back to its original position.

The Twilight Hour

Seeing he could not win on the basis of strength alone he tried a different approach. He pressed against the slab he eyeing her, "Urd I wonder, are you this persistent in *everything* you do?"

She scoffed dismissively. "*Consult your dreams*, since that's as close as you'll ever come to finding out."

"Oh I intend to," Takumi grinned. As he anticipated Urd had forgotten all about the porch by this point, and so it remained in its eastward orientation.

"*There!* A perfect building built by a perfect goddess," she declared examining the completed structure.

"Uh-huh," Takumi said coming alongside her.

"You disagree?"

"Some people might say that statement's a bit arrogant - if you don't mind my saying so," he teased.

"Well I *do* mind," she replied frowning. "Do you have any idea how lucky you are? How many men have groveled at my feet for my attention over the years? Hundreds - probably thousands," she said indignantly.

"You're right goddess. Please accept my apologies. I can't see how anyone could *possibly* describe you as arrogant. But I am curious," he said leaning close, "Did any of them truly make you happy?"

"What . . . kind of silly question is that?!" Urd asked looking away, wondering if he was trying to read her thoughts.

"Just a theory -," he said walking beside her now the moonlight shore. "That if one is to love - to truly love, they must take that person into their heart completely, flaws and all. They must believe in them utterly, placing them above themselves. That kind of commitment requires that the two are equals, perhaps not in worldly things, but in their hearts. Without it I do not believe that one can ever know the full blessing of love." He had not intended to say so much and now worried his words might be taken as insult. He turned to her adding, "I say this to you Urd because I know you understand of what I speak."

"How do you know that?" she replied pressing against the cliff face watching at him intently.

"Your eyes," he said walking on ahead of her down the beach.

"-And because I believe you experience such love everyday of your life."

Seaside Residence

“Well you’re right about that. Bell and Keiichi are always right there in front me.”

He turned to her serenely, “Actually I was referring to the love your sisters clearly place *in you*.”

His words caught her off guard. Quickly she looked out to sea so he could not see her reaction. After a moment she recovered saying, “But you still think I’m arrogant.”

“I do not mean it unkindly,” he said lifting his hands to feel the ocean winds. “I’m sure it’s a common problem among beautiful women, particularly goddesses. I also understand you’re a *queen*, so that would make it even more -.”

Urd laughed, shoving him down in response to his teasing.

“Yeah a queen - *who can kick your butt*,” she replied smugly.

“Oh I doubt that,” Takumi said rising, shaking off the sand.

“WHAT?! After everything you’ve seen me do tonight?! Didn’t you say earlier you were glad you didn’t have to fight me in the mountains?”

“Indeed and I meant it. And what I’ve seen tonight is most impressive. But I was half dead when you found me in the mountains, now -?”

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” she said smiling, her eyes aglow sensing their imminent confrontation.

“No,” he said simply, beginning to pace around her.

“Is that a challenge?” she asked tilting her head to one side.

“If you think your ego can handle it,” he replied lightly.

“Oh you are *soooo* going to get it!” she growled preparing.

Takumi continued to circle. “Yes that’s what your whole wardrobe says to me - *I’m ready to fight*,” he taunted. “By the way if you ever wind up fighting in a field of violets or purple irises you’d be almost invisible . . . provided more of you were covered that is.”

“You don’t like the way I’m dressed?” she teased.

“I like it fine. I just think some of those you’ve ‘conquered’ may have been too busy ogling you to adequately defend themselves.”

“And you don’t ogle?”

“Me? This isn’t about me -,” he said looking away trying not to stare. “I don’t - notice such things.”

“Because you’re so pure no doubt,” she mocked.

The Twilight Hour

“Well a man need goals -.”

“Well see if you notice this!” she said pouncing. But Takumi’s reverse caught her in mid-flight dropping her to the ground.

“Well I wasn’t ready,” she complained standing up. “But I am a good fighter.”

She once more but he paralleled her movements sweeping under her, again tossing her harmlessly to the ground. “Maybe you mean you’re a good fighter for a *girl*,” he suggested.

Urd smiled determinedly rising to her feet. Following two quick feints she attacked but was again thrown headlong to the ground on her stomach. “You know it’s not a bad view from back here,” Takumi observed looking on admiringly.

“UGH! This is ridiculous!” she said springing to her feet.

“Let’s try that again.” This time as they connected Urd changed her tactics, dragging them both into the air. As she had anticipated once airborne Takumi’s advantage in terms of speed and physics were largely neutralized. Locking her legs around him she twisted downward, “*Goodbye Takumi*,” she said slamming him into the ground ten feet below her. He struck the earth and did not move.

“Are you alright?” she said kneeling beside him worriedly.

“Your hair smells like wildflowers,” he observed lifting his head. “Either that or I have a concussion,” he said collapsing back on the ground.

“*I vote concussion*,” Urd said dusting herself off. “Which reminds me, you and I have one more thing to do tonight.”

“Oh, what’s that?!” Takumi asked excitedly recovering.

“I need to find something to shut you up,” she mused. After locating and shaping the appropriate 800 pound slab of concrete, Urd positioned it over an opening between the main floor and the subterranean chamber. “Is this okay? Hope it’s not too heavy for you,” she teased.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he said pushing the slab aside and dropping down into the lower chamber. A moment later he slid the slab closed. “Perfect,” came the muffled reply. “Not perfect, I can still hear you,” she muttered sitting atop the slab.

“Fortunately the temple where you *really* live doesn’t suffer the same problem,” he retorted from the tomb.

Seaside Residence

“True,” she replied rising. “It also has the added benefit of protections to keep undesirables like you out.”

“Well then don’t let me keep you,” he rejoined stretching out in the man-made cavern. I know there must be a big lineup of people who still have to grovel at your feet tonight. Besides, I have to think of something more interesting for you to do when you come back.”

“You mean *if* I come back,” she corrected, drifting away on the wind with Stringfellow. All was quiet at the residence for several minutes until Urd silently returned in a low sweeping arc. She looked down at the new structure, attempting to memorize every aspect of it. Bringing her hands together she whispered, “Spirits of the eternal sky, watch and protect the one who resides here. Keep him from his enemies.” A glow began to encompass the whole of the subterranean chamber then gradually dissipated. Urd started off once more only to stop, quietly walking to the new porch. She leaned back looking up at the night sky, her feet resting just inside the new doorway, toes gently touching the edge of the slab covering the subterranean chamber.

“Where’s Urd, it’s nearly noon?” Belldandy asked concerned. “Go wake her.”

“I’m not allowed in there after last time,” Skuld reminded her.

“It’s alright. Go ahead,” she nodded.

When Urd did not answer her knock Skuld cautiously slid the door to one side. She heard Urd mumbling in her sleep. “I’m not arrogant, *you’re* arrogant . . . saying I’m arrogant.”

“Urd it’s time for you to get up you lazy goddess!” she called.

“*Humph*. What day is it?”

“Huh? It’s Saturday.”

“Then I’m immune to such requests,” she replied rolling over, placing the pillow over her head. “Now go get some saké. *Big bottle*.”

“What?! Urd it’s morning.”

“Did I ask what time it was?” mumbled the voice from under the pillows. “No. I asked for *saké!*” she threatened pushing more blankets over herself.

“Urd, Belldandy and Keiichi have already -.”

The Twilight Hour

“Saké!” she repeated insistently.

Skuld made her way back to the tea room. “Umm, she says she wants saké.”

Keiichi began to smile but Belldandy frowned looking in the direction of Urd’s room. “Does she seem alright?” she asked.

“Uh, about as alright as she ever is I guess.”

“Sounds like she was just out enjoying herself a bit last night,” Keiichi said encouragingly.

“Well why can’t she just enjoy herself here with us,” Belldandy asked walking down the hall.

“Maybe it’s because you pester her too much,” Keiichi muttered to Skuld when she’d gone.

“Maybe it’s because you hogged all the cakes yesterday *mister*,” she snapped in response.

“Urd are you alright?” asked Belldandy entering the room.

“Yeah I just overdid it a bit last night moving - .” A quick look at her sister’s smiling face told her that providing Belldandy with the details of last night’s activities might not be the best idea. Particularly given her proclamation of he’s *evil* only weeks before. “-Just moving around in the surf you know, enjoying the waves.”

“I didn’t know you enjoyed the ocean at night. But that would explain why you came home with so much sand,” she remarked looking back pleasantly.

“Yeah, it sure would...,” Urd muttered pensively.

“And all that movement tired you out?”

“Yeah I guess I just didn’t know when to stop,” she replied lamely, hoping to move the conversation along to a new topic.

“Because I thought maybe you went down there to practice your fire magic. Where it would be safe and when you wouldn’t bother anyone.”

“Yeah that would have made a lot more sense -,” Urd mused.

“What?”

“*Nothing.*”

“Well I hope you had fun last night and didn’t get into any trouble,” she said giving her a trusting smile.

Urd smiled back at her sweetly. *HA! You think you can break me with guilt Bell? Is that what you think?! Skuld maybe, Keiichi definitely, but me? I AM URD! I can stand up to your*

Seaside Residence

tortures, she thought. They turned to see Skuld standing in the doorway, a bottle of saké in her hands.

“Well I hope you feel better soon Urd,” Belldandy said passing her the bottle.

“Why thank you Bell.”

Skuld followed close behind her sister down the hallway. “You don’t really believe that story do you big-sis?”

“Of course I do.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t even want to think about the alternative.”

Takumi had not actually seen Urd for several days now. Yet every evening when he emerged he noticed some new aspect of her influence. On previous evenings he’d spied a low table and cushions, bamboo coverings adorning the window and door, and even a futon doubling as a couch. Tonight however he saw no change at all. That is until he stepped out onto the porch and fell into the soft sand below. He sprang up spotting the note which read, “*Yeah it’s terrible what happened to the porch. But don’t worry I fixed it.*”

“Fix it,” he grumbled climbing up the hill. “I’ll fix you.” After pushing the slab back into its proper orientation and replacing her note with his own (*It’s-better -this-way*), he set to his nightly routine, wondering if this would be the night the mysterious goddess would return.

When Urd finally did appear, arising from a small pool of seawater beside the beach, she was followed by several chairs, two cups and a teapot which she promptly directed toward the porch after eyeing it suspiciously. Looking around she spied Takumi high up on the bluff practicing with Abyss. Watching him work with the deadly blade she began to understand how demonic helpers might have fallen to his hands. *He’s fast, but how aware is he*, she thought. Quietly she scaled the escarpment sneaking up on him and appeared to be succeeding until he whirled demanding, “Urd how are you getting all this stuff here?”

“Aaaah!” she yelped almost slipping as he caught her.

“Seriously how do you get a futon here on a broom? I mean don’t people notice that sort of thing?”

The Twilight Hour

“An object my size zipping past them at more than 350 mph a thousand feet from the ground? No, not really. But more to the point, there is an easier way to move such objects.”

“Which is?”

“Portal.”

“I see. And where is all this stuff coming from exactly? I hope Tariki Hongan temple isn’t missing anything. I’d hate to make myself any less popular over there,” he observed sarcastically.

“Heavens no. I know how to shop,” she said modestly.

“Uh-huh,” he replied, thinking it best not to pursue the matter further. “Well I’m glad you’re here. I too have brought something to this little abode.” He jumped down appearing moments later carrying a surfboard. “I brought this from what’s left of my stuff in Tsukuba. I thought we might go surfing tonight.”

“I - *see*,” she replied examining the object warily.

“Using your balance to guide it through the waves,” he explained hopefully.

Urd looked disdainfully from Takumi to the board. “Does this by any chance involve me getting wet?”

“Umm . . . possibly.”

“Then no. It’s not my idea of a good time,” she replied crossing her arms.

“Oh come on Urd. You might like it,” he implored her.

“No, non, nien, iie, no way.”

“Oh I see. Of course. I’m so sorry,” he said bowing his head.

“For what?”

“Clearly you’re *afraid* of this device. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you with my strange modern invention.”

Urd muttered something under her breath before replying,

“Alright let’s see how entertaining this is,” she said impatiently.

After explaining the basic mechanics of the board, Takumi paddled out beyond the waves as Urd soared above. “At my signal just come down and stand with me and we’ll try to ride the wave okay?”

Urd hung low the air nearby eyeing him suspiciously. “This is all some weird excuse for you to put your hands all over me right?” she said snapping her fingers, transforming her outer layer to a one-piece swimsuit.

Seaside Residence

"It doesn't really work that way. Of course now that I see that swimsuit -." Their first several attempts were predictable, with Urd landing on the board only to jump off seconds later as she felt its instability; invariably causing Takumi to pitch over into the waves. But with each successive attempt they became more and more accustomed to the other's balance point and eventually were able to enjoy a few brief seconds standing side by side in the onrushing wave before tumbling into the surf. "You're getting it!" he shouted paddling back beyond the break. "You just need one more thing," he said turning for the next set. "And what is that?" she asked looking down from above. But at that moment Takumi turned, paddling to catch the swell. "Now!" he shouted as Urd landed beside him and together they made a quick right cut across the face of the wave before turning back as Urd yelled with pleasure. As the wave began to gather speed passing over the deep water rocks, Takumi weaved left then right to maneuver their way through. Sensing oncoming catastrophe Urd tried to jump into the air but Takumi caught her, holding her fast. "*Commitment's* what you're missing!" he yelled madly as together they pushed forward and to the right, quickly passing another rocky pinnacle before sweeping down into the steep face of the wave the far side. Turning sharply they now accelerated into the eye of the wall of water, soon surrounded on all sides but for the opening before them. "Now bend down almost to your knees," he shouted. Urd smiled in spite of herself seeing the phosphorescent glow of thousands of tiny microorganisms in the darkness of the curling wave as she raced through the thundering cascade. They continued on for perhaps five more seconds before the end of the barrel suddenly collapsed cutting off their escape. "What?!" she cried. "Hang on!" Takumi arched the board right as together they burst headlong through the side of the torrent into the open. As they headed for shore Urd sprang from the board dropping into the water beside him. "YES!" she yelled throwing her arms around him before realizing her actions a second later letting him go. "Well how do you like it?" he asked.

The Twilight Hour

She surveyed her companion holding the board in the waist deep water. "Well I like everything I see so far. Of course you do realize I'll need my own board."

"By a strange coincidence I think there might be something up at the residence for you," he said coming ashore. At the residence, Takumi pulled a second board from the depths of the lower chamber. Urd smiled at the design, for it carried across on its length the outline of a large lightning bolt. "This is an old board, but a good one. It has been with me for many years," he said handing it to Urd.

"Thank you," she said rubbing her hand over its surface. "But I don't think I can keep this at the temple. Perhaps you know someone who can hang onto it for me?"

"It would be my pleasure," he said placing the boards side by side along the far wall. "And perhaps now you will come more frequently in the evenings - to visit your board of course."

"I *plan* to come tomorrow night," she said walking away.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I think it's time I showed *you* some entertainment," she said disappearing over the hill.

Entanglement

The next night Takumi waited anxiously for Urd to appear. As he sat outside counting the early evening stars he watched as a spot appeared on the horizon, growing in intensity until the form of Urd streaked down to land beside him.

“Well what sort of entertainment do you have in mind for this evening?” he asked watching her amethyst eyes.

“I think it's time you and I got to know one another better. You know, go someplace with music . . . and such.”

Reflecting on his rather limited supply of clothing he replied, “I think it will have to be some place – informal. There is a place I know but it's a bit far from here; in Shibuya.”

“I think I can manage to get us there and back before your bedtime,” she said summoning Stringfellow.

Takumi eyed her companion nervously.

“Oh, my strange modern invention doesn't *frighten* you does it?” she asked innocently.

“Well I understand the principle of how a surfboard works,” he replied. This on the other hand -.”

“Then I guess you'll just have to trust me. You do trust me don't you?”

His look conveyed something less than complete confidence. But together on Stringfellow they soon set out over the coast, eventually heading inland to pass over the rolling hills of the Boso headlands. Urd sat back, thoroughly enjoying Takumi's look of controlled terror as they shot through the sky. Mature and kindhearted goddess that she was she made sure to swoop and dive at almost every opportunity that presented itself. In truth the evening's ride gave them a spectacular view of the surrounding scenery which Takumi would probably have enjoyed, had he not been focusing all his effort into holding on for dear life.

“*Urd!*” he cried as they dove toward the waters of Tokyo Bay approaching the Aqualine Bridge at breakneck speed. “*NO!*”

The Twilight Hour

he yelled with as much authority as he could as they careened toward the approaching bridge spans.

“*Oh yes,*” Urd replied as they arced beneath one of the massive bridge spans before streaking out the other side. “Ship, *SHIP!*” he cried a moment later as they closed on an oncoming container vessel at several hundred miles an hour. For Urd such course corrections were instinctual, and she easily swept Stringfellow up and over the deck of the oncoming vessel at the last possible moment. As they leaned to the right Takumi could see they were fast approaching the shipping channels on the far side of Tokyo Bay; closing on the Rainbow Suspension Bridge. “Over or under?” she asked pressing her head to his. “*NON-DEATH!*” he screamed as Urd made an instantaneous decision to sweep Stringfellow up and over the top of the span. As they raced toward the Sibuya section of greater Tokyo, Takumi could at last feel them beginning to decelerate. Urd turned heading for the majestic woods at the center of Yoyogi Park. Landing Takumi stepped (or fell depending upon one’s point of view) from Stringfellow as they touched down. “You don’t like flying?” she asked watching him struggle to stand.

“I’m not sure what that was Urd, but I’m certain it wasn’t flying. If I inquired in the heavens I’m certain they’d tell me flying with you qualifies as a death sport,” he retorted reaching for the nearest park bench. “Seriously, do you have a license for that thing?”

“Hmm it might be suspended right now, I’m not really sure,” she replied helpfully.

“*Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,*” he muttered regaining his balance.

“Wait until we shoot the upright cables going back!”

Takumi grew pale turning to her. “Urd don’t even joke about that,” he said, imagining the effect that striking the bridge cabling at their speed would cause. They walked along the moonlit path under the graceful arches of the ancient cedars until at last reaching the park’s edge.

“Alright sweetheart, I’m just going to leave you up here for awhile,” Urd cooed directing Stringfellow to the upper branches of a large tree.

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Takumi shook his head watching her. "Seriously, do you ever worry about people seeing you racing through the air on that thing?"

"And what would they say if they did? *Hello police, I just saw somebody whiz past my house on a broom. Is anything stolen? No, I'm just calling to let you know.* Yeah, I'll bet they put a big priority on those calls." Eventually they arrived at an older club in Shibuya district playing (among other thing) American music. Urd turned raising an eyebrow. "Oh be quiet Urd, just go in," he said nudging her from behind. "At least I understand the songs they play here."

"How do you know this place?"

"The owner was having some problems -,," he began.

"Do I really want to know?"

"*Probably not,*" he replied, waving to the man at the door as they walked in. After speaking briefly with the owner Takumi and Urd climbed to the second floor, eventually sitting at a balcony table overlooking the small central dance floor.

His eyes moved over her as she sat across from him. "You know I forgot to say it earlier while you were trying to kill me but you really do look lovely this evening."

She smiled back confidently. "And you look - like someone whose eyes hide a lot. So tell me."

"Me? You're the goddess. You must have all kinds of interesting things to say. But what is it you're the goddess *of* exactly? *Beauty? Love?*" he suggested leaning forward.

Urd laughed shaking her head "Definitely not love. Mostly I would say I'm the goddess of things that go wrong."

"And what goes wrong?"

"Usually not much. But when it does -."

"I don't understand," he said as the waitress came passing their drinks.

Urd sipped hers instantly spitting it out. "*Bleach!* What is that?"

"I think you may have my Tequila," he said offering his.

"Ahh now that's saké. But how did you know?"

"I smelled it on you the other night. I assume you're some sort of alcoholic," he said leaning back in his chair.

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"It's a tad more complicated than that. But I can see now you're one who pays attention to detail. I'm going to have to remember that."

"Yeah please make a note of it in whatever book you're compiling about me. Perhaps you can put it next to: *unconscious during daylight hours*. But we were talking about your heavenly job."

"I'm a systems administrator at Yggdrasil."

"Which is?"

"A massive informatic architecture regulating the interaction between realms. Should I go on?"

"Would I understand any more if you did?"

"Probably not."

"Hmm, in that case do you have any hobbies?" he asked, watching how the hair fell about her face in the dim light, wondering if the effect was intentional.

"Some might say I research new boundaries of magic."

"I see. I too am a researcher."

"I know - life and death."

"How do you know that?"

"I may not look it but I too have an eye for detail," she said tossing back the remainder of her saké.

"Another?"

"No. I wouldn't want you thinking I'm an alcoholic," she teased. Once again Takumi had the strangest sensation he could not breathe as her eyes moved over him. Yet despite his best efforts he could not fathom what lay behind them. She looked away breaking the spell as a slow sentimental song began to play. "*Follow me*," she said as without warning leaping over the banister to land gracefully on the dance floor below. Takumi watched as she swayed to the music, her eyes calling up to him, motioning for him to follow.

Careful, he thought. *That's no ordinary woman down there, goddess or no goddess. Follow her now and you will never be the same.* But as he looked once more, seeing Urd staring up at him invitingly his heart quickly decided the matter for him.

"*Oh the hell with it*," he muttered, jumping over the railing to land beside her on the floor. They circled one another as men and women so often do, each attempting to impress the other

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with their grace and agility. The fact that a number of the bar's patrons were beginning to take notice of their actions only seemed to further encourage Urd. She spun fluidly into the crowd before once more rejoined him as the music played,

*and I do want to love you,
and I do want to try,
because if falling for you girl is crazy,
then I'm going out of my mind,
so hold back your tears - this time . . .*

Embracing the moment Urd raised up her hands, lifting her voice to the rafters. Soon an amazing transformation seemed to take hold of the bar's patrons as they succumbed to the goddess's power, their voices now engaged in raucous effervescent song. In the midst of the goddess-induced chaos, Urd and Takumi caught sight of each other at opposite ends of the dance floor. Matching the other's movements they jumped fluidly from the floor, to the railing, to the uppermost balcony of the dance floor.

"Urd what are you doing?" Takumi said taking in the effect.

"What am I doing?" she shrugged teasing him. Standing opposite one another now along the top railing of the balcony they began to sing boisterously, chasing or avoiding each other as they jumped and spun effortlessly across the edges of the atrium high above the dance floor; much to the wild delight of the patrons below. As the music reached its crescendo the two dove from their respective positions to catch each other in mid-flight using their otherworldly strength. Though they hit the ground hard both were strangely uninjured. Unfortunately several customers attempting to replicate the feat were not quite so fortunate. As the sound of song completely filled the hall Takumi pulled Urd close. Arms encircling her, they moved now as though it were only the two of them. Both sang along with the music, each attempting to do so as casually as possible. Older than many of the surrounding patrons, it quickly became apparent that both knew how to dance properly as a couple as each anticipated the other's movements. As the patrons finished their rowdy chorus, Urd turned pressing against him to face the crowd as the bar exploded in applause. She threw

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back her long hair laughing. “*Ha*, it’s been a long time since I’ve done that!”

“Tell me about it,” Takumi said putting an arm around her. Soon they were chasing each other out into the street, quickly becoming just one of many couples enjoying the warm May evening. As they continued to walk however, Urd noticed a subtle change begin to take hold of Takumi.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Just a little tired,” he replied shaking his head.

Together they strode past numerous clubs heading toward the center of town, as up ahead the self-appointed queen of Nekomi Tech Sayoko Mishima emerged from her Rolls Royce Phantom. “What’s going on down there?” she complained to the valet, unknowingly witnessing the lingering aftereffects of Urd’s incantation work its way out into the street.

“Sorry Ms. Mishima. There seems to be some kind of big party going on at a club down the road. It’s creating a bit of a backup. We don’t normally have this problem,” he apologized.

“*Augh*, these low-class neighborhood clubs just wreck it for people with more refined tastes trying to have a good time,” she sighed tossing him the keys. Just then however she noticed Urd’s familiar form approaching. “*Urd?! What are you doing here? If you think you’re getting into this club you’re wrong. It’s private,*” she stated smugly.

Though saké and song had slowed her powers of perception somewhat, Urd now recognized the source of the irritating voice assailing her. “*Hah, Sayoko! Still a stuck-up little spoiled brat I see,*” she yelled walking by.

“Umm, friend of yours?” asked Takumi.

“*Ehh*, long story. Oh but I forgot to give her this,” she said turning to stick out her tongue.

“Yeah nice, very ladylike,” he said turning her head back to its proper orientation. “By the way, where are we going exactly?”

“Huh? I thought you knew.”

“Urd, who flew us here?”

“Hmm, you have a point. Now where did we leave our means of trans-por-tat-ion. Hey maybe down this street!” she said, accidentally leading him past a series of progressively more lurid love hotels.

Entanglement

“Urd are you trying to take advantage of me?” Takumi asked with mock suspicion.

She shrugged comically she raised an eyebrow.

“I mean you take me to the big city, have drinks with me, then we *happen* to wind up in this part of town? I think I’m going to have to report this to your sister.”

“Fine. Go chirp your message to that bird over there. Trust me she *will* get it,” laughed Urd.

“Wow and I thought I had a screwed-up childhood,” observed Takumi, only making her laugh harder. But as they continued down the side street Urd once again sensed the subtle change in Takumi’s demeanor. He seemed to grow distant.

“Am I not interesting enough for you?” she said finally.

“No it’s not that, it’s just -.” He slowed to a stop, his eyes seeming to look off to darkness on their left. Then he was gone, off and down the street, down the block and across the brightly lit intersection, faster almost than Urd could perceive. She followed as quickly as she could, spotting him on the scaffolding of the billboard headed for the roof. Urd was right on his tail as he cleared the top edge of the wall, moving a speed across the rooftops until at last stopping at a far corner.

“You’re pretty fast,” she breathed. “You almost -.”

“Urd stay back” he cautioned.

“What?! Why?”

“*Shhh.*”

Approached the roof’s edge she now saw the source of his concern. In front of them beyond several sets of rail tracks lay a park. Looking closely now in the darkness she thought she saw movement beside several parked cars. To her horror she realized two men were in the process of assaulting a young woman.

“I can get them,” she whispered coming to the edge of the roof.

“No,” Takumi replied putting his hand over hers. “Let us make sure. *They must choose their path,*” he said ominously. But a moment later it became all too clear what was occurring. “*Quiet!*” the man said striking the girl. Urd raised her hand but Takumi jumped blocking her shot.

“*Dammit!*”

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Five floors below Takumi hit the ground before the man could strike again.

A cry of surprise from his accomplice who lunged with the knife. It was over in an instant. Urd saw Takumi snap the man's neck casting him aside. As the young woman screamed he placed a hand in front of her catching the second assailant by the throat. As the woman fell to the ground unconscious, Urd's eyes grew wide in terror as Takumi bit down, quickly finishing the assailant. A chill swept over her as Takumi's eyes slowly turned toward her. It had been one thing for her to know of what he was; it was quite something else to see it in practice. She knew there was no hiding the fear and revulsion in her face. She watched as he carried the woman to a nearby bench before returning the others. As he did he tried not to look up at the rooftop, for he knew that no matter what he saw he would not be able to bear the sight of it. Either she would be gone, terrified by what she had seen, or she would remain, and he would have to see the hurt in her face, her eyes a reflection of the terrible monstrosity he'd become. Hatred burned within him as he brushed away angry tears setting to his vile task. It was perhaps no surprise when he returned from tucking his victims away that Urd was nowhere to be seen. She was gone and that was that. Still, some small selfish part of him had hoped she would stay. But the greater part knew he should be happy, happy that the goddess Urd was now free of him. Once more he began the long journey back to Namegawa.

Urd shut herself up in her room for two days following her return from Shibuya speaking to no one. Though Belldandy suspected the source of the problem she said nothing. For she had great faith in Urd's instincts and hoped this would be the end of it. But for Urd the days were filled with sadness and confusion. She wasn't even sure what it was she was sad about. Did she feel bad for him, or the world upon which he'd been released? Or herself? She thought about the time they had spent together, she could see the pain he was in. Was it right to release him from that pain? Release him from what gods or demons might do if they found him? Or what he might do to society? She lay for hours thinking there must be some other

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way, if only -. Or was that simply what she wanted to believe, an outcome she *hoped* was true? By the morning of the third day she knew she had to face him. *In the end he's struggling against the inevitable*, she thought. Speaking to Belldandy that afternoon she told her all that had occurred.

"I'm going to see him tonight," she said.

"You've decided what to do then?" Belldandy asked cautiously.

"When I see him I'll know what has to be done."

"Are you sure? Why not just leave him in peace and let things take their natural course?"

"What do you mean? No I should see him."

Belldandy felt her concern growing. The time had come. She had made her decision. "I have to work tonight but I want to be here for you. Can you wait until I return before you go?"

"Okay Bell."

Urd went inside as Belldandy remained alone on the veranda, considering what must be done. A moment later Keiichi poked out his head. "Is everything alright Bell?"

"I hope after tonight it will be," she replied somberly.

For Takumi the nights too had been long. The look on Urd's face burned in his consciousness. His heart seemed to ache.

Why don't I just do it - go into the sun? At least she might respect my having the courage to end it, he thought wistfully.

But why should that be important? Her respect, the hope she might consider him more than just an interesting diversion.

"You know," he muttered trying once more to put her out of his mind. "But selfish desires and vague hopes don't constitute a plan," he fumed. "There is a debt. And all other considerations are secondary."

As he emerged from the lower chamber that evening however he realized he was not alone. Something else stirred in the shadows behind him. "You've come for me then?" he asked quietly staring out the doorway to the sea. When no answer came he began to tremble. "It's alright," he said slowly turning to face the hooded visitor. "I knew it had to end sometime. I'm glad it was you who came," he said turning his hands outward. "I ask that you to forgive my sins not easily forgotten, and all those things I have left undone in my life. For myself I say

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only that the last month was the most precious to me. Please let - everyone know that.” The visitor’s hand rose in the darkness and Takumi knew his time was almost at an end. He had perhaps one or two breaths left. “I’m ready,” he said closing his eyes. *“For in truth I do not fear death.”*

The hand wavered then struck with focused effort. The sound was deafening as the catastrophic blow obliterated everything in its path. For several seconds he felt nothing. Then slowly the sensation of choking dust assailed him. Tentatively he opened his eyes. He saw that the entire seaward half of the roof had been torn away as had most of the wall behind him. Moonlight now streamed in illuminating the rear half of the chamber. Amid the settling dust and debris Takumi saw the figure lower their hood as tears streamed down her face.

“Urd, why?”

She shook her head. *“Because . . . I couldn’t imagine a world without you in it, because our work is not yet done, because I don’t care what people think anymore, and because -,”* she turned walking away.

“Wait! Urd don’t go!”

“I have to.”

“No, not before we talk. Not before I tell you everything.”

Leading her to the ocean bluffs amid blustering winds he began to tell her everything he knew. Of Sorano and their search for the stone, of her sacrifice to save him, and of her burial and his escape. Finally he told how he had lost the stone to Mezzumura, and how the demons had introduced him to his new dark powers in Tokyo. When he’d finished she asked, “Then you didn’t attain your present form through demonic contract?”

“What?! Why the HELL would I do something like that?!”

“But you didn’t. You didn’t ask for it. It occurred by accident.”

“Of course it was an accident! What idiot would want this?!”

“You’d be surprised. Provided you acutely survive any attack and with the exception of the sun, you’re essentially immortal.”

“Hardly an existence I would recommend. The look one sees in the eyes of . . . others is reason alone to shun it. But that’s not important now, the stone is. There’s no telling how much damage they will do. All because of my failure.”

Entanglement

"There was little you could have done. If you'd fought them you'd be dead and they'd still have the stone. As it was they trusted you enough to bring you to Belldandy; buying us valuable time. Besides, you didn't seek the responsibility on your own. You were asked to do so by one of us."

"Yes, Sorano. Did you know her?"

"Sorano. There is something familiar about that name. But no, I do not think I know her. But then we are many."

"What do we do now?"

"Well as Belldandy might say, we trust. We have to trust one another."

"I do."

"Why? You don't really know me."

"That is a hard thing to put into words," he said looking out at endless forest of onrushing waves. Still he knew the time had come to tell her. "All my life I've glimpsed something, something I could sense but never touch. A person I eventually came to believe I would never know or even meet. He spoke now as though in a dream,

*From landfall's end, beyond the vast oceans,
know in your heart, I shall always return,
until time and tide take us, bringing us once more,
to the one true sea.*

Urd felt tears in her eyes but had no idea why. He turned. "I believe *you* are that person Urd. There must be a reason I've found you now. We must have some part to play in all of this. But what that is . . . even I do not know."

Urd understood more of what he spoke than he knew. Still, she was glad she didn't have to explain it.

"I have to know Urd. What was it that truly stayed your hand tonight? Sympathy?"

"No," she said pushing past him. "But please don't ask me of it. Because I *know* I can't put it into words." *How could I tell him? How can I explain centuries of instinct, of believing in something I can't prove, much less communicate.* She knew what she felt in her heart, but why? No, it was better to say nothing. Because deep down she feared her real reasons had more to do with things unspoken - his hold on her in the waves - his eyes as he spoke - *the path in the mountains.* These were

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things she could barely admit to herself much less a stranger. She didn't even dare consider a future that could be. Yet in her heart she knew she had already taken the first step -she had trusted. "Let's just say I couldn't let you fall to darkness. Not when I sense the power for good still lies within you," she said coming close.

"In that case there is something I need to ask. And I need the truth."

She looked over at him nervously.

"Can you forgive me Urd? For what I've done, and for not stopping."

"You mean by destroying yourself?" She looked to the dark shores growing quiet. "You did not seek this life. Those who've crossed your path were in the midst of harming others, and would certainly have continued to do so in the future."

"It still doesn't answer my question."

"For myself I forgive you Takumi. Now that I know everything, I do. But there is something I must tell you, something you need to know."

He watched her expectantly.

"I am half demon."

"I don't understand. You mean like Mezzumura?"

"Yes." Though she had lived with it a lifetime, until that moment she had never remembered being quite so concerned how another viewed her.

Takumi reached out taking her hand. "I know only what I see Urd. And what I see is you. And that is what I believe in - *come gods or demons*," he said fiercely as the wind gusted around them. "And Belldandy?"

"Belldandy is my half-sister," she said searching his eyes. "We are born of different mothers."

"I see. And your daughter?"

"MY WHAT?!"

"Umm, the little sarcastic one."

"Skuld is NOT my daughter!" she shouted.

"Oh," he replied sheepishly.

"Skuld is also my half-sister."

"So she and Belldandy are -?"

"Yes, born of the same mother."

Entanglement

"Wow that's a relief. But are you sure? Because Skuld seems a bit more like -," he fell silent under Urd's continued stare.

"Oh and Keiichi has a sister," she added.

"Stop. I don't think I can handle any more relations for one evening. But if you have nothing further to say there's something I want to give you. If you don't want it I'll understand. But I want to give it to you."

"What is it?" she asked.

Without hesitation Takumi stepped in kissing Urd passionately. At first she resisted, an instinct it turned out which lasted for about half a second. For in his embrace she felt the depth of his true emotions. So too she felt how long, how very long indeed, she had been waiting to feel those emotions again. And so in his arms she melted, though she managed to pull herself away seconds later.

"Okay now I *have to* leave!" she said straightening up.

"*But Uuurd,*" Takumi complained looking back at her as innocently as possible. "Things are, *you know*, just starting to get -."

"No. If I don't leave now things are *really* going to get out of hand!"

"Okay. But Urd?"

"Yes?" she replied flushed.

"Thank you for not killing me tonight."

"Doesn't mean someone else won't try tomorrow."

"True. And thank you for leaving me with that happy thought."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes?"

"Were you really ready to die tonight?"

"Yes. But it's probably important to mention that in the school where I was trained we were taught to view each day as our last."

"Sounds happy."

"Its true aim was to teach us to live each day to its fullest."

"I see. Still it must make planning for the vacations tough."

"Urd are you teasing me?"

"*Maybe just a little,*" she said reaching out her hand for Stringfellow.

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“Umm, what about the residence?” he asked looking over the debris.

“Subterranean half looks fine to me,” she replied taking to the air. “As for the rest, we’ll discuss it on my next visit.” And with that she disappeared over the hills toward Tariki Hongan temple.”

“Bell can I have a cup of tea?” Urd asked entering the main hallway.

“Of course,” she replied happy to see older sister - even if she had neglected to wait for her return. Minutes later as Urd pulled herself into a hot bath Belldandy ventured the question she longed to ask. “Is everything okay?”

“Bell you would not *believe* the evening I’ve had,” she replied stretching in the tub.

“I see. And Mr. Sato?”

“Umm, *we might see him again*,” she muttered after sliding beneath the surface of the water.

The Dark Visitor

Over the next several weeks Urd dropped in on Takumi several times, each time doing her best to feign an excuse for the visit. Lately any pretense would do. And so one night after several days of absence, Takumi sat debating whether he should visit her at home. “I should go see her - after all it’s only polite. *No*, it’ll seem too anxious after the other night. On the other hand if I just go and check on her quietly, that should be okay. Just to go see her face. She doesn’t even have to know that I’m there. After all she may need me help in some way,” he thought hopefully. “Alright it’s decided then. I’m definitely going to go see her.”

Several hours later he climbed the last hill leading to the temple grounds. Reaching the top of the outer wall he quietly surveyed the courtyard. But his vantage point offered him little to see. Jumping down he began walking around to the side of the house. That was when he heard a soft metallic click off to his right. “*Yaaaaa*,” he screamed diving as the projectile narrowly missed. No sooner had he done so than a second missile streaked toward him blowing a sizable chunk out of the wall as he dodged. “*Dammit!*” he cried rolling out of its path. Crouching low to the ground now he could just make out his opponent in the dark. A small metallic dwarf-like creature sat hunched by the steps watching him with evil red glowing eyes. “*Get that perv!*” shouted a voice in the distance. Quickly coordinating his movement against the target, Takumi leapt in a zigzag pattern across the ground, each time trying to close the gap between himself and his enemy. Several times he narrowly missed being hit by the robot’s counter measures but when he was close enough he struck, taking his opponent to the ground. “Now I think that deserves a prize!” he declared looking around.

“What’s going on out here,” asked the soft voice sliding opening the shoji door as Belldandy peered into the courtyard.

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By now Takumi was well aware that Belldandy might not be anxious to see him again as Urd's guest. However spotting him beside the now defeated Banpei she turned calling inside.

"Urd, Mr. Sato is here," she said taking up a position at the edge of the porch to stare calmly but intently at the visitor. Urd's appearance on the veranda contrasted markedly as she sauntered down the steps seductively to greet him. "Well hello there. I see you've met our watchdog," she said casting a casual glance to Banpei on the ground. "I told you we had ways of keeping the riffraff out."

"Yes I must say I don't remember him from last time."

"He was undergoing - *renovations* at the time."

"Ever consider putting up a 'no solicitors' sign like normal people?"

"The *people* we're worried about don't seem to pay much attention to signs."

"I see your point." Up on the veranda, he could see Belldandy had now been joined in her vigil by Keiichi and a smaller, much angrier, pair of eyes.

"And why are you here?" Urd inquired teasingly.

"Well I -," but the presence of the entire Morisato household staring at him from the veranda seemed to have diminished his speaking voice.

"It's pretty obvious Urd. He came here to see you," Skuld shouted impatiently from the porch. "-As in *this* is where you've been all those nights, the *thing* you were doing you didn't bother to tell any of us about," she proclaimed, happy to get her big sister into trouble.

"Did I forget to mention it would probably be best if you *didn't* publicly announce yourself here?" Urd whispered to him.

"Did I forget mention your little sister just tried to *kill me*?" he exclaimed hoping to divert attention away from the current topic. But his announcement was only met with continued staring from the porch. He tried a different tact, "Well don't misunderstand, there hasn't been any actual *doing* . . . or anything," he said to no one in particular.

The only response was the sound of Urd slapping her hand to her forehead.

The Dark Visitor

"The truth is I just wanted to umm . . . check on you to see that you . . . were home safe because . . . this is a school night and it would be . . . so very wrong for you to, you know, be out *doing something*," he said loud enough for all to hear.

"Well isn't that courteous of you Takumi," Urd replied nodding encouragingly to the others in a lame attempt to induce a similar response from them. Still they received only stares in reply.

"But as you can see I'm perfectly fine," she turning slowly in front of him. On veranda Takumi saw Keiichi had lost interest in this particular nighttime melodrama returning inside. But Belldandy and Skuld remained, side by side arms crossed, looking on like expectant parents.

"Well thank you for taking the time to check on me all the same," Urd said coyly taking his hand. "I suppose I should escort you off the premises. It's not like we can just have *strange* men walking around here all hours of the night," she said leading him to the outer gate. When they were out of earshot, Urd put her arm around him. "So why did you come?" "*We can still see you you know!*" shouted a high-pitched voice from the far side of the courtyard.

Takumi leaned close. "I was tormented by a face. A face I knew I could only have imagined it in a dream. And so I came to look upon it once more, to see if it truly compared with that of my vision. One which looks out at me from a small porch above a dark ocean."

She felt herself flush but continued on calmly. "*And?*"

"It's just as I feared. Your presence far surpasses my imagination . . . Indigo," he whispered in her ear.

Urd made an admirable attempt to suppress her instinct to pounce. "Well, since we've come to the gate, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you here," she said raising her hands behind her head. She looked back to Belldandy calculating her next move for maximum effect. As Takumi turned to leave she quickly grabbed him, dipping him down to kiss him passionately.

"Suddenly I feel rather lightheaded," he replied as they came up for air a moment later. "I think I'll go rest in those trees for while before heading home. Or maybe there's somewhere else I can lie? Your room perhaps?"

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"No, no - not here," she said though with less than complete conviction.

"Very well. I guess I'll just have to go home, *alone* and think about everything that's transpired. By myself . . . *alone*."

"You do that mister," she said giving him a playful shove.

When he had gone Urd strolled back leisurely across the courtyard. Belldandy said nothing as she passed continuing to stare, arms folded at her chest.

"Stare all you want, I'm not going to change," she replied entering the house. When she reached the tea room Skuld came in prancing wildly. So is that your *boyfriend* out there? That you were out *cuddling* with. That you probably want to go and start *kissing* again," she taunted merrily, wrapping her arms around Keiichi.

"Hey, get off me!" he protested trying to finish his dinner.

"Yeah that's pretty much it kid," Urd replied, knowing it would rob her of numerous additional sarcastic comments that evening.

Skuld blinked looking back her fun ruined. "Urd you're a jerk!" she said dashing to her room.

"Aren't you going to tell her that's no way for a goddess to act?" Urd said seeing Belldandy appear in the doorway.

Her sister said nothing, slowly yawning as she turned to go to her own room.

"Oh I see, so that's how it is."

As the weeks passed the Morisato residence began to hear the lament of, "I'm bored there's nothing on," more and more frequently. Which inevitably led to pronouncements of, "I wonder what . . . well maybe I'll just go out for awhile, you two need time alone." And so, several nights a week after Skuld went to sleep, Urd would make her way to the seaside residence. More and more she would visit during the day now, not so much to see Takumi, but simply to add or create something new to her second abode. Not that things always went smoothly, arguments erupted from time to time, particularly when one thought the other had not visited frequently enough.

The Dark Visitor

"She reminds me of a bird bringing things to a nest," Keiichi observed one afternoon as Urd returned to the temple.
"That's what concerns me," Belldandy said sitting beside him.

It was perhaps predictable therefore that early one morning (or late one evening from Urd's perspective) as she entered the house she would pass Belldandy in the tea room, seated beside several trays of perfectly prepared food.

"Come in Urd," she beckoned smiling from the doorway. "Sit with me. Would you like something to eat?"

"Sure Bell, thank you," she replied warily. *When sis sits like that she reminds me of an old-fashioned samurai*, she thought biting into a cookie.

They ate in silence for less than a minute before Belldandy asked, "Urd can I talk to you about something?"

Here it comes. "Sure Bell what's on your mind? As if I had to ask," she said taking a sip of her tea.

"Well -," she began cautiously. "Urd you know I love you, and that I would never think of telling you how to live your life."

"Uh-huh."

"It's just -."

"-Takumi."

"It's just that while I see he possesses some admirable qualities, he -." She hesitated uncertain of how to continue. "Urd I don't know how to say this, but I sense nothing of the divine in him."

"Well its fortunate you're not dating him then," Urd replied sipping her tea.

"*Urd the dark blood is in him*," she insisted.

"Aren't you the one who always tells me it's what a person *does* that makes them who they are? That is you, right?"

"Good point," agreed Belldandy. "And exactly what is he *doing*? When he's not with you that is?"

Urd felt herself becoming angry. "I assume you mean when he's not out rescuing you," she answered.

"Urd you know I don't think he's a completely bad person."

"Just not good enough for me."

"*Exactly*," she said, relieved her sister now understood her.

The Twilight Hour

Urd however seemed less than pleased with the revelation. "Bell, I think we're going to have to stop talking about this now," she warned.

"Urd if this was something like -."

Her temper flared. "*Like you and Keiichi?! That is what you were going to say wasn't it? How do you know it's not?*"

"*It's not,*" Belldandy replied perhaps a bit too quickly.

Urd's eyes narrowed, her lips trembling. "You're sure?"

"I just mean I see the way the two of you are. It's not the same."

"Meaning?!"

Belldandy knew whatever she said from this point on would only make her sister angrier. But the truth was that she cared more about her sister's happiness than she did upsetting her.

"Keiichi and I have complete faith in one another," she blurted out. *That was it.* Urd exploded rising from the table pacing angrily. How dare her younger sister give her a lecture.

Especially about love!

Belldandy looked for a way to calm her sister. "Well I mean, are you saying that it is? Are you sure this isn't something you're just doing out of loneliness, or boredom?"

Urd turned on her as she spoke, the anger and hurt clearly visible in her voice. "Bell I've always defended you and Keiichi. No matter what anyone else said or thought. How dare you not do the same for me now!"

"Urd this isn't the same thing!" Belldandy pleaded, shuddering at the thought of the images she'd seen. *Enough of this.* It's time to end it, she thought. "Urd he's going to cause you terrible pain! I know it! And I can't let it happen."

"Thank goodness you've never experienced any pain in your relationship with Keiichi," she snapped.

"It's not the same thing Urd. Keiichi never *intended* to cause me any pain."

"And you're certain this is different?"

She hesitated.

"I didn't think so. Thank you for your advice. Now if you don't mind I have to go live my life!" she said storming out.

The Dark Visitor

"Urd don't go," she called chasing her into the hallway. "I didn't mean to upset you." But by the time she had reached the front door Urd was gone. "I only said what I did because -,"
"Because you love her," replied the calm voice behind her.
"Keiichi."

"Good morning. I heard raised voices. I also heard my name. Am I in trouble?"

"No it was me," she said coming beside him.

"What happened?"

"I told Urd I didn't think it was a good idea to see Mr. Sato anymore."

Keiichi smiled shaking his head. "And how did that go?"
She looked back frowning, a small crease forming in her delicate brow. "Well I had a very good reason," she submitted.
"Did you really think reasoned arguments would work with Urd?"

"Well -."

"Knowing her it will probably have the opposite effect. Besides, don't you see how happy she is whenever she comes home lately? I don't think any of us could change her mind. Maybe we shouldn't try."

"Why do you say that?"

"I suppose because I know how she feels," he said kicking a stone into the pond. "I think of what I would do if someone told me I couldn't see you anymore. I wouldn't let it stop me. I'd see you no matter what."

"Even if it caused you pain?"

"If the love is stronger than the pain; then yes. Besides, I don't think these things are logical, no matter how much we want them to be. I mean are they so different from us?"

"You sound like Urd," she said pressing against his shoulders.
"Hellooooo!" came the booming voice suddenly across the courtyard.

"What's all that noise!" demanded Skuld. "*Oh food!*" she said helping herself to the tea cakes.

"Aww great. That's Tamiya and Otaki. They've come to help with the braking system for the prototype," he said walking out to greet them.

The Twilight Hour

“*Mo-ri-sato!* Come down here. We want to talk to you,” they shouted from the street

“What is it?” he asked coming down the steps.

Quickly Tamiya grabbed him. “We didn’t want to say anything in front of the ladies, but we’ve seen some disreputable types lurking around the temple at night lately.”

“Disreputable types?”

“Well at least one,” replied Otaki.

“But where there’s one, there’s probably more,” echoed Tamiya glancing up and down the street.

“What - exactly are the two of you doing outside the temple at night?” asked Keiichi.

“MORISATO! This is no time for silly questions. We have a security problem on our hands!”

“Yeah,” nodded Otaki. “And we’ve got the solution dude. We can like, put nets over all over those trees over there. Then when the time is just right -.”

Keiichi shuddered visualizing their plan in action. “That’s - okay. I really don’t think we need that,” he motioned quickly.

“*Need what?*” Megumi asked coming up the walkway.

He turned at the sound of his sister’s voice. “Tamiya and Otaki want to fill the trees with booby-traps. I told them we should probably hold off.”

“Are you sure man? Because I have some netting right here in the truck,” offered Otaki.

“I - really don’t think you’d be happy with what you caught,” he said, trying to imagine what 160 pounds of pissed off Takumi would be like following the encounter. “Besides the person you saw might be a friend of Urd’s.”

The comment seemed to silence any further discussion on the topic. “Well on to the shop then -,” they said dragging him away.

“Okay, *okay*,” he conceded. “Megumi, what are you doing here?” he said while being unceremoniously loaded into the back of the truck.

“Belldandy doesn’t have to spend *all* her time with you does she?” she shrugged climbing the steps.

By the time she located them in the tea room, Belldandy and Skuld were already deep in conversation.

The Dark Visitor

“Well I don’t know -,” Belldandy replied hesitantly.

“It’s simple. We need to find out where she is, don’t we?”

“Who knows what she’s getting up to? And what if she gets into trouble? How will we find her?” Skuld said putting on her most sincere look of sisterly concern.

“Well maybe it would be good to at least know where she is,” Belldandy thought pensively.

“Great. I know exactly how to do it,” Skuld said jumping up rubbing her hands together eagerly. “Yes, an Urd tracker. It won’t be hard. It’ll be just like tracking a flying raccoon or squirrel. Probably easier now that I think of it. Once we’ve tracked her we’ll know exactly where her shady love lair lies,” she said excitedly. “And where to find her when she doesn’t do chores and stuff.”

“*Shady love lair?*” echoed Megumi. “I thought you said you wanted to find her in case of trouble?”

“Yeah . . . that too,” Skuld said with a wave of her hand.

“I don’t know Skuld. You’re sometimes a bit too enthusiastic about your projects,” Belldandy cautioned.

“Definitely,” agreed Megumi.

“Well do you want to find her or not? Shouldn’t we be able to find her?!” demanded Skuld.

Belldandy crossed her arms looking to Megumi. “Well if Megumi works with you I suppose it’s alright,” she said finally.

“Great then it’s all settled. I’ll start building my Urd Catcher immediately.”

“*Finder,*” Belldandy reminded her.

“Yeah sure - whatever.”

Megumi followed Skuld outside as Belldandy gave her a pleading look. “Don’t worry Bell, we’ll locate *that shady love lair* in no time,” she smiled.

Hmm, putting the two of them together may not have been the best idea, thought Belldandy.

Several hours later Urd returned home, walking into the tea room without so much as a hello to anyone as she parked herself in front of the TV.

“I see you’re still mad,” said Belldandy coming to the doorway.

The Twilight Hour

“Me? Mad? Why should I be mad?” she said stiffly. “I just returned from a home where I’m *appreciated*,” she said rubbing the small seashell charm in her hand.

“Well it sounds like you’re mad. But you shouldn’t be. Because we all really love you.”

“Well I don’t have to worry about that Bell. Because everything is fine in my relationship,” she pouted continuing to look at her charm.

“Okay Urd but I wasn’t asking,” she said turning to go.

Urd leaned back snapping on the TV. “-And why is Skuld so happy to see me all of the sudden?!” she bellowed.

Despite Urd’s proclamation, Takumi did not come to the temple that night. Nor did he come the following night - or even the night thereafter. After her comments to Belldandy Urd felt embarrassed. *Who cares*, she thought. *I could go at week without seeing him. Two weeks in fact! Well - at least one week.* But by the fourth evening Urd found herself thinking, *I’ll give him until 8:00.* An hour later it was ‘9: 00’. By 10:00 pm Belldandy said, “Why don’t you just go Urd?” “Yeah you’ve been looking at that clock every 5 minutes for the past hour,” sighed Skuld.

“I have not,” she replied defensively.

“Yeah Urd, you have,” said Keiichi.

“Well I don’t have to take to this kind of treatment. I’ll just . . . go for a walk then.”

Skuld and Belldandy exchanged silent glances. “Should we expect you back from this *walk* anytime soon?” yelled Skuld as Urd took to the skies on Stringfellow.

Arriving at the residence she found it empty. She searched the shoreline outside growing anxious. “*Where is he? Did something happen? Has he gone into the sun?!!*” “No, I know I still feel him,” she said trying to calm herself. Searching the bluffs she finally found him in a narrow craig of the sea cliffs. “Don’t you know it’s impolite to keep a lady waiting?” she said floating behind him.

“Urd,” he replied looking up gravely.

“Are you all right?” she asked. He seemed shaken.

The Dark Visitor

“Urd, can I talk to you?”

She did not like the sound of that. She felt the knot forming in her stomach. She tried to lighten the mood.

“Don’t tell me, you’ve moved the porch again?”

“No,” he said staring out at the waves.

“You’re married with two children?”

“No.”

“Hmm, you don’t really like girls? Oh I know, you’ve fallen in love with one of the local dolphins and you’re planning to announce it. You know the one I’m talking about, the one who always waits until I’m leaving to come close to shore.”

He smiled but she could see she had not broken his mood.

“Urd, what kind of a relationship could we possibly have?” he asked suddenly.

“*What?* Why are we having this conversation now? I guess I’ll just become a bit of a night owl.”

“For how long?”

“Well . . . *maybe for a long time I guess,*” she said her anxiety growing. “What’s bringing all this on?”

“Over the last week I’ve thought a lot about you. And about what’s fair. I mean, what kind of life could I give *a goddess?* I see the way your sister looks at me, like I’m some kind of -.”

“Are you dating her now? Because that topic seems to be coming up a lot lately.”

He waved his hand dismissively.

“Then it shouldn’t matter what she thinks,” Urd said feeling her heart race.

“What’s the point?” he said looking down into the dark waters.

“I have a feeling I’m not going to live much longer. I just – don’t want you getting too sad when I’m gone that’s all.”

“And what makes you think I’ll be sad when you’re gone? Actually you’re starting to bore me,” she said nudging him trying to cheer him up. “The point is while we’re alive we should live. Isn’t that what you said? So what are you saying now? You don’t want to try because it might be hard?”

“For myself of course not. But for you -.”

“Let *me* make that decision. Oh and for future reference, you should assume I’m at *least* as tough as you are; probably tougher.”

The Twilight Hour

"It's not that simple Urd," he said shaking his head. I have to be concerned with you."

"Why?"

"Why? *Why?! Because I love -*" The words were out before he realized them. He looked away blushing.

That was the moment. The moment she truly knew she could be with him.

"*What?*" she asked pretending not to hear. "What was it you were trying to tell me Tai?" she asked teasingly.

Takumi put on his fiercest expression to cover his blushing, thinking best how to extricate himself. "I said I have to be concerned because I love - *being in this place*. Yes, that's it," he murmured finally. "And that's not my name."

"No, but it's what I'm going to call you. Especially when I think of this day," she said hugging him tightly.

"*Humph* go away. Don't bother me," he grumbled embarrassed. But Urd could tell his gloom had broken.

"Well I am going. *Going surfing* that is."

"You can't go without me, the waves are too high for you tonight."

"That's what you think. I've been practicing."

"*What? When?*"

"Being awake during the daytime does have certain advantages. I've been practicing for weeks. I think I'm better than you now."

Takumi knew her statement was designed solely to provoke him. But it didn't matter. "Urd you're such a liar."

"I guess there's only one way to find out," she said stretching her arms above her head. As they paddled out it soon became obvious that while Urd had improved considerably, she still had a ways to go before challenging Takumi's ability. But Urd's success that night was not measured in waves. It was measured in her ability to dispel his fears. After all, not all a goddess's powers depend upon spells or magic enchantments. They moved safe in the ocean's embrace until Takumi heard her yell, "Damn, the board got away from me!"

"Let it go, we'll get it later. Come here for a minute," he called swimming beyond the breakers.

The Dark Visitor

"And what are you going to do to me out here?" she asked coming alongside him.

"Just come and relax," he replied floating on his back looking up at the night sky.

Urd floated beside him, perhaps a bit more awkwardly than he.

"Why are we doing this?" she asked after a moment.

"You're a goddess. I assume you like stars."

"Hmm, stars," she replied noncommittally looking up.

"Sometimes I come here to think about the connectedness of all living things," he said looking back at the waters reflecting the lights of the distant city of Kamogawa. Urd thought the idea rather silly, floating on one's back in the middle of the ocean to think. However as the minutes passed she began to relax. She stared up at the night sky thinking back on the many events of her long life. She thought of Belldandy, of Skuld, and Keiichi, and how truly thankful she was for each of them; even if she couldn't or wouldn't admit it. There was a quietness to the water now which seemed to surround them, protecting them from all the world outside. Even the pounding surf seemed somehow distant now. Almost unconsciously Urd reached out her hand above her to take hold of Takumi's. And so together they floated, two tiny beings adrift in the vast ocean.

"Had enough thinking?" she asked moments later.

"Yes," he nodded, retrieving the board as they paddled for shore. "I just thought you might like it."

"I like it fine but I also see your problem. You think too much."

"I'll try to be more reckless in the future," he promised.

"Which reminds me, there's still something I don't understand. Belldandy claims on the night we met you destroyed two of Mezzumura's servants."

"Yes and several more at Jufukuji."

"I don't see how that's possible."

"You really want to know? Because you won't like the answer."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I believe I was successful because I exploited a weakness you all tend toward."

"Which is?"

"Laziness."

The Twilight Hour

"What?" she cried shoving him into the surf.

"You rely on your powers too much," he replied surfacing.

"Meaning?!"

"Those with immense powers frequently become dependent upon them. As such they don't concentrate on strategy. They don't need to. Those without such reserves have no choice but to depend on their wits. When I was young my teachers always made sure to match me against stronger opponents. You've probably observed a similar behavior in Keiichi Morisato."

"Keiichi?" she replied derisively.

"Yes. I'll wager that when it comes right down to it he's probably a very cagey opponent."

"I would take that bet," Urd laughed shaking herself dry.

"And I would accept it. Because when such individuals choose to fight, they typically do so not for themselves but for those they love. As a result they act without hesitation or fear. This makes them doubly dangerous."

"So you're saying your opponent's overconfidence was their undoing?"

"It provided an opening. They left gaps in their defense a trained person could exploit. As you yourself no doubt discovered the other night."

"*I knew you were going to bring that up!* Just remember it was I who was ultimately victorious."

"True. But only because you had an opportunity to learn from *successive* encounters. In actual combat there is typically no such opportunity. Which reminds me; with all that's happened we should ensure there are no gaps in our own defenses."

"Then perhaps we should train together."

"An excellent idea."

"No I mean *really* train, not just give you an excuse to tackle me."

"Naturally," Takumi blushed, "-that is what I had in mind."

Urd liked the idea because it gave her an 'official' reason to visit whenever she liked. *Besides* she reasoned, a little *tackling* never hurt anyone. Eventually they found a favored spot to practice on a flat segment of rocky precipice overlooking a nearby cove. For Urd these sessions began as largely perfunctory events. But in time as they grew accustomed to

The Dark Visitor

one another's movements, standing side by side along the bluff Urd would feel the fighting spirit rise within her. On nights such as those she would often remember the angelic hymns of her childhood, frequently humming softly as they practiced. *He's right*, she thought looking out at the wide sea. *This realm is ours to protect.*

Unbeknownst to Urd and Takumi, their practices had attracted another visitor, one who had developed a habit of watching them as he faithfully walked the hills above them. Tonight the old Tanjo-ji monk had dragged with him a rather reluctant younger colleague to observe. "You see, it's as I told you," he said insistently pointing.

"Umm, what am I supposed to be seeing?" asked the younger monk puzzled.

"Down there, against the coast. It's just as I suspected." At that moment the figures jumped simultaneously to unearthly heights, landing gracefully beside one another a second later. "Did you see that?!"

"I'm not really sure what I saw. It's a long way off and pretty dark. What do you think they are again?"

"Ah, it's obvious," he said frustrated. "They are the kami of the hills."

"I don't think that -."

"What else *could* they be? They are spirits of these hills, protectors of the land. Now keep walking, you're slowing me down!" he grumbled moving on down the path.

Wind and Fire

“**W**e’ve got it!” Skuld shouted excitedly pointing to the display. “Almost all Urd’s paths cross into this area. Now big-sis can praise me for the genius I truly am!”

“Really? Because all you did was put a tracking beacon somewhere on Urd right? I think you can buy those things at most electronics shops,” Megumi began.

“Silence! This design is far more elegant and advanced than anything on Earth.”

“On what?”

“*-Japan*. More advanced than anything on the beautiful part of earth that is Japan,” she said quickly.

“It still doesn’t tell us exactly where she is.”

“Which is why we’re going on an expedition.”

“We are? Maybe we shouldn’t. I mean, maybe we should just tell Belldandy.”

“We *have* to go find the exact spot. Besides if big-sis goes first I won’t get to see any of the interesting stuff that’s probably there,” Skuld said, more to herself than to Megumi.

“I see.”

“But don’t worry, I’ll understand if you’re afraid to go,” Skuld muttered over her shoulder.

“*Afraid?! Oh you’ve got the wrong girl*,” Megumi said going for her bike.

Unfortunately for Takumi, Mezzumura and his servants had not been idle following their last encounter. Though they had long since determined he resided on the coast somewhere between Kamogawa and Katsuura, Urd’s enchantment on the residence prevented them from seeing it directly, and her powerful protections on the lower chamber prevented any direct attack upon it. The fact that none of them were particularly eager to find out what additional surprises might be awaiting them inside such a location also tended to deter closer inspection.

Wind and Fire

Given the grievous injuries she had inflicted on their master, Urd's frequent presence in the area also did little to encourage exploratory activity. The best time to attack it would seem was when Takumi was outside and alone. But after observing several of his practice sessions with Abyss, few servants seemed anxious to pursue even this line of attack. So they watched and waited while their master recuperated, hoping for an opportunity to present itself. And so it was one afternoon as Megumi pulled off the coast road that several sets of eager eyes began watching her intently.

"Is this where we're going?" Megumi asked as Skuld hopped from the back of the bike running toward the beach. "It doesn't seem very inviting. Just a bunch of abandoned buildings."

"No not here, over in that direction," Skuld pointed consulting her screen. Together they marched west as Skuld continued to search for traces of her sister's influence. Finally she stopped. "Up there!" she announced.

"Umm . . . there's nothing up there Skuld," Megumi replied looking at the vine covered outcropping.

"You have to know how my Onee-san thinks. She's very sneaky," Skuld said approaching the hillside. Cautiously she stretched out her hand. "Wait here," she replied pushing forward. To Megumi's amazement Skuld seemed to disappear into the surrounding terrain only to reappear a short while later. "Yep this is the place!" she announced proudly. "Come on in."

"*What?! How?* I don't understand. Is this one of your sister's magic tricks?!"

"Umm yeah, that's right. Follow me, you'll see."

Following Skuld, a moment later Megumi found herself in the inside the residence.

"Wow," she gasped looking at the walls covered with ornate carvings. "Urd's been busy. They're beautiful," she said studying the colors. "What are they?"

"I'm not sure really. They're a kind of pictorial storytelling, describing old history and legends and stuff." In a corner she spied several notations for new potential combinations of ingredients. But Skuld had little interest in such things. She had come for other sights. "So this is the place Urd goes to make out," she chirped happily landing on the futon.

The Twilight Hour

“Skuld you’re sooo bad,” Megumi laughed shaking her head.

“Hey what’s with this slab in the center of the floor?”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about that,” she said eagerly investigating one of the surfboards lying against the far wall. As always Skuld was curious about her big-sister. About what she knew, about what she was really like. About secrets she might not want to tell her.

“Hey Skuld this one looks like you,” Megumi said pointing to one of the drawings.

“*What?!*” she turned to see a crudely drawn picture of herself spinning through the air following contact with what appeared to be several rather sizable bolt of electricity.

“That never happened!” she cried angrily over Megumi’s laughter.

“Well what do we do now?”

“You mean before we tell Belldandy? We stay right here! I can’t wait to see the look on that Takumi’s face when he sees us sitting in his secret love cave,” Skuld said contentedly.

“*Ok-ay,*” Megumi replied sitting down reluctantly beside her.

“But you know at their age Skuld such places aren’t really a big secret. Besides how do you know when he’ll be back?”

“How long is it until sunset?”

“About an hour.”

“Then I think we have about that long,” Skuld said flopping down lazily on the futon.

From the cover of the cliff their plans were already in motion.

“I told you we cannot breach their defenses,” hissed one of the servants.

“No but perhaps we can bring him to us,” replied the other.

“Impossible.”

“No. Anyone can be taken. You just have to be patient. *And use the right bait,*” he said eyeing the motorcycle. “We’ll have to time this just right. Too early and they will burn for nothing. Too late and he will cease the fire before it can do any real harm. It must all be ablaze at sunset. That way he’ll emerge in weakness into the heat of the inferno and they will all be consumed together. And our reward will be great.”

“*Idiot,*” said another. “What if he doesn’t come out?”

Wind and Fire

"He'll come. When he hears their screaming, he'll come. And if not? He'll be blamed for letting them burn and his protectors abandon him. What do we have we to lose? An act of nature.

It's perfect."

"What if they leave before sunset? Should we stop them?"

"No, that would not get us the traitor. If they leave now we let them. Their panic and death must be rapid. If we tried to stop them in the open they gather enough time to call others."

"Then let us prepare."

"Agreed."

Megumi had just finished tracing her finger over one of the strange symbol on the west wall when the flames burst to life beyond the doorway.

"SKULD!"

Skuld searched the room quickly realizing their only means of escape was blocked. *"No water! No mirror! Dammit Urd you idiot!"*

"Skuld we don't need a mirror, we need a way out!" cried Megumi. But it was already apparent from the heat on the outer wall that escape was impossible. *"We're trapped!"*

"How long until sundown?" Skuld asked frantically.

"SKULD WHO CARES?! Help, HELP!" shouted Megumi.

The full gravity of their situation now began to close in on them. "Oh no, big-sis, BIG-SIS!"

"Skuld no one is coming! We have to get ourselves out. Get to the back wall!"

At Tariki Hongan temple Belldandy suddenly dropped the dishes to the floor. *"SKULD!"* she whispered racing from the room.

"I feel it too!" Urd shouted flying into the hallway behind her.

"She's not sending a clear enough picture of where she is!

WHERE COULD SHE BE!" cried Belldandy.

Alerted by her shout Keiichi came running from the shed.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?!"

"Skuld's in trouble! We need to find her NOW!"

"She went to go exploring with Megumi, but that was several hours ago," he replied.

The Twilight Hour

“*Going - going - GONE!*” shouted the demons watching the blaze from the abandoned building as the sun dipped below the horizon. Opening his eyes Takumi heard the roar of fire above him. Then he heard the screaming. The slab exploded under the force as he leapt to the main floor. Kneeling in the heat he saw Skuld and another girl huddled at the far corner of the room. The air was already suffocating as heat surged from every wall.

“*I’m sorry!*” sobbed Skuld.

“*TAKUMI*” Urd said looking up, knowing now exactly where they were. With no time to prepare a portal she jumped to Stringfellow and was gone. There had been days when she had made it to the residence in little over five minutes. Tonight she prayed she could make it in three.

The fire had begun to penetrate the room, its walls already too hot to touch as Takumi reached for Skuld. “*Take her out first!*” Skuld shouted above the flames over Megumi’s unconscious body.

“Skuld!”

“*DO IT!*”

There was no time for discussion. He grabbed the girl and plunged through the doorway, trying to breach the flames making for the beach. As they sank to the water he looked back in horror seeing the full magnitude of the fire. The house was now completely engulfed, its outline barely recognizable through the fortress of flame. He could only guess Skuld’s relative position within the inferno. His last conscious thought as he hurled himself toward to the outer wall was, *this is going to hurt*. An instant later the supporting wall exploded as he burst through to reach Skuld’s body. Though he tried to force his way through the fire’s intensity was too great, and all too soon felt his flesh ignite as he struggled to escape its fury.

Urd could hear nothing but wind as she streaked through the skies toward the point. Approaching the residence she saw the

Wind and Fire

rising pillar of smoke. “*Oh no*,” she breathed seeing the extent of the devastation. On her left something moved.

“*Skuld!*” she cried throwing her arms around her, forgetting she had ever been a source of irritation in her life. “Are you alright?” she said holding her tightly.

She nodded kneeling beside Megumi at the water’s edge. “*But, Takumi . . .*,” she began turning to look at the waves.

Urd followed her gaze, cold fear beginning to grip her. It took her a second to see him but when she did her heart stopped.

There in the shallow water a body was floating face down, looking like little more than a corpse. “No, NO!” she screamed.

“*ELEGANCE!*” she cried running as her angel burst forth.

“*Tai – Tai can you hear me?!*” she shouted reaching the water beside to him. She turned him over with trembling hands.

Takumi said nothing, his body trembling, his breath shallow and irregular. “*HOLD ON!*” she said as her full power grew to light. She focused her energies as Belldandy struck to the ground behind her next to Skuld. After a flurry of words between them she raced to join Urd raising her hands.

“*DON’T!*” Urd cried glaring back at her angrily. “I wouldn’t want you to waste your power on something *non-divine*.”

Caught off guard by her sister’s sudden anger Belldandy’s eyes welled with tears. Still she remained beside her, as the two determinedly attempting to stave off death. Urd said nothing as they worked, for in truth she knew it would take both their effort to save him.

“Bell what are you doing?” she said as her sister’s hands moved to his heart.

“We’ll need to slow the tree if we’re to lessen the fire’s poison,” she replied pressing down.

When they had done all they could Urd turned to her. “I’ll take him somewhere I can try to heal him.”

Belldandy took hold of her shaking her head. “*Where Urd?*”

Where will you take him? The gods won’t help him. The demons would destroy him. Where will you go?!”

“*I don’t know!*” she sobbed. “*I’m your older sister but I don’t have all the answers!* I won’t bother you with this. I know you don’t want him around.”

The Twilight Hour

Belldandy surveyed the still body. “No,” she said finally. “You need to bring him to the temple. And we need to move him now.” Raising her hand she extinguished the dying flames onshore as together they retrieved what was needed. They opened the portal returning to Tariki Hongan temple as the sound of sirens descended on the Namegawa peninsula.

Takumi was taken to Urd’s small room and heavy curtains draped across the exterior wall to protect him from the coming sun. Though portions of his face and torso were relatively unscathed, Belldandy worked quickly to wrap his seriously injured arms and legs. When she returned moments later to finish the process Urd was already fast asleep beside him, unconscious from the vast overuse of her power. At Belldandy’s request Keiichi carried her to Belldandy’s room before bedding down beside Megumi to watch over her. By the time he awoke the next morning Belldandy was gone, off to obtain the supplies she would need to aid in Takumi’s recovery. With Urd and Megumi still unconscious, the responsibility fell to he and Skuld to look after things until she returned. It was a duty which Keiichi took with the utmost seriousness. Kneeling down to tend to the dressings he looked at the face of the stranger who had helped not only save Belldandy but now his sister as well. “*Hold on,*” he muttered surveying the body which to all appearances seemed already dead. He grimaced seeing the burnt flesh. For fire was an ancient enemy to Keiichi Morisato. In his home far to the north it was an all too common occurrence during the long cold winter months. And so from a young age he had become accustomed to dealing with the consequences of burns. The sound of Skuld’s approach roused him from his reverie. She came to the door of Urd’s room that morning demanding to see him. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Keiichi replied concealing Takumi behind a curtain in an attempt to spare her from the grim reality of his wounds. “I’m not some little kid. I want to see him!” she demanded. “Take down that curtain!”

Despite his repeated urgings Skuld would not be placated and eventually he relented. But upon seeing him Skuld quickly fell

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silent, saying nothing for several long minutes. Keiichi could see shock and silent tears in her eyes. When she spoke again her voice was barely above a whisper. “*You . . . can put that curtain back up now,*” she said closing her eyes. He nodded putting his arm around her.

“Keiichi?”

“Yes?”

“Is he . . . *going to die?*”

“I don’t know Skuld. But we’re going to do our best to prevent that, right?”

Silently she shook her head doing her best to convince herself. The two may have hoped that the hardest part of their day was over. Unfortunately it was only just beginning.

“He must be close to death, it shouldn’t take much more to finish him off. Even Mezzumura said a brief exposure to sunlight at this point should be enough,” whispered the helper watching from behind the temple wall.

“*Mezzumura*. He thinks only of success - *and he’s not here,*” sneered the other. “Who knows how dangerous this really is?” “It’s the best chance we’ll have. I see only the little one now.” “We haven’t seen the other one yet though . . . *Urd.*”

“*Yes, yes,* we must be cautious,” agreed the other.

“We’ll approach from the side gate. If she appears we’ll leave.”

“Agreed. Either way they’ll come to feel dread in their hearts when they see how little we fear them.”

“And if we succeed . . .”

“*Yes!* So let us go - but cautiously.”

Slowly they crept over the walls on opposite sides of the house toward their target, unaware of Banpei standing silently in the shadow of the trees. A moment later Skuld and Keiichi rushed outside at the sound of the explosion.

“DEMON!” yelled Skuld.

“Just the two of you eh?” gloated the helper. “Not much of a -.”

“*Quantum net!*” cried Skuld.

Banpei fired downing the demon, tumbling to the ground as he struggled in the net.

“*Noble Scarlet!*” Skuld shouted calling forth her angel as together they began pummeling the captive squealing demon.

The Twilight Hour

Only the sudden crash in the entryway alerted them to the presence of a second intruder. "*Keiichi!*"

"I know!" he said running to the house.

Unlike Mezzumura's servant, Keiichi Morisato knew exactly where he was going. Jumping to the porch he crashed through the outer wall of Skuld's room intercepting the intruder in the inner hallway. As the two caught sight of each other the helper smiled. "Well, what are you going to do now boy?" he said closing on him.

Keiichi knelt down, rising from the foot of Urd's doorway with the haft of the naginata now firmly in his hands.

His opponent slowed. "I don't think you can use that," he hissed. "For I see in your eyes you're no killer."

"Then please say hello to your friends for me," Keiichi replied lunging. The look in his eyes as he swung wildly combined with the sound of Skuld scrambling toward the entryway behind him immediately caused the intruder to take flight. Skuld raced into the house. "*You're okay!*" she yelled throwing her arms around him.

"*What?* You're concerned because of *that*?" he said putting her off. "That's no big deal. If I can handle you I can certainly take care of those guys," he said mussing her hair. Skuld slid down beside him on the hallway floor. "Yeah we're okay," he said watching the sunlit reflection in the hallway. "*All of us.*"

Returning home Belldandy noticed the rather sizable hole in Skuld's wall and rushed inside.

"Keiichi?! *Skuld?!!*"

She saw them stationed at the far end of the hallway outside Urd's room. Reading the concerned look on her face Keiichi replied, "Welcome home Bell. You weren't worried about us were you?" Following her questioning gaze to Skuld's room he added, "Oh Skuld and I were just horsing around."

"Keiichi you are such a liar! Demons came here to kill Takumi, but Noble Scarlet and I trapped one in my quantum net, and Keiichi almost killed one in the house," she shouted excitedly. "*You . . . Noble Scarlet . . . Keiichi . . . kill . . . house?*" she repeated stunned.

Wind and Fire

"It sounds more exciting than it was," Keiichi shrugged trying to reassure her.

"No it doesn't!" Skuld protested. "The quantum net deployed perfectly, that demon never knew what hit him. And Keiichi chased another one single-handedly out of the house."

"I knew I shouldn't have left the house," Belldandy sighed fearfully shaking her head.

"It's okay," he replied hugging her. "Everything's alright."

Later that night Urd finally reawakened.

"How long was I out?" she asked looking around.

"About a day," Keiichi said sitting next to her.

Immediately she walked to her room. "Takumi?" she whispered, peeking through the open door. Inside she saw Belldandy pouring over the dressings as she continued in conversation with Skuld, "*- but what do you really think?*" Belldandy looked up catching Urd's eye before replying, "His injuries are severe, but his breath is stronger than before. Demons of this kind are very durable and thus difficult to destroy. I believe he will recover if we care for him."

Belldandy had hoped her words would provide Urd with some comfort, but instead they only seemed to irritate her.

"Yes, well I'm sure you two have done more than enough for one day. I'll look after *the demon* from here on in.

"Urd I didn't mean -."

"I know what you meant," she said tensely.

Belldandy waited several hours before trying to speak to her again. She knocked at the door, "*Urd?*"

"Yes?"

She looked in to find Urd seated at the far wall, wrapped in a blanket reading to an unconscious Takumi from an old book.

"Research?" she asked.

"Old Norse poetry," Urd replied continuing to read.

Belldandy could not recall ever having seen her sister devote so much energy to anything before. "You're not going to let go of this are you?" she said quietly.

"No," Urd replied stiffly, turning the page without looking up.

"Then I'll say goodnight then. Please call me if you need anything."

The Twilight Hour

She walked down the hall ducking into Keiichi's room. She sat down beside him saying nothing as she began to knit.

"What is it Bell?" he asked in answer to her thoughts.

She moved closer. "I have a bad feeling about this Keiichi."

"I know. But I know if we were in trouble I would hope, no I would pray that someone helped us Bell."

She looked out to the hallway, "That's what I'm trying to do Keiichi; that's what I'm trying to do."

Urd's night was a quiet one. In the early morning hours she awoke to find Takumi shivering, whimpering in pain.

"*I'm here Tai,*" she said moving to ease his suffering.

"*I'm just . . . cold,*" he replied apologetically.

"*Here-,*" she said, trying not to apply too much pressure as she cared for him. She had held up well since awakening. But now as she soothed him her eyes began to tear.

"*What were you thinking?!*" she sobbed scolding him.

He looked up swallowing hard, "Just . . . *I don't know.* Just trying to make you proud, trying to be worthy of -."

She shook her head silencing him as her tears fell. "*You do that every day -,*" she whispered kissing him, her long hair spilling down over his chest. "*Rest now.* Let me watch over you," she said curling up beside him.

Takumi closed his eyes thinking of the first time she'd turned to him in the dim candlelight of the residence. She was dressed in the long robe she always wore when she decorated the walls. He watched as she painted, carving and covering in a single fluid motion with her hands, working to create an intricate series of pictographs and glyphs.

"*What is that?*" he had asked.

"*Everything - ,*" she replied as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Two days later as the rest of the household finished dinner, Belldandy overheard Urd and Takumi speaking in her room. Peering in she could see Urd had him propped up in a makeshift bed against one wall as she sat beside him holding up pages of an old book so he could see the script inside. "So what's this?" she heard Takumi ask.

Wind and Fire

“That’s a symbol you must learn. It’s very important. For it is my name.”

“I see so this is a U?” he asked trying to point one element of the script.

“No our names are mostly ideographic, though our language does possess both ideographic and phonetic elements.”

“Beautiful. So this part here is the radical within the glyph?”

“Yes,” she replied eagerly.

Takumi trembling fingers moved to the lower part of the page.

“So this series of glyphs indicates the type of command spell? And the physical elements it affects are shown here?”

“Yeah that’s right,” Urd said brushing her hair away to lean in closer. “Of course these are all quite simple. We actually control things in a variety of ways, sometimes through scripts like this, but also through the interaction of light, sound and other physical waveforms. Every *string* has its own unique harmonic resonance and properties.”

“I see,” he replied beginning to understand. “They’re all ways of representing forms of complex mathematical relationships. Given in their entirety they represent what you called a *completed program*. Their correct execution alters the surrounding physical environment to create the desired change; probably through some form of matter-energy inter-conversion.”

She smiled wryly. “Well it’s a little more complicated than that but yeah, that’s the basic idea. For example gravitational lensing puts certain tight constraints on what’s often instantaneously achievable.”

“Can such a program be fought? Defended against?”

“Usually one sets up an interfering counter-program as a defensive measure. Or more rarely one can inhibit a program by directly interacting with it. For example with the script here we can interact with it directly, so we could counter it by redressing it in this way, you see?”

Takumi watched as the glyphs began to change as Urd retraced them in reverse order.

“Yes I think so,” he said fascinated.

“Urd can I see you?” called Belldandy from the doorway.

“Yes?” she said sticking her head into the hall.

The Twilight Hour

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to discuss such things?”

“I’m not telling him anything he doesn’t already understand at some level. Besides, even if he understood it completely he doesn’t possess the power to *initiate* a program. He’s not one of us after all.”

“All the same, remember their understanding of string mechanics is still very primitive,” she cautioned.

“I haven’t told him anything his society doesn’t already know. Many at Takumi’s level already understand the basic elements of M-theory. I haven’t said anything about inter-dimensional energy transference, or long-range particle interactions they’re presently ignorant of. It’s not like I’m explaining to him how gravity works or something.”

Belldandy turned to go but Urd knew the matter was still far from settled. She became certain of it the next evening. “What do you plan on feeding him Urd?” Belldandy asked pointedly as they sat down for dinner.

“Oh don’t worry about it Bell. I’ve got it covered. *Come here Skuld!*”

“Ha, ha, that’s so funny Urd,” replied her little sister glaring.

“Well what about you Keiichi? There must be a few *disposable* types over at the University. Sayoko perhaps?”

“Aaaah, I think that might create a few problems,” he replied doing his best to excuse himself from the whole conversation.

“Oh all right. In that case on your way home tomorrow could drop by the hospital and ask them if they have any extra -.”

“*What?!*”

“You know that won’t work Urd,” frowned Belldandy.

“Well I have to do something. I wouldn’t want you to get a bad reputation in the neighborhood,” she argued mischievously.

“Though knowing his tastes, any neighbors he removes probably wouldn’t be a big loss.”

“Urd!”

”Oh Bell I’m just kidding. Leave it to me. I promise it won’t involve any depletion of neighbors.”

The days passed slowly but Takumi did begin to recover, a sign of both his care and considerable recuperative ability. Much of the damaged flesh on his torso and upper limbs had begun to

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come away and even his burned extremities were beginning showing signs of improvement. His proximity to the Morisato household during this period gave Belldandy a more than ample opportunity to observe him. Many evenings now she saw him engaging Keiichi in conversation on topics of mutual interest in structural mechanics; be it motorcycles or the human body. So too she heard their murmurings of more serious conversations, as when Keiichi thanked him for assisting Megumi and Takumi's reciprocally praise of Keiichi's courage (and foolhardiness) in defending his own life. But she became increasingly concerned one evening when she saw Takumi take Skuld aside, speaking to her for some time in the courtyard.

"Is everything alright?" she asked as Skuld came to the house.

"Yeah, no problem."

"What did he want?"

"He asked if I could do him a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

"He wants me to look after his stuff while he's away," she said proudly.

"*Oh?*" remarked Belldandy watching him in the courtyard.

After the first few days when it became clear he would survive, Urd and Takumi spoke less and less during his recuperation; a result of her spending more and more time unconscious. Often at night now Takumi would creep into wherever she was sleeping, frequently finding her curled up in one corner of the tea room. Initially Belldandy was uncertain if he fully understood the link between his own recovery and her incapacitation. But late one evening as they sat alone together in the tea room she caught him staring at Urd's unconscious form. The look in his eyes told her he understood all too well the true nature of Urd's slumber.

"How long can she sustain it?" he said suddenly, clearly aware of her surreptitious glances. She remained silent.

"I'll take *that* to mean not for very long," he said irritated. "Is it doing her harm?"

"There are limits to any goddess's power. I'm sure she will cease when you are well enough."

The Twilight Hour

“Most of her demonic energy must now be going toward replacing the fact I’m not . . . *replenishing* myself,” he said turning to face her directly. “I ‘m well enough. Please tell her to stop,” he said soberly, rising to leave.

The next evening as they gathered together in the living room Takumi addressed them, expressing his gratitude for all their help. It was clear from his clumsy words he was unaccustomed to asking for or receiving outside assistance, embarrassed by the kindness they had all shown him. Urd now awake and sitting in one corner of the room beamed as he spoke, clearly proud of his words. After thanking them he handed Abyss to Skuld, formally asking her to watch over it. When he had finished he and Urd retired to her room, where at long last they spent a comfortable night asleep beside one another.

Now that Takumi was well on the road to recovery, Urd naturally assumed they would continue their own journey together. Yet with each passing day he seemed to grow more and more restless, as though anxious to be off on his own. Later that week she caught him talking to Belldandy who appeared to be making ready for his departure.

“I never thanked you properly for saving Skuld -,” she heard her sister say.

“Hardly necessary, since there is no way I can ever repay you for saving my life and allowing me to recuperate here.”

“*Are you going somewhere?*” Urd asked approaching. The looks exchanged between them mad Belldandy to quickly excuse herself.

“*Yes*. There are several things I need to do. It’s best that I got to them.”

“You know if you have to go *into the city*, you can come back here afterwards.”

“No, that’s no longer appropriate. I need to be on my way.”

“Did Bell say something to you?”

“No. This is just something I have to do.”

“But I have a *surprise* for you,” she said pleading with her eyes, hoping to delay him.

“When I come back.”

“*Come back?! Where are you going?*”

Wind and Fire

“Up North. Up near Ichinoseki for awhile.”

“Well I guess that’s alright,” she sighed. “I could use a vacation after all that’s happened.”

He smiled apologetically. “Not this time Urd. This is something I have to do alone.”

She began to feel anxious. She had not had the best experience when it came to men departing North.

“Why?”

“It’s complicated. There are just a few loose ends I need to tie up. Things which I must do now. I’ll explain it all to you when I return.”

“And how long will that be?” she said, annoyed by his revelation after all they’d just been through.

“Perhaps several weeks.”

“Several weeks!”

“Maybe less. I’m not exactly sure.”

“Are you sure you’re *coming* back?” she asked turning her back to him.

“Of course,” he replied continuing to pack.

Men, she fumed watching him in the evening light. *They’re as unpredictable as the wind!*

Northern Departure

With Urd still grumbling, Takumi kissed her later that night as he picked up his belongings and was on his way. Though he understood the danger, something inside him needed to see the remains of the house he and Urd had built one last time before he left. And so, after taking care of several unsavory elements in Chiba city, he traveled out to Namegawa. As came around the bend in the shoreline he was shocked to see a building standing in its place, one which showed no trace of fire. Running his hands over the dwelling he could see the whole of it had been rebuilt similar to, yet more far carefully than the original. He rushed inside to find the walls bare, devoid of Urd's beautiful drawings. But in one corner he saw a new story was beginning to taking shape on a small sub-section of wall. Though he recognized only one of the symbols in the picture it brought tears to his eyes. There in the center was the angelic symbol for *hope*. *She believed*, he thought. *Believed I would survive and we would go on*. She must have been working on this place the whole time. *'I have a surprise for you'*. He cursed his stupidity for not sensing her intent. "But I can't think about that now. I have to get ready for -."

"There you are!" said the voice suddenly behind him. Takumi spun instantly catching the man by the throat. *Dammit how could I have been caught off guard like that?!* He scanned the area but no one else seemed to be present.

"Who are you?!" he demanded squeezing him tight.

"I did not mean to disturb you Fudo-Myoo," wheezed the man.

"I was merely preparing the prayer ribbons," he said motioning. Dragging his captive with him Takumi went outside. He now spied the rows of free standing streamers gracing the far side of the building. He looked at the man studying him carefully. *He must be seventy*, he thought.

"Who are you?!" he repeated.

Northern Departure

"Nobu, a simple monk from Tanjo-ji," coughed the man. "I saw the kami of the hills rebuild this place. I protect it in her absence," he replied proudly.

"Wait you what? You saw a kami of the hills?"

"Yes."

"And what exactly did this *kami* look like?"

"Beyond earthly beauty, her silvery hair . . ."

Okay well that takes care of the kami, thought Takumi.

"She's the one who *practices* with you," added the man.

His eyes widened. "And what *exactly* have you seen this kami and I *practicing*?!"

"It's okay Fudo-Myoo," he said raising his hands. "I'm an old enough to know that what is written in sacred text is not always a precise description of the truth," he said winking.

Wonderful, he thought letting him go. But he was beginning to understand. He chuckled. *The monk thinks I'm the deity Fudo-Myoo. Wow is he in for a disappointment!*

"Sir I'm not Fudo-Myoo. Believe me on this," replied Takumi.

"It's okay Fudo-Myoo, your secret's safe with me," the man whispered knowingly.

"No, seriously. I'm not."

Without warning the monk shoved his fingers into Takumi's mouth.

"HEY! I don't know where those have been!"

"Ah-hah I knew it! Your vampire-like teeth, your piercing eyes to punish evil doers," he muttered excitedly. "Fudo-Myoo, your sword cuts away the hindrances of passion and false knowledge," he continued fervently.

"Actually what I carry is more like a -."

"Shhh," insisted the monk. "You are a god of fire. I saw you emerge from the flames when you saved those people. How else could you have survived?"

"Well that is a bit harder to explain. But actually I was quite badly burned."

The monk looked back eyeing him suspiciously. "Strange I see no evidence of it," he said searching him with a small penlight.

"Wait - why do you have a penlight?"

The monk ignored him. "But where is your rope?" he asked.

"Used to draw beings to enlightenment?"

The Twilight Hour

“The fact that I’m not carrying *a rope* is your hint I’m not Fudo-Myoo?” He shook his head. “And doesn’t Fudo-Myoo have one downward pointing tooth representing his compassion for those who are suffering, and an *upward* pointing one representing his desire for progress toward the truth?”

“Hmm, it seems as though you’ve given this a lot of thought - *Fudo-Myoo*”

“Well if I had I known there was going to be a quiz -,” Takumi began.

But the monk had clearly convinced himself. “To demons you are a terror -.”

“I’d like to think so. But I believe if you actually took a poll -.”

“To the faithful you are a remover of anxieties, a banisher of evil -.”

Takumi brightened. “Well that would be nice to put on my headstone. But the truth is I’m just a regular person.”

“No human possesses your strength, or could have emerged from a wall of solid flame,” the monk replied chiding him.

“Does the umm - *kami* know of your presence here?” Takumi asked looking around.

“I try to keep a low profile and not disturb the work of the gods,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“I see.”

“But I do work diligently to keep the scum away,” he added proudly.

“Like . . . *who*?” he asked looking up and down the deserted coastline.

“Those who are *evil*,” Nobu replied helpfully.

Takumi grew concerned. “You’ve actually *seen* someone else here?”

“Yes, a week ago. I saw their malevolent little eyes on that ridge over there. But they left when they saw these,” he said, enthusiastically holding up a prayer flag.

Entertained though he was by the thought of demons being scared off by an old monk waving a streamer, Takumi sincerely hoped the man had only seen a stray dog or raccoon. Yet he couldn’t be sure. The monk noticed his look of concern.

“Do not worry Fudo-Myoo. I am old - but fearless. Besides I have my stick -.”

Northern Departure

Takumi smiled as the monk held up the withered staff.
“Yes well all the same . . . why don’t you leave the demon fighting to us. If they come please leave. Or at least take refuge within these walls.”

“I would never think of entering holy ground.”

“Yes, well in an emergency you have my - *err*, divine permission. Better yet send us your blessings from Tanjo-ji.”

“*Of course*,” the monk replied sullenly. Takumi could see that like it or not, the residence had acquired itself a groundskeeper. After a brief mediation session atop the rocky plateau where he and Urd practiced (which the monk insisted fit into yet another aspect of his contention he was indeed Fudo-Myoo) Takumi said his goodbyes retiring to the confines of his new home.

He rose just after sunset the following day, kneeling on the wet sand to prepare just as he had in the old days. He thought of all that was behind him and all that yet lay ahead. “This trip will be difficult in more ways than one. But the time has come to begin.” Catching the train in central Tokyo, he arrived at Ichinoseki two hundred and forty miles northeast just after midnight. Taking up his pack he wandered out from the train station, following the meandering course of the Satetsu River for more than an hour until at last he reached the Genbikei ravine. Looking down into the fast-moving waters of the ravine he tried to imagine what they might look like in the daylight; indeed trying to remind himself of what daylight itself looked like. He pressed himself down on the rocks, listening for some time to the sounds of the clear water rushing over the stone below before at last rising to begin the final leg of his journey. Hiking up and away from the river now, he walked the forested road for several more miles before reaching his destination, the cave temple of Takkoku no Iwaya. The outer half of the long low temple jutted from beneath base of a massive rock wall looked both formidable and forbidding in the darkness. He checked the time - *almost 2 am*. “A little late for a reunion I suppose.” He looked to the temple rising from the cliff face. “This will provide more than adequate accommodation for tonight. I’d best find a spot to -!”

The Twilight Hour

He spun sensing the shot as the arrow flew past him, striking the wood plank less than a foot from his head. The design on the arrow's shaft left little doubt as to its owner. From the trajectory he had some idea of the archer's position. But out of the corner of his eye he saw nothing but tall grass.

"The road is the other direction," murmured a voice from the shadows. Takumi knew the archer did not yet know his identity and so he replied in a low voice, *"I just need a place to sleep."*

"It is warm tonight, and the grasses of the fields are soft," the archer replied in a tone which assumed this settled the matter.

"Are you as skilled with your hands as you are with a bow?"

Takumi called out stubbornly. Even with his heightened senses he had trouble detecting the archer's subtle movements through the grassy stands. Then, seventy feet away Takumi saw the figure come up onto the road. There was no mistaking the man's calm fluid movements. He was now in the presence of his old master, Sensei Sen Okubo.

"Perhaps," answered the archer, standing before him.

"I'm impressed an old man like you would even bother to defend this place," growled Takumi.

The man approached but stopped some 30 feet from him.

Takumi tried with all his might but could not discern whether it was pleasure or dissatisfaction which greeted the man upon his recognition.

"So is this a disguise, or simply your new profession Takumi," inquired Okubo.

He ignored him. *"Do you stand out in these fields every night waiting for thieves?"*

"I was meditating. The echo of your footfalls was too loud to ignore," Okubo replied dismissively. *"Come."* It was not a request. Takumi fell in behind him as together they walked road leading beyond the temple, eventually coming to a group of houses nestled among scattered trees at the base of a rocky cliff. In the house in the still had its porch light on.

"Sen?" he heard the woman call. *"You're back from Kyudo practice early tonight."*

"Humph," Okubo heard Takumi mutter behind him.

Northern Departure

"Naru can you put on some tea? I seem to have collected a visitor." At this Naru leaned farther out from the porch, peering into the darkness at the approaching figures.

"Tenori?" she called tentatively. When no answer came she continued to stare. "*TAKUMI!*" she cried a second later.

"In the flesh - or some manner thereof," he said coming into the light.

She rushed down the stairs throwing her arms around him. "It's been so long," she said not letting him go. "Come, come inside and let me take a look at you."

Sitting down at the table in the small kitchen Takumi could now see them both clearly. They were in their mid-sixties and both seemed happy and healthy. Naru spoke first. "So how are things at the University? You've been there about a year now haven't you? Sen says you're busy down there."

"Oh does he now?" Takumi replied smiling.

"I take it this is not a social call," Sen retorted continuing to look ahead while sipping his tea.

"Well *no* it's not in fact," he replied thinking how best to begin.

"Tenori says you're working on something," remarked Naru.

Yes that's probably the best way, he thought. "The fact is Abyss has been found."

She looked up sharply. "You've recovered it?!"

"Yes," he said feeling a measure of pride.

Sen made no sign save for extending his hand. "It will be safer here at the temple."

"Well you may be surprised to hear this sensei, but I thought the bullet train might have a problem with me bringing a seven foot weapon onboard."

He nodded. "We will send a car."

"Yes. But you should know the full story before deciding upon what to do. Which is related to why I'm here," he offered nervously. "I believe the time has come for me to collect the item you hold in safeguard for me," he stated quietly.

"Are you asking me . . . or telling me?" Sen inquired turning to him inquisitively.

"I'm asking of course sensei," he replied with respect.

"Do to you need the item for yourself Takumi? Or is this for *a girl*?" Naru said getting to the question she really wanted to ask.

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Sen snorted. "*Of course it's for a girl Naru.*"

"It's not like that!" complained Takumi. "There's much more going on. Besides at my age we don't call them girls."

"I see, *so there's much more going on* -," Naru echoed happily. "Please tell us."

"Well umm -." He began to feel as though he were a boy again. If that were not enough Naru chose this moment to say, "Sen remember when he just *had* to take the boat to other side of the island during that storm because he knew the perfect place to collect cowrie and abalone shells? Remember how he begged you to take it no matter how high the waves were?"

"Hmm, *that* was for a girl too as I recall . . ."

"I didn't beg and I was thirteen at the time," Takumi interjected.

"I remember what happened to the boat," retorted Sen.

"They couldn't find you for two days. And when they did spot you stranded in the cove, there you were, sitting calmly under the trees carving those shells. Rain and wave so high that half of the men didn't even consider making the landing," Naru laughed. "But there you were."

"*None of them* made the landing," corrected Takumi. They made *me* swim out through the storm waves to them. And as I recall the pieces I collected did wind up making a fine necklace," he added defensively.

"As to the boat," Sen began -.

"It was a 20 foot skiff and I rebuilt it stronger than it was on the day I took it. No doubt it's still in use on the island today."

"I think Naru's point is that you sometimes -."

"I have no point," she said nudging him. "He simply follows his heart. Not unlike *others* I know," she said winking happily.

"This is hardly the same situation. Back then I was a boy trying to impress a girl. I'm not trying to do that now," Takumi said, his voice growing serious.

"*Then tell me*," Okubo replied his voice growing equally serious.

"Perhaps - we should speak at the temple," he suggested.

Sen and Naru looked at one another. "We have no secrets here Takumi."

"Yes I know, but there is something I need to show you," he motioned getting up to walk outside. Okubo followed as they

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walked in the moonlight of the whispering trees until reaching the rice plantings at the edge of the road. There he began to tell him of everything he thought it necessary for him to know. Of the finding of Abyss, to his dark awakening, to his contact with demons and goddesses. He finished by saying, "I can't help but feel that things may soon come to a point of crisis. I need to ensure they're safe if it's in my power to do so."

Okubo looked over regarding him cautiously. "How are things at the University Takumi?"

"*The University?! What the hell does that have to do with anything?!?*"

"You must have a lot of responsibilities there."

"Sen I'm not crazy! And I'm not making this up! If I was going to lie don't you think I could have thought up something that sounded - well a bit more *reasonable?*"

"Perhaps."

"*Oh for goodness' sake! Follow me,*" Takumi demanded, searching the grounds of the nearby houses until he found what he was looking for. "*Look at this!*" he said picking up a segment of steel pipe. As he attempted to bend it however he realized that perhaps he should not have picked up one quite so large; or so thick.

"What exactly am I waiting for?" asked Okubo folding his arms. Takumi muttered redoubling his efforts. Then slowly the pipe began to bow, bending before it suddenly snapped.

"*There!*" he replied tossing him then ends. "Still think I'm crazy? I've never lied to you, why would I lie about *this?*"

Slice me, pierce me with arrows. I assure you I will heal."

For some time Sen said nothing considering him. "Let us find a place for you at the temple," he said finally. "I must meditate on this."

When Takumi awoke the next evening in the confines of Takkoku no Iwaya he quickly realized the outer door had been reinforced and a lock placed upon it. "*Are you kidding me?*" he shouted rattling the door.

"*Takumi!*" Okubo called from the other side hearing his voice.

"Are you trying to lock me in?!"

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The door burst opened as Sen stepped inside facing him. "The lock is to keep visitors *out*. We do occasionally have visitors here remember. It would be rather difficult to explain your presence here. Now come!" As he moved beside him through the depths of the inner temple Takumi sensed the change in his demeanor. *He believes me now. He must have seen me during the day.* His teacher's actions had become quick and deliberate. Exiting the temple Takumi saw Naru waiting for them beside the car. "Thank you Naru, I can take it from here," Sen replied walking down to join her.

Approaching Takumi sensed her fear. *He must have told her everything.* "I would not harm you," he said coming to her. Quickly she took hold hugging him. "It's not me I'm worried about," she whispered protectively.

He felt her fear more clearly now. *She's afraid I will die. Afraid this will be the last time she will see me.* "Don't worry. I'm stronger now," he assured her.

"So are those you face," she warned continuing to hug him.

"Naru he's a grown man. And we must go," urged Sen.

She raised her and for silence pulling the package from her robe. "We brought this for you today," she said placing it into his hands.

"This is it?"

She nodded as Takumi peeked inside. "It's beautiful. But - the centerpiece seems to be missing."

Okubo sighed. "You didn't really think the two would be stored *together* did you?"

"No, of course not," Takumi said feeling foolish.

"Which is why you need to get in the car. Now let's go." And with that they said goodbyes and were off.

"Where are we going?"

The item is secured about thirty-five miles from here near Oyasu Gorge. As Sen negotiated the winding mountain road, Takumi silently studied the instructions he had drawn. But when at last they reached the departure point it was not the mountain's descent which was on Takumi's mind. Standing at the precipice looking down at the black canyon complex his thoughts turned to past, of the common path which master and student walk. *Perhaps that time will come again*, he thought.

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Okubo's voice brought him back to the present. "Here is your gear. You've memorized the route to the proper cave?"

"Yes."

"It will be more difficult in the dark and remember the canyon walls are very steep in places," instructed Okubo.

"You'd be surprised the terrain I can cover now. I should be able to make the descent and three and half mile hike quickly."

He thought he heard Okubo give another sigh looking at him pensively. "Remember that when you locate the object you need to hold it in your bare hands before removing it from the cave. I will meet you here two hours before sunrise."

"I understand."

"Good then go - quickly but calmly." As he moved to step off the ridge however Okubo halted him. "Remember whatever happens, you have the strength that comes from knowing."

"Yes sensei. Sensei?"

"Yes."

"I've always wanted to make certain what that meant."

"In a crisis, men's actions frequently arise out of fear. Try to act out of reason."

"I understand. I thought that's what it -."

"Takumi?"

"Yes?"

"Time." Without another word he began his descent down the mountain face to the canyon complex below.

Urd closed yet another book as she lay back listening to Peorth and Belldandy continue to chat away outside in the garden. *Let them have their fun*, she thought. *I can entertain myself perfectly fine in here.* But in time boredom and curiosity got the best of her. "Well it *is* a beautiful day," she reasoned standing up to stretch in the doorway.

"Hello Peorth," Urd said walking to the table they had set up under the trees.

"Urd," Peorth replied politely. "So where is this friend of yours I keep hearing about?"

"Who? What?" she said looking to Belldandy, who seemed to have taken up a sudden interest in studying a small batch of flowers along the hedge.

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“Oh . . . *him*,” she replied calmly returning her gaze to Peorth. “He’s not here. He had to go up to Ichinoseki on an errand.” “So what’s everybody doing up there lately? Is it some kind of secret?” asked Peorth eagerly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I know Lind snuck off that way a few days ago. And I heard she didn’t want anyone to find out about it.”

Lind. For some reason the very mention of the name irritated her.

“How do you know that?” she asked trying to sound nonchalant.

“I am a first-class goddess. It’s important to keep oneself informed.”

Urd couldn’t argue with that. Peorth had a reputation for knowing all the gossip in the heavens, particularly that concerning personal affairs.

“Yeah, she left all of the sudden too,” she continued. “Word is she’s been making a lot of unusual moves on her own lately. Sneaking around by herself, off to Tsukuba and such. I tell you I think she’s up to something.”

Urd could feel her blood beginning to boil. “Tsukuba eh?” she mused, quietly digging her nails into the underside of the table doing her best to act as though the name meant nothing to her.

“What do you suppose it’s all about?” she inquired as innocently as possible.

“I tried to find out but you know the Valkyries. They’re very tight knit and not inclined to tell outsiders anything they don’t have to. I assume it’s something she wants to keep very hush-hush, even from the higher-ups.”

“But what could it be they would have any reason to hide from an administrator such as yourself?” Urd persisted, her hands digging deeper into the table.

“I don’t know. Ex and Ere were joking that maybe she had a lover stashed somewhere. Can you imagine that? *Lind!*” she burst into laughter. But as the moments passed something else seemed to occur to her and her laughter slowed, then ceased altogether. She began to look around nervously. “Anyway I don’t really know what she’s up to,” she muttered quietly.

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Urd felt Belldandy's eyes upon her but turning saw her glance down. She decided to deal with the matter head on. Better that, than having Peorth use her own lurid powers of imagination when she returned to Yggdrasil. She shrugged calmly. "Has anyone ever told you you have a dirty mind Peorth?"

Peorth laughed once more relaxing, "*Hey I didn't say anything!* I'm sure there's a *perfectly logical* reason why they're both up there. Like - well sounds like they're both fighters. Maybe they're up there practicing fighting . . . or wrestling . . . *or something*," she said doing her best not to smile.

"Yeah, I get it Peorth," Urd said rolling her eyes. "Maybe I'll show you the love bites he gives me sometime."

Belldandy's head came up her eyes wide.

"*Oh Bell, I'm kidding!*"

Urd did her best to put the image of the two of them out of her mind. Still felt unsettled. *Enough of this*, she thought.

"Well it was lovely to see you again Peorth but I don't want to monopolize your time. I'm sure there are still a great *many things* the two of you want to discuss," she said throwing her sister an accusatory glance.

"You're going then?"

"Yes there are a few things I need to check on," she said rising from the table.

"Well, let me know how it turns out with your guy," Peorth said sweetly.

"You can count on it -," Urd said exiting the main gate.

After an hour and a half of wandering through the gorge complex, Takumi was now convinced was at the base of the correct canyon. It took him a little longer to locate the marker stone in the dark, but with that done he pushed it aside revealing the mouth of the cave. Inside he ignited the chemiluminescent lights walking down the narrow man-made passage to the main cavern. After traveling several hundred feet down the left side of the cavern he found the correct connecting tributary, following its serpentine course as it moved downward to the rocky alcove he had been seeking. He looked up in awe at the crystalline wall covered in jet black stone. Dousing the lights he reached out into the blackness,

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moving his hands slowly over the length and breadth of a subsection of wall. A moment later a brilliant flash of color flickered before him within the wall. Gripping the stone it grew in luminance as he pulled it from its resting place, rubbing the smooth surface before placing into his pocket. It was well past midnight by the time he reached the exit, throwing out the last of his gear. Stretching, he stood in the cool night air before realizing the presence of another. He turned slowly at first seeing nothing. Then he spotted her, twenty feet above him on the canyon wall.

"Hello Takumi," Lind said jumping beside him eagerly.

She leapt to his arms as he held her aloft. "How are you?" he asked.

"I'm alright." You didn't have any problems getting away did you?" she asked sliding down to press herself seductively against him. His arm encircled her athletic torso.

"No. But there are few things I need to talk to you about."

"Oh is this about Urd again?" she said shaking off a long strand of her hair. "I told you before, forget about her. You and I are much more compatible. After all, we both enjoy adventure."

"Well it's just I may have told her that -."

"Talk later - *play now*," she said pushing him to the ground before leaping on top of him.

"*Bleck!*" Urd cried jumping up awakening from the nightmare.

She cast a glance angrily beside her. *No Takumi. He's still away in the North. How long is he going to be away on that stupid trip of his!* "Honestly, I have the worst luck with men!" she cursed. Jumping from the bed she marched outside to begin pacing in the courtyard. "*Stupid men and their stupid quests*," she muttered kicking the stones.

"Hey be quiet out there!" shouted Skuld. "Why do you always pace out in front of my room?"

"*I don't be quiet, you be quiet . . . telling me to be quiet*," she said continuing to mutter as more stones flew across the yard. Several minutes later the outer door of Belldandy's room slid open. "Urd is everything okay?" she asked.

Urd looked over. Saying anything now would be tantamount to admitting defeat. "Yeah Bell everything is great - *just great*."

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I'm just outside getting some air," she replied walking back to the house. "*Stupid men,*" she muttered entering the doorway. The next day she decided to go to Namegawa to clear her head before retrieving the groceries Belldandy had asked her to buy. Entering she was surprised to find that the slab to the lower chamber had been disturbed. "*Takumi?*" she asked quickly pulling it aside to check the lower chamber. Finding it empty she flopped on the futon more irritated than ever. "What is this? He's using this place as a hotel now? And what's with all the damn streamers?!" she complained.

Late that afternoon she returned to the temple through the main gate, arms full of groceries and her now increasing weekly supply of sake. Walking to the house she was shocked to see Lind standing on the veranda.

"*Lind!*" she called as calmly as she could from across the courtyard. "I'm surprised to see you here," she said pleasantly, gritting her teeth.

Lind jumped at the sound of her voice. In all the time she had known her, Urd had never seen her unsettled. Her eyes narrowed. "So what are you up to?"

"*Urd,*" Lind replied as the color drained from her already pale face. "I'm - surprised to see you here," she said looking around. "I live here remember?" she responded coolly.

"Yes of course. It's just that . . . Belldandy told me you would not be here."

"*Oh hello Urd,*" Belldandy called coming from around the corner, a towel over her shoulder and two teacups in hand.

Urd smiled watching Lind's movements. She felt herself becoming angrier with each passing moment.

"Why Lind you're not trying to avoid me, are you?" she asked playfully, doing her best to force a smile.

"No of course not," she replied heading for the steps. "It's just I'm sorry I have to be leaving so soon."

"Oh?" Urd said suspiciously. "That's unfortunate. Because I wanted to ask you if perhaps you'd seen a friend of mine while you were -."

"You need to leave now?" Belldandy asked confused.

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“Umm yes I’m afraid I do have to go - *immediately*,” she said rushing out to the courtyard.

Before either could say more she was gone.

“Have you *ever* seen her act like that?” Urd said turning to her sister.

“No, *truly* . . . She seemed very distracted,” replied Belldandy.

“Yes . . . *very*,” observed Urd, staring at the spot where Lind had stood only a moment before.

Four nights later the winds of the coming ocean storm began to blow over the residence. Arriving to enjoy some time alone, Urd was surprised to see Takumi sitting comfortably on the couch in the darkness. As she entered he quickly pulled a coat over his shoulders.

“Taking it easy I see,” she replied lighting several candles.

“Something like that,” he said smiling back at her.

“When were you going to tell me you’d returned?”

“In a few days. My plans were altered somewhat.”

Urd did her best to keep her emotions in check. “You don’t seem that anxious to see me,” she observed.

“Quite the contrary I assure you,” he said rising from the couch.

That was when she saw it, the scratches on his right side.

Using her power she subtly probed for their origin, quickly verifying what she feared most. *Lind*. Her anger exploded as she succumbed to her demonic nature.

“WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!” she shouted. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out about what you’ve been up to with your little *friend*?!”

Takumi registered shock. “How did you know about that?”

“You think I’m stupid Tai? Is that what you think?! Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?”

“Wait a minute I know the answer to this one - lucky to be in your presence thousands at your feet right?” he replied smiling. Her eyes grew wide. “Are you making fun of me?!”

“Maybe just a little.”

“So you enjoy humiliating me!”

Takumi’s smile began to fade - *rapidly*. “What?”

She was now trembling in anger. “Your rendezvous with Lind. *We’ve been together awhile*. Yes you’ve certainly *been* with

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her. *I'm not sure how long it will take.* Tell me, is she the *loose end* you needed to tie up? How could you, after everything you said!" she shouted too angry to continue.

"What are you talking about?" he replied bewildered.

If anything his response only made her angrier, "You've got a lot of nerve showing up here with those *love scratches* and trying to play innocent!"

Takumi stopped puzzled for a moment saying nothing. Then he began to smile.

"Oh you think this is FUNNY!"

"Urd . . .," he said holding up his hands.

"Listen to me, I don't *ever* want see you again!" she cried, the hurt plainly visible in her eyes.

"Look -," he said trying once more.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

"URD!" he shouted. His voice no longer gentle or patient.

She whirled glaring at him. "WHAT!"

"Remember who you are! You're a goddess - *among goddesses!* Look now with the clear eyes of a goddess!" he commanded.

She hesitated.

"*Starting with those love scratches!*" he hissed clenching his teeth.

Urd looked once more at the scratches on his right side. She knew the marks had been made by Lind so why was he trying to . . . ? But as she placed her hand to them she began to realize the central 'scratch' she'd seen from the front actually opened onto a horrific wound in back. She gasped now seeing the massive scar which had clearly been made with a large axe. Tracing its extent with trembling fingers she saw the blow must have come from behind on the right, splitting him open almost to the spine. As bad as it looked now she began to imagine what it must have looked like the instant it was made. She gaged beginning to feel distinctly unwell, thinking of Takumi lying face down on the cold ground blood pouring out of him. "I've got to get outside," she coughed rushing to the doorway putting her head down.

Takumi came behind steadying her. "It's okay, it's alright," he said rubbing her back reassuringly, a moment later adding, "So

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in answer to your question *yes* I did have a chance to meet your *insane* little friend Lind."

"What did you do?" she said looking up at him.

"*What could I do?* I fell down bleeding."

"Why?"

"Funny, I had the same one word response right before she was about to land a second blow at the base of my skull."

"And?"

"You remember the one I told you about; Sorano."

"Yes."

"It seems that she's Lind's cousin."

"*What?!* That can't be right!"

"Urd, *does* Lind have a cousin named Sorano?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, there was one we called Sky leaf. But it couldn't be her. She was no more than a *child* the last time I saw her."

"Uh-huh. And exactly *when* was that?"

"Well I don't know. It wasn't *that* long ago."

"I told you she was a young woman. She looked to be in her early twenties - whatever that translates to in goddess years."

The full impact of what had transpired now sank in. "*You mean all that time you were running around with little Sorano?!*"

"Apparently so. I can tell you which of them I prefer."

"How did she find you?"

"I have no idea how your kind locate people. But I did buy the rail ticket under my own name. She also seemed to know I was with Sorano at Jufukuji, and that I survived the attack which killed her. And of course she now knows that the demons have the stone. I'm guessing she assumed I played a direct role in her death (not exactly untrue) and came for revenge. But who knows? She got me as I exited a cave in the north in the middle of the night."

"The fact that she could sense your demonic energy probably didn't help matters any. And then?"

"I tried to tell her that Sorano fought bravely at Jufukuji and saved me. I told her I was trying to return her possessions to her family and where they were. Apparently she believed me because she ceased her attack and went to retrieve them."

"Where were they?"

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"Here," he said nodding at the lower chamber.

"And she just left you there?!"

"She didn't say anything but I think she regretted what she'd done. She attempted to stanch my bleeding and then yes, she left."

"She hardly deserves a medal then," glowered Urd. "By that point she'd probably cooled enough to sense Sorano's impression on you, and knew no ordinary demon would ever have bothered to make a place for a goddess after she died. Besides Valkyrie's aren't allowed to kill people they *know* are innocent. So you told her everything?"

"No. I didn't tell her about how the demons acquired the stone and I didn't tell her about Abyss."

Urd considered this. "So *that* was why the slab was moved, and probably why she was at the temple the other day. She must have gone there after retrieving Sorano's seals. But why was she so nervous around me? Tai did you tell her about us?"

"Did I not explain it clearly enough? Hi. *Whack!* Where are Sorano's things? I'll kill you if you're lying. *Whoosh!* We didn't really have time to cover respective life histories."

"But then why -? *Bell!* She must have told her," Urd muttered pacing the residence. "She'd probably just come back from here when Belldandy told her about you and me. And to think I'd asked her if she'd seen a friend of mine! No wonder she was nervous. *'Yeah I believe I chopped him up in the mountains a couple of days ago leaving him for dead. Oh and did I forget to mention I just got back from ransacking your place?'* Oh what I'm going to do to her when I get my hands on her!" she snapped tightening her fists.

"Well try not to invite her back here. I don't think I could stand the additional blood loss."

"That's right - blood loss! Tai how did you survive?"

"The answer is I very nearly didn't. I fainted but regained consciousness about an hour before dawn. I managed to pull myself into the cave and lay there until help arrived."

"Help?"

"Yes, Sensei Okubo -," but he stopped saying no more.

Urd turned shocked to see tears in his eyes. "*Takumi what's wrong?!*"

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"I just . . . don't want to talk about it now."

"You didn't kill him did you?!"

"*I'm not an animal Urd*, regardless of what people think."

"I don't - think that," she said coming beside him, putting her arms around his waist.

"A sentiment not shared by all members of your family," he said pushing her away to watch the storm tossed the sea.

Urd bit her lip. "Well they're not me. I believe in you . . . and I trust you."

They looked at one another for moment before each began to smile in light of recent statements. "Tai I'm so sorry," she said shaking her head.

"I know," he nodded. "You don't have say it. But with respect to concerns, is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

Numerous things, she thought; *like who is this Okubo?* But now did not seem to be the time to ask. "No," she answered quietly.

"You haven't asked me why I went north."

"True but I'm sure you had your reasons. You don't have to explain them to me," she said feeling she'd embarrassed herself enough for one night.

"Alright," he replied turning his attention to the waves - mostly because he knew it would drive her crazy.

"But if you *wanted to tell me something*, I wouldn't mind," she shrugged tugging him playfully.

"Very well." He now seemed reluctant to hold her gaze. "Urd I've thought a lot about you. And once I knew, well - *important* you were, I knew I had to go and get something. Something I needed permission to retrieve. It's there on the table if you still want it," he said motioning.

Urd realized now that in her haste that she had not seen the package resting at the corner of the table. Glancing at him nervously, she began quickly unwrapping the paper and silk coverings. Opening the case she gasped seeing its contents. For inside lay a magnificent silver necklace holding an ornate jeweled cross. At least it she thought it was a cross. Looking more closely she could see each end was actually inscribed with symbols linking earthbound directions (north, south, east, west) to the ancient elementals (earth, fire, air, water). Around

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the center was set a circular seal with a fifth symbol (*void*). More than that, she saw the entire piece was inscribed with a series of glyphs she recognized to be an ancient form of protection woven together in a subtle pattern. But most curious of all was its center, holding a large black gemstone. "It's beautiful." Even as a goddess she was impressed. Picking it up she felt its weight. "Takumi is this -?" "Yes. Solid platinum." "Incredible. The stone alone must be -." "Twenty-eight millimeters; about 85 carats," he said. "Well umm, I'll bet this set you back a bit," she replied sheepishly trying to lighten the mood. "Some would say its value is beyond measure. But it's not the material that makes it truly precious." "The gemstone's a bit ominous though." "That all depends. Take it in your hands," he suggested watching her. Urd closed her hands around the stone, which at first had been as black as night now began to glow with an inner fire, brightening until it became the color of tanzanite. Takumi turned his head looking away. She gazed at the stone's deep blue color. "What is it?" "Black Tourmaline. At least that's what it was when it was originally mined centuries ago. My people have long used it because of its ability to absorb and release energy, and because of its power to protect the wearer from harm. Of course as you no doubt sense, what you hold in your hands is no ordinary piece of Schorl." "Indeed," she replied touching its surface, sensing the incantation upon it. *Something old - and powerful*. She could feel the crystal had now become as hard as diamond. "Long ago my life was saved by a relative of that. It was during that time I began to understand there were things beyond oneself, things worth fighting for." "Of course you know I can't possibly accept this," she said, though in truth she was already cradling it as though it were a small child. Takumi picked it up placing it around her shoulders, and she truly looked like a queen of old.

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"It is a gift," he said pressing to her. "I give it to you so that you might always remember me in your thoughts."

She looked up her amethyst eyes searching his. "*I don't need an object to remember you in my thoughts,*" she hushed.

"Perhaps. But please take it, so that its power might always protect you."

"I can take care of myself."

He nodded. "Yes but please take it anyway. Because the truth is . . . *it will protect both our hearts.*"

Urd was not often at a loss for words. But in the moonlight of the residence she now stood silent, putting the necklace down on the table. She reached out catching edge of his shirt, tugging before rushing forward to bury her head in his arms.

"*Sorry,*" he whispered hugging her. "*Did I say something better left unsaid?*"

She looked up shaking her head, her eyes brimming with tears. Then reaching back she untied her choker placing it into his hands. "Keep this as a reminder of me, *always,*" she said rubbing her head to his. Together they curled up on the futon now, listening to the sounds of the storm tossed sea outside. She put out her arms immersing herself in his hold, feeling his kisses on her head, mouth and throat as she nuzzled him on that night. The first night they were truly together. In her heart Urd wanted to feel but also to know, to truly know him; and wanted him to know her. Safe in each other's arms they spoke now not of the Morisato household, or demons, or the workings of heaven; but of their dreams, their regrets, and fears. It is not necessary here to convey the many tender words which passed between them on that night, or of the promises they whispered in the darkness. Hours later as morning approached Urd lay nestled on her side under the covers, staring out the doorway to the ocean, thinking of all that had happened to bring them to his point. She felt Takumi stir behind her. "*Is everything alright?*" he asked.

"Yes," she said pushing back against him. "Why?"

He hesitated. "No reason. It's just - you were crying last night."

"*Oh,*" she said thankful he could not see her face. "I'm okay. It's just something I do sometimes when -," she stopped, her

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tears beginning once more, *I feel so much in my heart*, she thought. She lay quietly for several minutes before replying, “And you? Did you mean . . . all the things you said?” “You’re a goddess Urd, I’m sure you *know* I did,” he replied pulling her back.

She gazed at sea once more but her tears were gone now, replaced by a quiet hopeful smile. *It will be dawn soon. Let me sleep here with him just a little while before we must part.*

Closing her eyes tremors passed through the dark heavens as within Yggdrasil’s core subtle new possibilities began to emerge.

Moonlight kisses before the War

When Urd awoke the next morning Takumi was gone, asleep in the lower chamber. Stretching out on the futon she looked up at the sky as though it were the first time she'd ever seen it. She strolled the shoreline for miles that morning, alone in the happy solitude of her thoughts. By the time she returned to Tariki Hongan temple it was past noon. Entering the courtyard she spied Keiichi and Skuld crouching on the west side of the house surrounded by an inordinate number of motorcycle parts. Waking closer they both looked up in amazement.

"Holy cow Urd, where'd you get that?!" Skuld yelled running to get a better look at the necklace.

"Umm Urd, were did you elected queen of some country or something while you were gone?" Keiichi said before returning attention to the bike. From the corner of her eye she saw Belldandy emerge from the doorway, dressed in overalls to come help Keiichi. She took some small satisfaction in noting her sister's gaping mouth.

"What . . . *this*?" Urd asked innocently. "Just something Takumi picked up for me on his travels. A little reminder of what I mean to him I suppose," she shrugged, casting an eye at Belldandy who continued to stare but at least had closed her mouth. "Well, I've had a rather long evening so I think I'll just go take a bath," she yawned dramatically sauntering into the house.

"Yes, you must be very tired Urd," Belldandy said as she passed.

That evening Takumi materialized as if from thin air onto the temple grounds just after sunset. Keiichi saw him approach as he continued working with Tamiya and Otaki to finish assembly of the new prototype Skuld had affectionately named *K2*.

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“*Takumi*,” he said smiling at the face he’d not seen in several weeks. At his words Belldandy appeared quietly from around the corner of the shed.

“Hello,” he nodded looking from Keiichi to his coworkers.

“*Yeah, hi there*,” Tamiya replied gruffly, giving the stranger the once over. He looked to Otaki who evidently was thinking the same thing he was.

“Nice fashion statement dude,” said Otaki, eyeing the choker Takumi now wore.

“Yeah, not every guy could pull that off,” Tamiya added chuckling with Otaki as they packed up the last of the tools. Takumi smiled, casually wondering what their combined blood volume might be.

“That looks familiar,” muttered Keiichi.

“*It's Urd's*,” Belldandy whispered coming up behind him.

“Oh I see so Urd gave you that?” he called aloud.

Takumi nodded.

“I was wondering what she exchanged for that necklace,” said Belldandy. Though she smiled politely somehow Takumi felt she had not missed him quite as much as Keiichi.

“*I heard that Bell*,” called Urd coming onto the veranda with Skuld.

“Umm so . . . *Keiichi*, have you ever exchanged anything with Belldandy?” asked Takumi trying to diffuse any tension.

“She gave me a very special sweater once, and I gave her that ring she wears,” he replied pointing.

“Beautiful,” Takumi observed admiringly.

But Skuld was more interested in the present. “So does this mean you’re officially sweethearts now?”

“Umm, yes well, I suppose something like that,” Urd replied blushing, conscious of the eyes focused on her - particularly Belldandy’s.

“So - maybe we should go out and celebrate like we talked about last night,” suggested Takumi.

Belldandy turned expectantly to her sister.

“Umm yeah, we thought it might be fun if we went out to a festival.”

“It’s too early for the Awa Odori in Tokyo,” said Keiichi.

“No we were thinking of the Obon festival, up in Matsushima.

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“*Appropriate* -,” muttered Belldandy.

“Nobody’s forcing you to go,” growled Urd.

“I want to go!” said Skuld. “I have a fantastic yukata I want to wear.”

“Who said you were invited?”

“I think it would fun if we *all* went,” said Takumi nudging Urd.

“*See*, I was being invited,” said Skuld sticking out her tongue.

“We’ve all been working pretty hard, it would be fun to go,” ventured Keiichi giving Belldandy an encouraging look.

An hour later they were all dressed and standing at the edge of the Matsushima bay two hundred miles northeast of the temple.

From the firelight onshore they could see the dozens of small wooded islands dotting the bay, reflecting like jewels in the calm nighttime waters. The five of them moved at a leisurely pace through the crowds along the thoroughfare as visitors celebrated the final evening of Obon. Down at the water’s edge, Belldandy saw the first of what would soon become hundreds of glowing paper lanterns being set adrift into the waters of the bay honoring the spirits of departed friends and ancestors.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said taking Keiichi’s hand as they walked the shoreline.

Keiichi looked over at her moving gracefully beside him in her yukata, her face framed by the torchlight. It was times like this he really could not believe how lucky he was.

“Belldandy?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad . . . you were the one who answered my call.”

“*Me too*,” she said squeezing his hand as they looked out at the lanterns floating slowly across the bay with the evening tide.

Some distance behind them Urd and Takumi also strolled the boardwalk. For the third time that evening Urd yanked Skuld back like some kind of disobedient pet. “*No*” she said tugging her. “It’s a nice atmosphere tonight don’t ruin it for them.”

“Yeah I know what you mean by *nice* Urd. You’re such a pain. At least let’s go get some seafood. I’m hungry.

“Okay, okay,” said her older sister acquiescing. “*Bell, Keiichi* - do you want something to eat before the fireworks start?”

“I’ll go with you Urd,” Keiichi said running up.

Moonlight kisses before the War

“No, then I won’t get what I want,” Skuld protested chasing them. They had just disappeared when Takumi realized it left he and Belldandy alone. *Well maybe she’ll just -*

“Hello.”

“Umm hello White Wing. How - are you this evening?” he replied awkwardly.

“Fine. That was quite a beautiful gift you gave Urd.”

“I’m sure you know it’s more than that.”

“*Indeed*,” she replied turning to face the breeze coming from the waters. “You have a strong desire to protect her. As do I. What if I told you that the best way to protect her was -.” But she could see he was no longer paying attention. He seemed to have sensed something in the wind.

“Please excuse me a moment,” he said rushing off.

“Certainly,” she replied, shivering as she watched him go.

Alone now Takumi moved quickly up onto the surrounding rooftops. Dropping down on the far side of the festival grounds he moved inland through the trees, heading for the Zuigan-ji temple five hundred yards ahead.

At 220 lbs, the ex-officer was used to having his way. And what better way to enjoy the evening’s festivities he reasoned than by cornering the girl ahead who appeared to have lost her way to the festival while crossing the temple grounds in the dark? Quickly he closed on her unnoticed at the edge of the ancient burial caves. But approaching his instincts made him hesitate, turning just in time to feel the impact of the oncoming blow.

“*Looking for someone?*” Takumi hissed down him as a panther fells a deer. Before he could cry out he silenced him, quickly setting to his task.

“Where’s Takumi?” Urd asked upon her return.

“I’m sure I don’t know. Something seems to have caught his interest. *Perhaps you should check on that*,” Belldandy replied.

The look in her eyes told Urd it was not a suggestion. The goddess walked off as calmly as possible through the crowd, quickly accelerating her pace as she broke from the path putting the festival grounds behind her. She caught up to him at the temple caves just as he dropped his new found friend to

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the ground. “*Tai!*” she called as loudly as she dared. He walked to her slowly leaving the man where he lay.

“Are you just going to leave that there?” she hissed.

“I thought I would yes,” he replied coming alongside her.

Then she sensed it. “He’s still breathing.”

“Umm, yes,” he said continuing to walk on down the path.

“But that’s good isn’t it?”

“I have a feeling I’m not doing society any favors. But it’s always possible he may take my *neighborly* words to heart. In either case I realize it’s no longer my decision to make.”

“But that means -.”

“*I SAID IT WAS FINE!*” he cried his voice suddenly choked with emotion. He walked on to a small hill overlooking the bay. Following, Urd now realized this was the vision she had seen the first day in the shed. She reached out to him. “Do you want to tell me about it Tai? About what *really* happened in the mountains that day?”

Takumi sat down covering his eyes.

“It’s okay. You can tell me,” she said softly.

He lowered his head, his voice barely audible, “When Okubo found me I was close to death. He attempted - to save me,” he whispered.

“And it worked,” she said prodding him.

“No you don’t understand. *I almost, almost -*,” his body began to tremble.

Urd put her arms around him embracing him. It was the most goddess-like thing he had ever seen her do. “*But you didn’t*, and that meant you had the strength within you to stop.”

“Or perhaps simply that he had the power to stop *me*,” he replied wryly.

“But that action alone couldn’t possibly have allowed you to recover?”

“No, most certainly not. The next evening he arranged for me to be removed from the cave and taken to Takkoku no Iwaya to recuperate.”

“Arranged? *Of course*. The members of the dojo. *They* removed you.”

“I told you. It’s like a family. *And they keep the family secrets.*”

Moonlight kisses before the War

“They provided you -.”

“With what was needed until I was strong enough to leave. *Five days.* A long time for them no doubt,” he said bitterly. He still remembered the look on Naru’s face the day he left. “But in the end you learned -.”

“*Don’t you see Urd?* Everything before that! I didn’t know and I didn’t try to find out! *Why?* Why didn’t I?! Because I didn’t care -,” he said shaking his head as his tears fell. Now she understood. She put her head against him whispering, “Listen to me. There is good in you. I know it.” She hugged him tighter. “That is why it weighs upon you.”

“*Maybe once upon a time,*” he replied sadly. Now? *Now I don’t know . . .*” He looked at her lost. As though she were the only one who might understand.

“It doesn’t it matter,” he said finally shaking his head. “It doesn’t change anything.”

“*It does.* It’s time for us to go,” she said taking his hand. “Where?”

“*Home,*” she replied leading him away from the festival.

Urd didn’t know exactly why she was so drawn to him that night. Perhaps it was because she knew they now had a future, and was simply eager to live it. Perhaps it was because it was the first time she’d seen any real vulnerability in him and saw how much he truly needed her. Or perhaps she was simply recalling their encounter of the previous evening anxious to relive it. Whatever the reason, their encounter at the residence that evening quickly escalated to being ruled by their passions. Both were thankful they were not at the temple if for no other reason than the number of items which certainly would have been broken.

“Urd I just want to tell you -.”

“*-You told me enough last night,*” she said pulling the futon onto the porch to rest under the starlight. He came to her then, drawing the covers around her shoulders, kissing her again and again as she whispered his name. Minutes later as they moved in each other’s arms Takumi felt warmth, the intensity of which he had never known before permeate his body. An intense feeling of love and peace began to encompass him. He felt as

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though his heart had burst open, his body dissolving to nothingness. A feeling as though being cast high into the heavens, his hand reaching toward the first golden rays of light above the clouds before being pulled back to earth. He felt himself falling, freely and from a great height, yet was utterly unconcerned. For in that moment Urd race down surrounding him, enfolding him as though they were one being. Safe in each other's arms they fell, on and on through the quiet heavens, completely at peace until they struck the ground moments later totally indifferent to the world around them. Minutes, or perhaps it was hours later, Takumi felt himself breathe once more, once again part of the world he knew.

Awakening with a start he found himself lying in Urd's lap as she sat staring up at the stars. He looked up at her awkwardly. "Hmm that was - what was that?"

"A *merge*," she said quietly continuing to gaze up at the night sky.

He lay back in her arms. "A what?"

"Our souls merged for a moment, became as one," she said continuing to absently stroke his hair watching the heavens.

"Does that happen a lot in your world?"

"No. But there's always the possibility."

"Has it ever happened to *you* before?" he said, not really sure if he wanted to know the answer.

"Once."

"Old boyfriend?"

She looked down gently shaking her head. "No nothing like that. It was when I was young and Belldandy -. I intervened to stop a hemorrhage of her soul."

Takumi did not understand but felt she would say no more.

"What happens during a merge?"

"You experience the person as they truly are, stripped of all pretense."

"Really? And you're still here?"

"You're not as bad as you think," she said jostling him.

"I suppose that's not surprising coming from a half-demon."

"Umm. You want to know something else?"

"What?"

Moonlight kisses before the War

“You’re *mine* now Takumi Sato. You’re like my *pet*,” she said teasing him, hugged him happily.

He looked back at her sleepily. “That’s okay. The truth is I’ve been that since I first laid eyes on you,” he yawned turning to one side.

Urd continued to talk, teasing him for several more minutes before she realized he’d fallen asleep. Then she too fell quiet, looking at him intently as she brushed the hair from his face. “I don’t blame you Tai. I *am* pretty hot stuff after all,” she said bending down to kiss him.

Deep within Yggdrasil Lind sat alone in her quarters, leafing through the pages of reports from various reconnaissance teams. Each documented small but disturbing anomalies seen in recent weeks. For hours she had meditated upon their meaning. Now she decided the time had come to act. “*Come*,” she commanded summoning the page outside the door. As she entered Lind began forming a series of glyphs over the tablet, each interlocking with the next as they dropped to the page. As had long been her habit the message contained two parts, an upper one providing opinion and recommendations to the Upper Council, and a lower one detailing specific plans in the event they decided to act. The page read through the note quickly. “Sir? This lower part says *to the community at large*. Is that your intent?”

Lind sat back, quietly drawing out the locket that hung around her neck. Pushing it open she stared at the engravings inside, one an apparently younger version of herself, and the other reminiscent of Belldandy. “It is no error,” she replied somberly. “I see now that Hild has not been idle these past months. Nor will she be in our future.”

“What do you think will happen sir?” asked the page hesitantly. “Something which has not happened in a very long time,” Lind muttered grimly.

Urd returned to the temple just before sunrise, quietly sneaking down the hallway even though she knew Belldandy was probably already aware of her presence. In the peace of the early morning she immersed herself in a hot bath, lying in the

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waters to reflect upon the previous evening, her hands lazily caressing the tanzanite stone around her neck. She dozed off but was soon awakened by the sound of hushed voices outside. Pulling on her robe she padded down the hallway only to find Peorth sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite Belldandy in the tea room. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Urgent first-class goddess business," said Peorth continuing to read the letter together with Belldandy. But then she turned smiling. "I haven't seen you for a while. How did things work out with your guy? Did he ever come back?" she teased smugly.

Urd sat down next to her. "Well I think it's going *pretty* well. We went to a festival last night and then later we, *merged*," she mused casually.

"*WHAT?* Urd you are such a liar!" howled Peorth. Belldandy said nothing looking up in surprise.

The goddess decided now would be an appropriated time to reach across the table, allowing her robe to open just enough to reveal the necklace.

"Wow!" Peorth gasped taking it in. "*He* gave you that?" She looked at Belldandy. "Is this the same -?"

"It's the same guy," she nodded significantly.

"A merge, *wow*. Tell me everything," Peorth said eyeing her with rapt attention.

"Well for a moment we were both, you know, *just there*."

Drawn together as one being. The feeling was just -, "Urd allowed herself to shiver for effect. "*But of course you know what I'm talking about Peorth -*," she said looking her in the eye; fairly confident she didn't.

Peorth blushed self-consciously. "Well of course -, " she replied flustered.

"And I *know* Belldandy knows what I'm talking about," Urd smiled.

"*Yeah that's right*, the first time Keiichi told her he loved her."

"Urd that's private!" Belldandy gasped embarrassed.

"Well - it sounds as though it's been a *busy* week around here, but I need to be going," Peorth said getting up.

Urd leaned back blocking her path. "*Oh Peorth*, I almost forgot. If you happen to run into Lind up there, please tell her

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that I wasn't aware of the kindness she'd shown Takumi the last time we spoke. *But I am now.* Please let her know I fully intend to *repay* that kindness the first opportunity I get."

"*Ok-ay,*" Peorth replied, uncertain of her meaning but happy to be involved.

That'll ensure the news gets spread far and wide, Urd thought watching her go. However as she looked over at Belldandy she could see her sister was not happy.

"Urd I need to talk to you. *Outside.*"

'*Outside*'. Ever since they were little, *outside* meant that Urd was in for a lecture. She found her sister waiting on the veranda. "Urd this has to stop. It's gone too far. A merge?! What are you thinking? What's next - *soul threading*?!"

"I don't know - maybe someday," she replied calculating her tone to shock.

Belldandy opened her mouth but at first no words seemed able to come out. "It's like I don't even know you anymore! I can't believe you think this is a good idea. Can't you see he's gotten a hold on you?!"

"*Maybe I need to be held Bell!* Did you ever thing of that?! You don't know what's going on, what's in our hearts."

But Belldandy remained impassive. "You don't understand. I told you before - *it will not end well.*"

"Oh I understand alright. I'm sure none of this is something *you* would do. No, it's not on the *Belldandy-approved* list," Urd snapped angrily.

"Do you even *have* a list Urd?" Belldandy retorted.

"-And people say my little sister doesn't understand sarcasm.

Thank goodness you've never lost *your* head over someone.

'*Oh Urd let me tell you for the thousandth time the thing my new teacher did that was sooo great*,'" she said mimicking her.

Her sister gasped. "*You said you'd never talk about that!* And this isn't the same thing."

"No Bell it's worse. You think I don't get it? The impossibility of our relationship," she cried, anger beginning to get the better of her. "How would you like it if every day, in some small way, I reminded you that even if you and Keiichi aren't ripped apart -."

"*Don't Urd!*"

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“-that even if the two of you have a long and happy life together -.”

“*STOP IT URD!*” Belldandy sobbed, tears coming to her eyes.

“-he will be but a *moment* in the long span of your life!”

“*NO!*” she screamed running to the house, unable to hear more.

Urd watched her go before stalking off angrily.

Awakened by her shout Keiichi caught Belldandy as she ran to the hallway. Skuld too opened her door roused by the noise.

“Bell what is it?!” he asked looking into her frightened eyes.

She threw her arms around him without a word. “I know you’re supposed to work today but . . . can’t we just go away somewhere please?” she begged him crying.

“*Of course*, of course we can” he replied hugging her, trying to soothe her trembling. Looking across the hallway however he spotted a now very unhappy Skuld, quickly manufacturing several crude Keiichi paper cut outs. He watched as she threateningly snipped the head off of the first, allowing its body to drift slowly to the floor. He looked back at Belldandy.

“Umm, where would you like to go?”

As Belldandy pondered this he saw Skuld toss another paper Keiichi into her mouth, chewing it furiously for several seconds before spitting it out onto the floor.

“*Anywhere Keiichi*,” she said her breathing slowing.

“Provided we bring along a small cage for Skuld to play in it shouldn’t be a problem,” he answered.

“*No!* There’s no way I’m letting you take big-sis out of my sight like this. Last night. Today. What do you think, I’ve become a pushover? That you can do anything you want?!”

“If it’s too upsetting for you you can stay here,” Belldandy suggested.

“*What?* You think I want to say here with the old bat?!”

“Then please come with us Skuld. Why don’t you ask Sentaro to come along and bring his bike?”

“No, he’ll just think I’m a weirdo,” she said worriedly.

“Not if you challenge him to a test of skill.”

“*Good thinking*. That’ll keep her busy,” whispered Keiichi.

When they had gone Urd reappeared from the garden.

Marching into Belldandy’s room she picked up the letter, reading it intently.

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The park trails weaved their way through the dense groves of bamboo, shielding visitors from the midday sun. As they walked along Keiichi watched her carefully. She *seemed* happy, as happy as she'd been last night. And yet every time she looked at him he felt as though she was on the verge of tears. "Bell, is everything okay?"

"Yes," she said tightening her grip on his hand.

Moving to one corner of the grove he took her aside. "You know you can tell me anything right? Anything."

She looked down nodding silently as tears began to trickle down her cheeks. "Keiichi if you were ever . . . if you were every not by my side, I think I would - want to go to that place to join you," she gasped crying.

Keiichi pulled her to him smiling warmly. His look made her feel as though he were the immortal and she the human. "Is that what's worrying you?"

She could only shake her head as her tears fell.

"Well don't Bell. Don't worry about it for a minute. Because no matter when you come, I'll be there - waiting for you. You know that don't you? *So there is no need to hurry.*"

Her tears only seemed to intensify. "Oh Keiichi I love you so much!" she cried pressing herself to him. He held her as though keeping the world at bay. "*Shh* it's okay," he murmured, trying hard not to think about how warm she felt or when the moment might end.

All too soon they heard Skuld's voice calling to Sentaro in the distance, "I think they might be over here. Take the bike and go down that path, I'll take this one."

"Yeah we'll flush them out, wherever they're hiding!" agreed Sentaro.

"You said it!"

The rest of the afternoon went fairly well. As Belldandy had predicted once Skuld was sufficiently filled with ice cream she left them largely alone. However returning to the temple they found that they had acquired a visitor. Entering the hallway they heard the muffled sounds of Urd and Takumi laughing and talking in her room, obviously in the midst of having a very

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good time. Skuld's eyes flared. "I'll bet she's doing something perverted."

"Do you think they even know we're here?" said Keiichi.

"No I don't think so," replied Belldandy.

"Well maybe we should just make a lot of -." At that moment there was a loud thud as something hit the floor. They looked at each other alarmed at the sound of raised voices.

"That's not funny Urd!"

"Oh Tai I was just kidding!"

"No, that's not -," they had difficulty making out the rest until the door flew open and Takumi, clad in one of her robes, charged unceremoniously down the hallway. Urd came out right behind him clad in one of his shirts. "Oh Tai don't be such a ba - bi," she said spotting them the same instant Takumi, who was busy looking back at her, crashed headlong into Belldandy. He looked at her bewildered at her for a moment before casting a quick glance back at Urd. Urd said nothing but began blushing fiercely.

"Hi . . . *we're home*," Keiichi said making the belated and now superfluous announcement.

"Is everything alright?" asked Belldandy.

"*FINE*, everything is just fine Bell," Urd said waving her hands, looking everywhere but their faces. "Boy you guys are back early. Aren't they back early Takumi?" she said trying to draw him into the conversation.

He folded his arms giving her a look of disdain.

"Takumi and I were just playing a game," she added hastily, though no one had asked.

"Yes. Perhaps you could elaborate on the rules," he replied.

If possible Urd seemed to turn an even deeper shade of red.

"No that's not necessary," insisted Keiichi not wishing to know.

"I'm going outside," stated Takumi walking past them.

"-Oh Tai," grumbled Urd. Clearly she wanted to say more but was reluctant to do so in the present company. She smiled weakly, walking past them outside. After several minutes of muffled conversation she returned.

"Well he's going to stay outside tonight, *because he likes the air!*" she shouted in his general direction. Taking down

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blankets from the closet beside her room she tossed them out onto the porch.

“Is he going to the shed?” asked Keiichi.

“Where else?” Urd said marching to her own room.

“I have a bunch of stuff out there; I should go clean it up.”

Belldandy did not like the idea. “*Keiichi*,” she implored but he persisted. He knew better than anyone how complicated relationships with goddesses could be. Entering he found Takumi examining the myriad of scattered motorcycle parts.

“Hi.”

“Hello Keiichi,” he replied. “I see you have yourself quite a project here.”

“Yes we’re working on a new prototype.”

“Looks to be in the superbike class. I see kinship in the design to a Ducati 848.”

“You have a generous eye,” he replied. “Do you know bikes?”

“Long ago I had a friend who was a great rider. And Urd tells me you’re very good as well.”

Soon they were both sitting on the floor of the shed, surrounded by tools and pieces of the bike falling into conversation. Sitting on opposite ends of the frame now they worked at Keiichi’s instruction, tapping threads for the bike’s motor mounts while pouring over details of the design.

“So the carbon fiber shell and components -?”

“- should bring the weight under 370 lbs,” said Keiichi. “Of course a primary focus is to minimize unsprung weight though we continued to compromise on that using special composite alloy wheels for durability. With respect to the engine modifications it’s expected to achieve a power ratio of 1 hp per 3.3 pounds net body weight.”

Takumi whistled. “So it won’t be short on acceleration. And with a wheelbase of 56 inches maneuverability should be good. But what about braking at speed?”

“We’re utilizing monobloc racing calipers forged from an aluminum-beryllium alloy. The elastic modulus is about 192 gigapascals per cubic millimeter. In addition I’ve placed hardened steel bridging at the caliper junctions to provide an extra reinforcement window. As such the brake calipers are

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almost as strong as high tensile steel but are substantially lighter and retain far more strength at high temperatures.” Takumi picked up a piece of the racing fairing which had already been finished in a deep blood red. “Does Belldandy know what kind of a monster you’re building out here?” “Well she knows I’m building a demonstration bike. And Skuld helped with some of the engineering calculations.” Takumi shook his head. “Keiichi, for some reason I don’t pretend to understand that girl seems to care about keeping you in one piece. I’m not sure this project agrees with that objective.”

Keiichi smiled saying nothing as they continued to toss tools back and forth, finishing the preparations for the motor mounts. In time however he grew serious. “Thank you again for Belldandy and Megumi. Without -.”

“I suspect that we are *more than even* on that account Morisato. For I sense you have done much on my behalf,” he said with a glance toward the house.

He shrugged. “Belldandy worries about Urd that’s all. It’s just the kind of person she is. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

“Hmm. And how long have the two of you been together?”

“A few years now. Yet in some ways it seems like yesterday.”

“May I ask you something?” Takumi said removing the tap from the frame to place it on the ground.

“Yes?”

”Did you know they can - change things?”

“The goddesses? Of course. They have the power to grant wishes.”

“No I mean like themselves. Like their appearance. I think it takes a lot out of them, but they can do it.”

“What, you mean like hair color?”

“Umm, yeah I guess so.”

“Is this about Urd?”

He said nothing picking up a piece of the bike’s clutch.

“Oh I get it! Urd changed something and it surprised you.”

“I suppose . . .”

“Like turning into a demon -,” he continued. “Yeah that could be really frightening.”

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Keiichi could not make out much from Takumi's muffled response. It amused him though, the thought of his being so easily frightened. But then another possibility occurred to him. One which did not please him nearly as much. "What exactly did she change into?" he asked.

Takumi's eyes wandered. "I don't think the specifics are really important. Just wanted to let you know in case you weren't aware."

"Are you blushing?"

"No I'm just tired. It's getting late."

"Aren't you normally awake at night?"

Fortunately for Takumi, he was spared further interrogation by Belldandy's sudden appearance at the door. "Keiichi you were out here a long time. I just wanted to make sure that you're alright."

"What?"

"I mean dinner is ready," she replied.

The Sign

Hild descended from the central dais, flanked on either side by her ranking demons. Reaching the lower platform her voice rose speaking to the gathered multitudes below. *“The time has come for us to take back that which is promised to us by prophesy. The power of the demon realm can no longer be contained, nor will it be denied. Let those who would oppose us bend to our will or be destroyed!”* A number in the crowd had been waiting nearly a millennium to hear these words. Now they burst forth in cries of support. Some however like Mara listened with a growing feeling of dread. The implications of the plan which Hild now set forth were almost unimaginable, a path which might return them to the savagery of old. As she finished Mara again heard Hild’s voice rise in the distance. *“The link will be opened in three days’ time. Let everything be readied, let everyone be prepared.”* *Three days*, she thought.

When Takumi awoke that evening he could hear Urd already outside pacing. He pushed open the door joining her.

“So are you through pouting?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Are you through being a perv?” he replied.

“You asked me if I could be nicer.”

“When we were under the covers of your futon? Yeah that was real funny,” he said scooping her up in his arms. “Where is everyone?”

“It’s such a nice evening they decided to go for ice cream. And since they walked they should be gone awhile,” she said raising an eyebrow.

“I see,” he said turning her over to carry her into the house.

“Can I ask you something Urd?”

“What?”

“Why are we still here?! Why don’t we just go back to the residence?”

The Sign

"Let's just say there are things in motion. Things that make me want to keep everyone close at hand for the time being. But don't worry, I'm sure I can find something to entertain you," she said drawing him inside.

They had just lain back together in the tub when they caught the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. "Where did they go for that ice cream - next door?!" she complained leaping up.

She put a leg over Takumi quickly forcing him under, sweeping her hands to create an instant a layer of soapsuds. The door opened. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?!" she shouted leaning out of the bath toward her younger sister.

From the doorway Skuld glared back. "The only reason I'm here is because Keiichi made me ask you which kind of ice cream you want! But I should warn you *my preference* is -."

Urd bit her lip. "I don't care Skuld. I really don't at this *point*," she said her voice rising as she squirmed.

"Yeah fine . . . *weirdo*," she said padding back to the kitchen.

Urd punched the water and Takumi surfaced. "Don't tickle me! It's not like you're going to drowned."

"Maybe I just wanted to see how you stand up under torture?"

"Yeah well -."

Without warning the door flew open once again as Skuld came in ice cream in hand. For a long moment the three stared at each other awkwardly. "What the hell is wrong with you pervs!" she shouted.

"Seriously this Christmas, I'm buying her a thesaurus," Takumi said trying to position himself as modestly as possible against Urd. He was about to make a suggestion as to their current arrangement when Keiichi also appeared in the doorway.

"Skuld what's all the - *oh I see*," he muttered quickly averting his eyes.

"A few more people in here and we could sell tickets!" Takumi cried. "Maybe you could ask Belldandy to go get her camera!"

"Big-sis isn't here. We came back alone," remarked Skuld.

"What? *Why*?" said Urd drawing a towel around herself and Takumi.

"She had to leave unexpectedly," explained Keiichi.

"Does it concern the deployment?"

"*The what*?" asked Takumi eyeing her suspiciously.

The Twilight Hour

"I was going to tell you," she said defensively. "The demon realm may be getting ready to use the stone."

They looked at each other silently for a moment as though some accord had been broken between them. Slowly Takumi drew himself from the tub, snatching away Urd's towel to cover himself as she marched off down the hallway. "Skuld I think I'm going to need that item I gave to you back!"

"Well since you're already upset, there's probably something else I should tell you," Urd shouted behind him.

He stopped in his tracks turning slowly.

"It's about my mother -," she began.

He looked at her puzzled. *"Your mother?"* He had never given any thought to Urd's mother. She had never talked about her, and so he had assumed she was dead. But now he grew fearful.

"Your mother? Is she alright? Do the demons have your mother?!"

Urd smiled back weakly, receiving rather unsympathetic looks of support from Keiichi and Skuld.

"You haven't told him about your mother?!" whispered Keiichi.

"There's really no good way to work that into a conversation," she replied.

"What's are the two of you murmuring about down there?" asked Takumi.

"Well it's just that my mother is sort of - well - *leader* of the demons," she said slipping below the surface of the water.

"WHAT!"

"You're right," observed Keiichi. "There really is no good way to work that in to a conversation . . ."

When Belldandy returned to the temple that evening she was greeted by a most unlikely sight. Out in the courtyard Takumi, Keiichi, and Skuld were practicing a series of defensive movements while an indifferent Urd sat on the veranda eating ice cream. She and Takumi seemed to be in the middle of an argument. "I told you I'm half-demon and that Belldandy and I have different mothers. Do the math."

Takumi continued practicing doing his best to ignore her.

"Anyway I don't know what you think you're doing, because I told you you're not going anywhere," she continued annoyed.

The Sign

Her response only caused him to move even more furiously with the weapon she took in another spoonful of ice cream. "So do I turn my body left or right here?" Skuld asked moving in line behind him.

"*Here*," he replied tossing Abyss to Keiichi, who continued the movement as Takumi went to help Skuld.

Belldandy however had seen quite enough. "*Keiichi!*" she shouted, her voice coming out louder and more shrill than she had intended. All movement in the courtyard ceased as they turned to her. She called again more softly. "Keiichi?"

"Yes?" he replied coming beside her.

"What is going on?" she asked leading him away from the others.

"Urd told us about what's happening. Takumi decided he needs to practice. He said he'd show us some of the movements used to take out opponents."

She cast a wary eye in his direction. "But why do *you* do this?" she asked.

"With all that's happening I want to be better able to protect you."

She nodded placing her hands over his. "I understand. But you don't need this. For you possess a greater power."

He looked back puzzled.

"You know that in part a goddess's power comes from her capacity to love. The same also operates between us."

"I don't understand."

"You remember the night Urd brought me back to the temple?"

He nodded looking away. He didn't like to think about it.

"Urd's power slowed the damage from my injuries. But it was you Keiichi, you and your complete love for me that played the greatest role in healing me when I returned." Her sapphire eyes began to glow. "You may think there is little you can do but in truth your love acts as a powerful form of protection around me. It gives me strength and courage. Remember this, for it is ultimately more powerful than any strike you may come to know." She leaned close brushing back the loose strands of her hair. "Do you understand?"

He nodded as his hand brushed her elbow.

The Twilight Hour

"*You see?!*" Urd called from the far side of the yard. "That's what we need more of around here on such a beautiful evening. A nice romantic atmosphere!"

"Yes?" replied Lind, continuing to kneel at the foot of the massive marble statue before her. The figure looked as though it were in the midst of rising, its left knee planted firmly on the ground, its right foot pressing forward as it held out its staff. Almost twenty feet tall the entire figure was shrouded in a flowing white cloak, its body pierced by arrows in several places. Yet the hooded face looked forward, eyes clear and purposeful in silent hope. The statue had graced the entrance to the Valkyrie sector of Yggdrasil for the better part of a thousand years.

"All teams report ready sir."

"Thank you," she said rising.

The administrator nodded considering the statue. "I've always wondered on its meaning," she murmured.

Lind knew she could never fully explain. Not to one who was not of the Valkyrie. She bowed her head speaking reverently, "The three arrows denote fortitude against mental, physical, and spiritual suffering. The cloak symbolizes our continuity with the world. The figure kneels on its left knee to denote humility, while the forward facing right foot symbolizes our perseverance against those who oppose us. The staff represents strength and our divine covenant with the heavens. It stands to remind us of who we are. That is why we have gathered here for centuries on days such as today."

"They say it's been more than eight hundred years since the demon realm last attempted to establish a direct link to the world below. That's almost as long as this statue's been here isn't it?"

"It's *exactly* as long," Lind said rising to exit. "But these times are nothing compared to those."

"I hope you're right," the administrator muttered staring into the statue's beautiful yet determined face. "They say she was modeled on a famous Valkyrie. Is that true?"

She turned realizing she was now alone in the great hall.

...

The Sign

An hour later the room was filled with Valkyrie commanders awaiting instructions. Slowly Lind came to the fore, climbing the stone pedestal as she raised her hands for silence.

Returning from her briefing with the Upper Council she now knew the full extent of the threat they faced, and the measures which they were now willing to employ to contain it. Yet she gave no hint in her demeanor. With a wave of her hand she raised the surface projection of the mountain canyon complex. "Indications are that they will try to establish a link here, approximately thirty miles north-northeast of Mt. Akagi," she said rotating the projection to show the view due east from the highest proximal mountain; the orientation which the Valkyries would be most accustomed. To the right they saw a large central valley running directly toward the eastern horizon, bounded on either side by a series of steep sloping hills interconnecting with a series of smaller side canyons. "Their stronghold will likely be here, on the first hill rising in front of the main peak just to the left of the central valley. We will come down and hold the northern and western slopes around this hill, while goddesses protecting the southern and eastern boundaries. Together we will attempt to contain whatever comes through the gate to the upper end of the canyon. The slope descending from the main peak just to the west of the hill will serve as gathering place for injured." At these words Lind saw several commanders subtly shift their glaze to one another. "The fighting is expected to be at close quarters and intense. The perimeter we're attempting to maintain between ourselves and the goddesses surround is only about a mile in diameter, so adjust your tactics accordingly."

Then she grew quiet, holding tightly to the locket in her hand. The Valkyries looked on silently until at last she raised her head, her golden eyes now ablaze, "*We are the guardians of this realm!* Each of you knows the price which we and our forbearers have paid to protect it!" she shouted, her voice ringing in the hall. "No element of the demon realm has ever successfully established a permanent gateway to the world below! So my directions to you are simple - *do not let us falter in our duty this day!*" she cried as the voices of the Valkyries

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rang out in unison. "Attend to your teams, our scouts will signal when the time is at hand."

At Tariki Hongan temple an altogether different sort of gathering was taking place at that moment. Watching with Skuld through the open doors of her bedroom, Keiichi saw Belldandy go out to greet the two goddesses, neither of which he recognized, who'd just arrived in the courtyard. Judging from their markings and attire he guessed that they were of the same category and division as Belldandy herself. Beyond them on the far side of the bamboo gate by main temple stood Urd and Peorth locked in conversation.

"Why don't they just go over and talk to them?" he asked Skuld lying beside him on the mat.

"I should think for Urd that would be obvious. As for Peorth, well she's from the Earth Help Center - they're a completely different group."

"Ag," said Keiichi, not really enlightened by the information.

"*Saga, Sunna, it's so good to see you!*" said Belldandy taking their hands.

"It's good to see *you*," Sunna replied throwing arms her around her. "Hey Urd - *URD!*" Sunna yelled waving vigorously to her in the distance. Urd nodded, waving back casually.

Keiichi noticed that the one named Saga also waved to Urd, though with much less enthusiasm. He looked to Skuld. "It's a long story," she replied putting her chin to the mat.

As they approached the table beneath the trees Belldandy had prepared, the wind once again began to blow as a third goddess appeared from the trees. Keiichi saw that this one was dark-skinned as she walked forward to join the group.

"Var!" Belldandy shouted.

"*Belldandy, so it's true.* They told me you were living down her now. Somehow it suits you," she said flashing a familiar smile as she took stock of the temple. On the other side of the gate she now recognized the goddesses standing off to her right. "It's been a long time. Peorth isn't it?" she asked.

Peorth nodded. "And I see *you're* here as well Urd."

Urd smiled replying, "Well when you're in trouble you usually need *my* help."

The Sign

Keiichi looked once more to Skuld. "Yeah, that's kind of a long story too," she replied.

Belldandy took the goddesses hand whispering, "*She's changed a lot since the last time you saw her.*"

"That's what you said last time," Var countered.

"*What you say may be true Urd,*" called Saga, "But isn't it usually your relations that *start* the trouble?"

Belldandy's looked over but it was Sunna who spoke first,

"Perhaps we should focus on the task at hand. I'm sure the Valkyries aren't wasting time recounting the last thousand years of *their* history." But she stopped realizing her words,

"Belldandy I'm sorry, I didn't mean that -."

"No you're right Sunna," she said putting her arm around her.

"What we need to do now is focus on how best protect the life of this realm."

As the afternoon progressed Keiichi thought the goddesses were acting more like guests at a garden party than warriors preparing for a battle whose outcome would dictate their future.

"This is crazy. How can they be so unconcerned?!"

"Don't be fooled by appearances Keiichi," whispered Skuld beside him. "Goddesses of their rank are cunning beyond measure. They don't worry much about their own lives. Their job is to protect others. Believe me they're plenty concerned. They're just trying to support one another. It's like a goddess's way of showing how tough they are. Even Urd. Notice how they always give her plenty of room at the table? They may not love her, but they know how powerful she is. That's why she and Peorth are assigned to the injured. They know how difficult it would be for any demons to get past the two of them together."

Keiichi smiled seeing the intensity with which Skuld spoke of her sister's prowess. As the afternoon wore on he learned that Urd and Peorth would be overseeing the protection and transport of those injured in battle (a thought he preferred not to dwell upon), while Belldandy, Saga, Sunna, and Var would be holding the southern and eastern boundaries - whatever they were. He and Skuld were supposed to assist Peorth and Urd with the injured brought back from the field. Throughout the afternoon Keiichi did his best not to bother or even look at

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Belldandy so that she would not see him worry. Doing so would only break her concentration he told himself. But it was hard, much harder than he had anticipated.

All too soon a glyph appeared in the late afternoon sky. "The time has come," Var said rising. Keiichi would always remember how the temple grounds looked at that moment, bathed in the last warm rays of the afternoon sun as Belldandy strode from the group to approach him in her flowing robes. "Keiichi?"

"Yes?" he replied coming out to greet her, reminding himself of his promise not to make a scene.

Before him in the dying light of the courtyard she began to slowly removing her seals, placing them one by one into his hands. The reaction of other goddesses was as if she were removing her *clothing* one piece at a time and handing it to him. But Belldandy paid them no mind, staring only at Keiichi as she placed the items into his hands. When she had removed them all she said to him reverently, "I will return to you Keiichi Morisato. Hold my seals until that time and remember all that we have spoken."

He embraced her quickly, turning away so the others would not see his tears. "Goodbye Belldandy. I will always -," was all he could manage to say.

"If I should fall I put my trust in you, now and in the hereafter," she replied, her body becoming luminous as she walked to slowly rejoin the others.

"Did she say *Urd* had changed a lot since the last time we met?" Var muttered as she approached.

Watching from the distance Urd shook her head. "That Keiichi's such a worrier," she observed.

"Oh be quiet you hypocrite!" snapped Peorth.

"What?!"

"You can cut the act Urd. Belldandy told me all about it -."

Urd shrugged blankly.

"You're telling me the fact that the sun will not set for another fourteen minutes has nothing to do with your calm demeanor?"

"Nothing at all," Urd replied beginning to remove her own seals with those of the other goddesses.

The Sign

"Hmm. I wonder if he feels the same way," Peorth muttered.

"Personally I *wish* somebody cared for me like that."

"What was that?"

"*Nothing*. I said I hope your guy kicks your butt the next time he sees you for not saying goodbye."

"I'll say goodbye – *Skuld*."

"*Yeah?!?*"

"Tell Takumi goodbye," she waved smugly, walking to stand with the others at the portal. "And make sure that everything is ready here. We don't know how many we will be bringing."

"We'll be ready" replied Keiichi, clutching his own shirtsleeves.

"*Urd?*" Peorth asked as they stood side by side at the portal.

"Yes?"

"What's that I see in your eyes?"

"Oh shut up," she said wiping her tears.

In the moment before the goddesses ignited the portal the sun seemed to cast an ethereal glow over the temple grounds.

Belldandy and Keiichi looked across the courtyard to each other one last time, their eyes conveying what neither would say aloud. An instant later she was gone.

In the solitude of the temple now Keiichi and Skuld sat quietly beside one another, each lost in their own thoughts. That is until Takumi awoke a few minutes later. Rushing to the courtyard he surveyed their faces. "It's begun then?"

"It appears so," Keiichi replied quietly.

He looked beyond the temple wall to the west. "Strange it should begin on so beautiful a day." He stamped frustrated.

"Dammit how could she leave me here?!"

"*Love*," said Keiichi.

"*Brains*," replied Skuld. They looked at her. "Well let's face it, your skills aren't exactly impressive compared to theirs."

"That's not the point. Except for Belldandy they have no idea what they're about to go up against. Where did they go?"

"Somewhere northeast of Mt. Akagi," Keiichi replied.

"I'll bet it's the same spot where Belldandy was attacked.

They must already have some kind of hold over that place.

Skuld can you take me there?"

"*No*. I can't summon a gateway on my own," she replied as though it were common knowledge.

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Takumi paced the grounds impatiently. "Well what are we supposed to do then?"

"The only thing we can do . . . *wait*," replied Keiichi.

"Yes - *of course*. I'm sorry," he said sitting beside them.

The wait turned out to be short-lived. Half an hour later, Peorth appeared with the first of the injured. "Help me," she called placing them on the ground.

As Keiichi ran to help Takumi whispered to Skuld. "*No*," she replied looking puzzled as he ran off.

With respect to the wounded Keiichi had not known what to expect. But what he saw surprised him nonetheless. There were no gaping wounds and little blood. In fact, aside from the occasional slice or puncture he saw little evidence of any kind of physical damage. Yet their stillness of their bodies filled him with an awful sense of dread.

"Skuld are they . . . ?"

"*No*, they've entered a state of dormancy due of their injuries."

"Will they awaken?"

"We hope so. But they will need assistance to recover."

Keiichi's attention was suddenly drawn to the chestnut-haired goddess Peorth brought forth. He ran to her. "*It's not her!*" she shouted moving past him to lay Sunna on the ground.

"Is she badly hurt?" he asked holding the goddess who only an hour before had been standing in their courtyard.

Peorth said nothing, quickly reaching her hand behind her to summon the gateway. The instant it appeared the figure leapt from the shadows of the roof through the portal, making scarcely more sound than a fluttering sheet.

"What was that?" Peorth asked looking up

Emerging one hundred yards below the main peak, Takumi could now hear and feel the ominous sounds of battle on the far side. Climbing to the ridge he encountered a familiar face.

"Peorth we need to move -."

"*Remember me?*" he said defiantly.

Approaching he saw the dirt, sweat and concern in her face.

But still she came, wrapping her arms around him. "*I told you to stay put*," she cried hugging him.

The Sign

“And I told you I would see this through to the end; and fight by your side. That I might redeem myself.”

“You can’t do anything to help,” she said turning to the ridge.

“You’re sure? Remember the first time we fought?”

“*This is no game Tai,*” she said grimly. Reaching the top Takumi now beheld the awful conflagration. The battle was centered on a hill almost directly in front of them, little more than half a mile to the east. To his left he watched as dozens of Valkyries swept down to furiously hammer the demon’s northern defenses attempting to halt their advance.

But Urd’s eyes saw only Takumi as he knelt down, surveying the scene in the fading light. There was something in his eyes that told her this was the moment. “*Tai,*” she called softly, her heart pounding, “I just want to tell you -.”

“*Dammit,*” Peorth cried coming behind them. “Sorry Urd.”

She stepped back, startled by her appearance. “It’s alright.

There’s nothing you could have done to prevent his coming.”

“What was it you wanted to say Urd?” he asked looking away from the battlefield.

She blushed shaking her head. “*It’s nothing.* I’ll tell you later.”

Takumi’s gaze returned to the slope. “Down there,” he said pointing to the valley floor separating them from the main force of the battle. “That’s where I first saw you.” It wove its way right, intersecting with the primary canyon running due east away from them through an array of forested side canyons.

“I don’t think we really have time for a trip down memory lane right now!” Peorth shouted alerting them to the first of the demons crossing the valley floor toward them. Almost directly across on the opposing hill Takumi now spied the stone, seated at the very center of the battle and surrounded by a number of fearsome looking demons. Demons who continued to pour out in ever increasing numbers through the nearby gateway. It soon became clear that though the heavenly forces on the ground and in the skies were fighting valiantly, those who approached closer than a quarter-mile to the demon stronghold soon fell to their devastating power. Every few minutes he saw groups of Valkyrie’s diving in in an attempt to break their lines, only to be repelled time and time again. Indeed the longer he watched the more apparent it became that the demonic forces

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were slowly, inexorably pushing them back. High in the sky above them he suddenly saw a brilliant streak of light. "Is that - ?"

"Yeah that's choppy," Urd replied following his gaze.

Beyond them to the right Takumi saw several additional points of light in the sky, floating beyond the main battle in a kind of semi-circle. "Is Belldandy there?"

"Yes," Urd said pointing to a spot above and to the right of the stone. He saw her now almost a mile away, aloft above the main canyon floor. Just as when he'd first seen her, he had the strangest feeling something else was in movement with her.

"Is that sound coming from them?"

"Yes," Urd nodded. "It's a form of defense."

Then Takumi fell silent, taking up position below the ridge to watch the battle as the goddesses continued transporting the injured. When they returned minutes later he asked, "What protects the stone?"

"Maybe its own power – *or maybe it's all those demons you see standing around it!*" Peorth cried having precious little time for idle conversation.

"I don't think so. *Look.* Every few minutes your forces strike hard trying to break their advance. Yet no matter what they do its power never seems to diminish - or even waver. I think its being protected by something else, something your attacks aren't putting any pressure on. Is it possible to create a protection using power taken directly from the demon realm?"

"No," replied Urd. "That's basically what all of this is trying to achieve. If they can maintain control over this area for a long enough period, they'll be able to completely overwhelm the local system controls. Once that happens they'll permanently rewrite the interaction matrices governing this region. Then they'll do exactly what you suggest, protecting this place continuously using power drawn from the demon realm."

"And if that happens?"

"*Let's just say you'll have some permanent new neighbors,*"

Peorth replied grimly. "Essentially this place *will become* part of the demon realm. In either case it doesn't matter. The protection's probably up on that hill behind a phalanx of demons."

The Sign

"I'm not so sure," said Urd. "That would potentially create a single point of failure in their defense. And as Tai says, none of our attacks have even seemed to weaken it so far. What if they're doing exactly what they did in the Yggdrasil sub-system, attempting to draw our attention away from their real strategy by hiding the primary protection offsite - away from the center of the battle? That way no matter where we strike them, no matter how much damage we incur, the stone would still be protected."

"Making it apparently invulnerable."

"Exactly." At that moment the fighting below them intensified as the demons finally broke through to cross the valley floor.

"Where could they set up such a protection?" asked Takumi.

The sky above them exploded as two injured Valkyrie's hit the ground nearby making for the relative safety of the ridge. The goddesses struggled to pull them toward the gateway as Urd surveyed the valley. "Given the level of control they'd need over it, it would have to be close by. Within a mile a mile I would say; probably half that."

"How big would it be?"

"About the same size as the area they wanted to protect.

They'd definitely want to keep it small so as to maximize its protective power. Probably six to ten feet across."

"Can you search for it?"

"Down there?!" asked Peorth watching the furious battle below.

"Peorth's right. There's so much happening down there it would be difficult to sense anything."

"Maybe that's what they're counting on."

Urd reached out, probing the surrounding terrain for several minutes before deciding she could not detect anything unusual.

"Well what if they wanted to hide something, how would they do it? How would *you* do it?"

Urd thought for a moment scanning the valley once more.

"Well maybe - *yes over there*. The signatures are too quiet.

On the far side of the canyon almost directly south of their stronghold. There might be something down there. What do you think Peorth?"

Peorth stretched out her hand, "Yeah, I think I feel it too."

"Then I'm going," Takumi said starting to move.

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"No," Urd insisted grabbing him.

"It's better this way. Either one of us can approach the protection due to -," he glanced at Peorth.

"It's okay Tai. Our lineage isn't exactly a secret."

"- due to our demonic nature. But only *you* can get the injured to safety *and* protect the gateway. That I cannot do."

Peorth looked down the slope at the advancing line. "Either way we're almost out of time."

"How far away do you think?" he said looking down the slope.

"Maybe three quarters of a mile."

"*URD! We have a bit of a situation here!*" Peorth warned as several demons screamed up the ridge.

"*Rose / Elegance,*" they shouted almost in unison as their foes dropped in their path, sealed from the immense burst of their power. Looking back Urd saw that Takumi was already gone, moving down the south slope at great speed. What few demons he encountered along the way he circumnavigated with ease. But as he reached the valley floor it quickly became apparent he would need help if he was ever to make it to the side canyon. Crossing the ravine to skirt the edges of the demon stronghold Takumi began to encounter more and more resistance. A moment later Urd gasped seeing him stumble as he tried to jump beyond the reach of a large demon in his path. Instinctively he raised his weapon in defense as he fell; its blade slicing across the demons left arm as both tumbled to the ground. Breaking free he rolled to his feet readying for the attack when Urd struck from the ridge, quickly removing the threat. He looked up waving only to hear her reply in his thoughts, *hurry you fool!* Racing over the uneven terrain Takumi attempted to avoid as many additional obstacles as possible. Those he did meet were now often consumed by mysterious strikes of lighting falling from the heavens with increasing rapidity.

Reaching the point she had indicated on the side canyon Takumi at first saw nothing. But using the luminous markings on Abyss he soon found a smooth vertical segment of canyon wall. So focused was he on finding the exact location of the seal he nearly missed spotting the two demonic protectors which fell from above. Stumbling into the open he readied his

The Sign

defense as the pursuers followed. But one fell almost immediately, collapsing into a glowing orb as a dark skinned goddess sweep low overhead before turning back toward the center of the battle. The second protector quickly became entrapped in vines encircling him before being struck by a bolt of lightning from above. Returning to the canyon wall Takumi reached out with Abyss, blindly probing for the reflected power of the stone in the seal. As he neared a lower segment of the rock wall, the embossed demonic flame of the seal suddenly appeared; its circular markings measuring some seven feet in diameter up the wall. So intense was its power he could not approach within a few feet. But reaching with Abyss he struck at the uppermost edge, slowly beginning to rewrite each of the symbols in the manner Urd had instructed. Working counterclockwise, the color of the glyphs began to change as each segment was completed in turn.

“What’s happening?” questioned Peorth. “We have to get the next group through!”

Urd looked on as the outer camouflage of the seal began to fade. “The protections are starting to erode! He must have completed the first segment. He just needs a little more time.”

“We may not have that luxury - look!”

A great chorus now arose from the hill as Hild emerged from the gateway, rising above her assembled forces. Turning she surveyed the battlefield. “*Let them try,*” she said sweeping her arms before her. The immense power seemed to draw the very air from the, sky pulling it in before it exploding outward a second later. Kneeling before the blast wave Urd instinctively looked to the southeast, watching as Saga fell to the canyon wall. Var too spiraled dangerously, barely managing to stay aloft with assistance. Only Belldandy seemed capable of withstanding the blow, rising high in a silent signal of hope to her allies as Holy Bell grew large behind her. Her actions were not lost on Hild who glared angrily at the primary daughter of the heavens closing on her. As she did however, Lind and the Valkyries began a furiously attack on her northern flank. So too Var now rose at Belldandy’s side as together they attempted to keep the demon forces off-balance. Not that it

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seemed to make much difference to Hild, who if anything appeared mildly amused by their efforts. Her voice thundered in the heavens. "Is this really the best you can do one-wing?" she taunted. "Creeping around the edges of my power? Come closer, I'll show you what *real power* is. After all, I believe I have something of yours," she said as the forces below her roared. "Something I believe you've been searching for for quite a long time. I'm told it belonged to your cousin - *briefly*," she said watching in delight as Lind shouted orders to her Valkyries, restraining their attack only with the great effort. Glancing back at the narrow slab of canyon wall, Urd saw now that Takumi had defeated more than half of the seal. They would only need another minute or two of distraction. Hild's eyes swept over the battlefield, pleased with both the progress and chaos they had created. But then she paused, looking curiously at the ground below her. Carefully now her eyes began to survey the surrounding terrain.

Up on the ridge Urd froze. She tried not to think or even breathe, shutting her eyes to block out any thought which might reveal them. She felt herself grow cold; her body starting to tremble. Her heart pounded furiously. But Hild's eyes were already moving southward. At that instant her forces seemed to slow; as if in some silent communication with her.

"*DIVE!*" cried Lind as a group of Valkyries swept down en masse from seizing the opportunity.

"*MOVE!*" shouted Hild a second later as the demons burst over the southern ridge down the slope toward Takumi. As Valkyries attempted to slow her forces, Hild streaked toward the canyon as Belldandy, Var and Lind raced to intercept her over the valley floor. Together their defense was so intense that the sky itself seemed to ignite, blazing for several seconds more brilliant than the sun. On the ground the battle too seemed to increase to a fever pitch. There were moments when the whole region seemed aglow in the fading light of fire and explosion from the fighting.

"*Tai!*" Urd shouted frantically in her thoughts. "*Get Out!*" "It's too late!" Peorth cried behind her as the blast of hot wind swept over them. They're going to overrun us! We have to get out those we can!"

The Sign

“Go to the gate!” But as she spoke the pendant around Urd’s neck grew dangerously warm. Looking back she saw to her horror that the light in the sky above Takumi’s position was fading. Hild had broken through. She saw Belldandy fall, twisting to arrest her descent at the last instant before striking the ground.

“TAI – *GO!*” she cried.

“Urd, we need to get out *now!*” Peorth insisted behind her. But Urd could do nothing standing frozen, unable move as she watched the scene below her.

“*TAKUMI!*” she screamed, frantic across the gulf which had become an inferno. He looked back then, forcing a smile as he looked up at her from beside the wall. Then slowly he turned away, concentrating his effort on defeating the final elements of the seal.

“NO!” she cried shaking her head feeling Hild’s oncoming fury.

It was then that she felt his voice within her, “*better - this - way . . . my love.*” Her eyes went wide but it was too late.

Hild passed judgment with chilling finality.

“*OBLITERATE!*” she commanded slicing downward.

Urd jumped from the slope as the fireball descended, concentrating her counterstrike. But Hild’s power was too great. Arcing from its path it struck the canyon wall fifty feet above Takumi’s head. Touching the living earth it exploded, its flame spreading out in all directions like lethal flowing water. An instant later everything before her was gone. And in that moment Takumi Sato was no more. But Urd would never see this. Or perhaps it was more correct to say that her mind would not allow her to see it. Not her scream as she hit the ground, nor Peorth pulling her to safety through the portal at the last moment before fire swept over them. Emerging at Tariki Hongan temple Urd gave out a terrible cry in anguish, stumbling several steps before collapsing on the ground. From inside Keiichi, Skuld, and the others raced to her position.

Aftermath

“**B**rave but foolish,” Hild murmured watching the spot where the figure had stood only seconds before. But then she began to sense the change. The protective field around the stone had begun to dissipate, exposing the defenses around the underworld gate.

“NOW!” commanded Lind to her waiting vanguard. Down through the cover of clouds they poured, breaching the demons northern defenses. For Lind had sensed her opportunity. *You depend too much upon intimidation Hild. And what has it brought you?* Streaking ahead of them with a speed only she possessed she dove from the heavens directly at Hild.

“*You think I don’t have enough left to break you one-wing?!*” she snapped watching her approach. Come on! I’m more than ready!” Lind’s only response was to accelerate toward her at an even more frightening pace. As Hild prepared for the impact Lind readied her strike. An instant before they collided however Lind arched her body steeply, narrowly missing Hild as she swept past. “NO!” she shrieked seeing now the true target of her attack.

“*UTRYDDE!*” Lind screamed striking the center of the stone shattering it under the tremendous force of her blow. Deprived of its unifying power, the underworld gateway immediately collapsed separating Hild’s surface forces from the main body of their host. As the combined forces of the heavens now poured in from the north and east, members of Lind’s vanguard raced down desperate in their attempts to link up with their commander fighting alone on the ground. As the archives would later record, in intense fighting over the next several hours the forces of the Almighty gained the upper hand, driving the demons back to the underworld.

“I’m ashamed to admit it mistress but we are beaten,” grieved Mara. “Let me be the first to apologize for my inferior performance.”

Aftermath

But Hild displayed surprising calm surveying the scene. “Yes, this is most unfortunate. But there is no need to worry,” she said shaking her head. “History is long and today has been instructive, yes - *most instructive indeed*. Given time we may be able to use this to our advantage.”

Mara knew better than to question her master’s musings, even when she did not understand them. And so together they departed in silence back to the security of the demon realm. As the heaven’s forces retook the ground Belldandy and the others departed, returning to Tariki Hongan where they were now needed most. Standing atop the central hill now, Lind and her colleagues began the slow process of sorting through the devastation and securing the gateway. From the southern slope Lind saw the young Valkyrie approaching. “Sir we recovered this from the canyon. I think the body -.”

“That is not your concern Pruror,” she replied quickly.

“Ensuring the gateway is properly sealed, *that* is our priority.”

Taking the weapon she moved past her down the slope.

Walking she looked upon the engravings calling to her like a ghost from the past. Gently pressing her thumb to the spine, each symbol in turn began to glow. She closed her eyes. She had been younger then of course, on the day the blade had been forged. In some ways it seemed an entirely different life to her. And yet regret welled within her. *If only I had not left, if only -*. But that was all in the past now. *It is ended. Leave it with this one now; let it go*, she told herself. Reaching the base of the slope she moved off from the others into what remained of the forest. “Spear mint, cool mint,” she called as together they made their way through the burned and shattered landscape.

Coming over a hill they at last found him. Despite the violence his body had endured his body seemed to be lying as though asleep, resting at the foot of a broken tree. Kneeling down she placed her left hand close to his heart, but as she expected life had left his shattered body. Alone now in the forest she sat beside him in solitude. What her thoughts were in those moments it is difficult to say. Of futility? Of the stone so long sought and recovered at so terrible a price now destroyed? Or of the will that drove them to fight for a better world?

Whatever her thoughts her composure soon returned as she set

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to her task. Pushing him onto his back she exposed his upper torso, hesitantly touching the edge of where her axe had cleaved him. Then she began to write, tracing her finger across the right side of his chest in angelic script. As she did the symbols appeared, each burning themselves into his flesh. Slowly the words came:

*Take this the body of Takumi Sato,
whose sacrifice this day asked nothing in return,
that he might know the sleep of honest men,
and awake in a world unbroken.*

Lind: Valkyrie, first class.

When she had finished she placed Abyss next to him wrapping the body. Then pulling him into her arms she began the unenviable task of returning him to Tariki Hongan temple. By the time she arrived it was almost 1 am, and as she had feared the news had preceded her given the number of people present. Entering the temple gates those in her path quietly stepped aside allowing her to pass as she walked up into the courtyard. Only Skuld broke with this decorum, rushing forward in tears before Belldandy grabbed her and gently pulled her aside. Cautiously Lind searched the crowd, when from behind she heard -.

"Put him down."

"Of course."

"NOW!"

Slowly Lind placed the body at Urd's feet as the murmuring crowd fell silent.

"I'm sorry Urd, he is -."

"YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW!"

"No of course you know," she said quietly.

But Urd was quite beyond politeness by this point.

"You think I can't feel it?! In my heart?! The feeling that if I could have. . . just one more moment -." She stopped her tears beginning to fall. Members of crowd shuffled nervously.

"He was able to -."

"NO! I don't need to hear those words from you . . . from anyone!" she shouted angrily. *"I was there! I know what he did. What he tried to protect,"* she said turning on the crowd. *"For those who surely wouldn't have done the same for him!"*

Aftermath

"Urd don't! Don't do this," Belldandy said stepping forward, her eyes both a plea and a warning. But any hope of decorum was quickly swept away as Urd knelt down placing her hands to Takumi's face. Tracing his body her hands slowed coming to his. Lind bite her lip unconsciously stepped back but the speed of Urd's backhand caught her off guard.

"HOW DARE YOU!" she cried seizing her.

Lind stumbled but recovered quickly her eyes now ablaze.

"It was my duty -."

"DON'T tell me about your duty!" she spat as Belldandy rushed between them.

"You're not the only one who's lost Urd," Lind breathed bitterly. Breaking from her she turned to leave, as she did however Urd whispered something beneath her breath.

Belldandy's eyes grew wide, throwing her arms around Lind as she spun on them instantly, *"YES - I saw the strike; NO - I didn't divert to shield him,"* she snarled. *"Because there was more at stake than one person's feelings!"*

Tears sprang anew to Urd's eyes but she continued. "Your friend understood that. Maybe someday you will too." She stalked away in silence disappearing through the trees. When she had gone the crowd began to gather around them. At Belldandy's silent urging Urd stepped aside, allowing each of them to pass. Keiichi watched as a number touched their fingers to Takumi's cheek or forehead as they did.

"What are they doing?" he asked.

"It's a sign of respect," Belldandy whispered.

"Is that right Skuld?" he said hoping to elicit some response from her. But Skuld said nothing, seemingly in shock as she stared at the body at her feet. As the night wore on the exhausted and injured fighters slowly departed amid quiet words of quiet thanks to one another. Eventually Belldandy gathered the members of the Morisato household together saying that they should try and eat, though it was clear her real purpose was to gather them together as a family on that terrible night. She called to Urd who was still seated beside Takumi in the courtyard whispering.

"Urd please come and have something," she said though no one was really sure if it was a good idea. When at last she came

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they sat around her nervously in the tea room, none of them looking her in the eye. They watched her as she ate in silence, her face haunted by pain as she looked out blankly, as though not fully knowing where she was. Unsure of what to say they said nothing, sitting together. Finally it was Urd who spoke. "Do you think . . . he's cold?" she asked worriedly. Keiichi and Skuld stopped, looking at Belldandy uncertain of how to answer.

"I think he's beyond the harm of wind and rain now Nee-san," she replied gently.

"*Of course* - stupid of me," she said shaking her head.

"No, no," they replied each putting a hand to her.

Urd closed her eyes as her tears came. "I think . . . I need to go now," she said rising unsteadily walking to her room. They continued to sit trying to allow Urd her privacy, though they could hear her muffled cries. Belldandy reached for Keiichi and Skuld telling them how much she loved them. Keiichi said as convincingly as he could they would all get through this together. Then they retired to their respective rooms. A short time later, Belldandy heard Keiichi's door slide open as he made his way quietly to Urd's room. From their muffled conversation she heard him speak fond words of Takumi, asking her if there was anything he could do. Thought Urd said little she seemed to thank him before he returned to his room. Bell had almost drifted off to sleep when once more she heard faint footsteps moving in the hall. Carefully opening her outer door she saw Skuld make her way through the courtyard, carefully placing a blanket around Takumi's still body. She had almost made it back to the house when she encountered Urd making her own quiet sojourn. She watched as Skuld ran to her sister's arms sobbing. For a moment Urd held her, shushing her quietly, urging her to go back inside. As she came into the hallway Belldandy opened her door, "Do you want to come in here tonight?" she asked making room for her sister under the covers. Skuld nodded sadly coming to her side.

The next morning Belldandy found Urd asleep outside next to Takumi. She rubbed her back. "Urd you need to go inside and get some rest."

Aftermath

Urd opened her eyes slowly pulling herself up. “No,” she muttered despondently. “There’s too much to do. I need to find a place for him.” She spent the better part of the day beyond the temple walls walking in the surrounding woods. When she returned that afternoon Belldandy was waiting for her, sitting with Keiichi on the edge of the veranda.

“I’m going to put him in the shadow of the blood maple,” she said somberly. “He has no family, at least none that I know of. So I guess it will just be us.”

“I’m sure others will come Urd,” Belldandy urged. Urd made no sign she had hear her walking to the house. For a long moment she and Keiichi sat on the porch looking at one another. Then Keiichi got up heading to the shed, and rode away. When he returned that evening Belldandy was waiting for him at the back wall. “They’ll be here in the early afternoon,” he replied. “Tamiya and Otaki will come earlier to, *you know*, dig.”

“I contacted Yggdrasil so they know,” said Belldandy. “What did you tell the auto club?”

“Only that he died suddenly. I went to Megumi’s to speak to her about it alone. She’s not taking it very well. She may come here tonight. How’s Skuld?”

“I don’t know. Quiet. Urd too.”

After another uncomfortable dinner they all said goodnight. As Keiichi lay in his room tossing and turning for a second sleepless night there came a knock at his door. Answering Belldandy quickly pulled herself inside. Without another word she was in his arms trembling. She pressed her face tightly to his shoulder choking back her tears.

“Bell?” Earlier that evening she had seemed to be holding up well, but now he could there was something terribly wrong.

“Keiichi I love you so much!” she said softly as her tears fell.

“Please, please, let me stay with you tonight.”

“Of course,” he said rocking her. *She’s must be imagining what it would be like if I were the one gone. Or more likely when I’m gone* he thought.

He rubbed her shoulders encouragingly. “You remember what we talked about in the grove right Bell?”

The Twilight Hour

"Yes . . .," she replied weakly, turning her head away as she pressed against him. "But sometimes, *it doesn't help so much* -," she whispered as her tears increased.

"We never talked about it Bell, but I know. I know how you feel. That night when you came back from the battle it was like I was reborn. Like I could finally breathe again. I was just so happy you'd returned. The truth is I didn't care about anyone or anything. I just wanted to see you again -," he shut his eyes holding her. "So believe me, *I know*."

Early the next morning Keiichi discovered Megumi had arrived sometime during the night. Her bike was parked in the shed and eventually he found her curled up beside Skuld in her room. For the first time in ages he alone seemed to be awake, standing in the hallway as he watched Belldandy asleep on his futon. Though he grieved the reason for it, he was thankful for their time together. Thankful to feel the weight of her head on his shoulder, sound of her peaceful breath after all they had been through. He heard the door behind him open as Urd stepped into the hallway. They stood looking at each other awkwardly; souls parted by two very different fates. Keiichi saw she was dressed in a purple gown similar to one he'd seen before, except that this one faded to black as it reached the ground. "Urd, would you like to show me where you want things to be?" he said wishing he could state it more delicately. "*It's all right*. Don't concern yourself," she said absently walking outside. "Look after them."

As the morning progressed it seemed everyone was doing better today, if for no other reason than they had something to do. Something to keep them busy. Urd spent most of the day alone in quiet contemplation. By noon most things seem to be in order, which was good given the increasing number of visitors beginning to arrive. Though Megumi and members of the auto club were present, many of the others he had never seen before, though he did spot Peorth among the group. They all seemed to know each other however, and gathered around Belldandy who played the role of host in Urd's absence. Keiichi saw they were dressed in a variety of subtle colors, many of them fading to black as they reached the ground.

Aftermath

Their presence, not to mention the burial itself, required him to do more than his usual amount of creative explaining, “How did you get permission to perform the service in the forest?” Hasegawa was asking now as she stood beside him. “Umm, I think Belldandy needs me for . . . *something*,” he said ducking inside.

That afternoon at the appointed hour, the group gathered beneath the red maple at the spot Urd had chosen. As Takumi's body was placed in the ground Urd came to stand beside him, while several goddesses including Belldandy and the one he knew as Sunna began to sing. Though Keiichi could not understand the words, the song brought tears to his eyes, for he could tell it was a song of final partings. Then as Urd nodded all voices ceased save Belldandy's, who continued to sing as she looked to Keiichi. But he could tell from her tone that this song was not of sorrow; but of hope. As she sang he saw Urd kneel beside Takumi, whispering what he could not guess. Then drawing a small stone from her pocket she placed it on the body. At the last moment however he saw her quietly split the stone with her thumb and forefinger, leaving only half with Takumi. “*That you may find the one true sea,*” she whispered rising to conceal the other fragment within her robe.

Belldandy was then joined by several others to complete the final hymn. Yet as they sang Peorth broke from the group, reaching out to the blood maple. Several in the crowd exchanged curious glances as she removed a gold chain from her robes to encircle it twice around the tree. Sealing it with her power she then cut into the flesh of the tree directly above the chain, allowing its sap to flow. At this Keiichi heard Belldandy's voice falter for an instant and Urd, who had been holding up fairly well until this point, break down in tears. Peorth rushed to embrace her as Megumi turned to him, but like her he had no idea what had occurred. With the ceremony ended the crowd began to walk back to the temple, leaving Urd alone beneath the tree.

Tamiya and Otaki approached. “Miss Urd, Keiichi said the digging was already done when we arrived. So should we begin to -?”

“It's alright. I'll do it . . .,” she said quietly.

The Twilight Hour

“Are you sure? Because there’s a lot of dirt here that needs to be moved,” Tamiya persisted.

“Yeah, that’s because he has to be placed deep down you know so animals and stuff won’t get to him,” Otaki added helpfully.

“Yeah, and also so that the smell doesn’t -,” Tamiya continued. Urd looked up frowning through her tears. In the distance the sound of thunder rolled through the mountains.

“GUYS!” Keiichi shouted rushing them. “Why don’t we just let Urd have some time alone here. We can deal with all this later. After all there’s food at the temple.”

“Well - okay. We’ll talk to you later Miss Urd,” Tamiya said handing her the marker stone.

As they moved off Urd picked up the shovel and with bitter determination placed dirt over Takumi’s lifeless body. Though she could have completed the process in an instant she wanted time, time to think and to feel, to physically feel the pain of burying him; and to reflect on all that had happened.

“*How do I get through today Tai?* Just tell me that,” she said putting her trembling hands to her face as tears fell upon him. “And what happens now?”

As he walked through the forest approaching the temple wall, Keiichi spotted Lind quietly observing the proceedings from the boughs of a large cedar tree. Though there were those in the heavens that did not share his feelings, Keiichi had always felt comfortable around her despite her brusque manners. For in the past had she not called him her only human friend, had he not felt her power within him?

He called to her. “May I ask you something?”

“If you must,” she replied continuing to observe.

“*Peorth*. What did it mean?”

She tilted her head to one side looking at him. “A symbolic reference to our past. Long ago when one of our warriors was lost, it was said his beloved wept tears of red gold - so great was the pain in her heart.”

“And cutting the tree?”

“We sometimes say that all things are connected through the great tree of life. If one’s contribution to that life is great enough, it is said the tree is scarred upon their loss.”

Aftermath

"I'm not sure I understand."

Lind looked down at him impatiently. "Peorth's actions were a public and personal way of saying she acknowledges the level of Urd's pain as a fellow goddess and the depth of Urd and Takumi's bond and service to us. Through her act she *implies* equivalence to our past," Lind mused.

"But you don't?" he questioned.

"Their pain is unfortunate. But in my long life I have seen much of it. Comparison of their suffering to that of our history would seem - a bold statement to me. But perhaps time has simply hardened me to such considerations," she said gazing back at the forest.

Beneath the tree Urd continued to examine the grave marker. Though the front carving had been completed she wanted to put something on the back, on that part which would lie forever in the earth. A place to say all those things she wanted or needed to say. But the longer she sat the more came to her heart and the less certain she was of how to say any of it. "Why can't I say what I feel? I'm sure if Bell were here she could think up with something beautiful to say in an instant," she muttered. In the end she vowed to return, writing only:
Takumi,

I did not save you, but you saved me completely.

Urd put the marker in the ground walking away. She did her best not to acknowledge the figures watching in the distance. Approaching the temple she could just make out Lind buried in the high trees of the ridge, while behind her the last rays of the sunlight flashed off the golden curls of her following somber observer. Entering the temple gates she felt each of them depart to their respective realms.

"It's nice out today," Urd observed lying against Takumi as they lay on the hill staring up at the blue sky.

"Yeah, it's sunny but the hillside is cool here," he replied.

"Come on, let's see what's up ahead," he said doing his best to pull her up.

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"No, I just want to lie here," she replied stretching stubbornly. "Or we could go home?" she called suggestively watching him climb the hill.

"C'mon just a little farther, then we'll go," he said continuing. Before long she followed. But as she did an uneasy feeling came over her. The terrain around her seemed somehow familiar. "Takumi let's go, it's getting late," she called nervously. But from up ahead there came no reply.

"*Tai*," she shouted climbing more rapidly. Reaching the top she saw him, Abyss held tightly in his left hand as he faced the sunset. An instant later the fireball exploded engulfing them.

"*TAI!*" she screamed awakening in the darkened room. "*TAI!*" Quickly the door slid open, "*Urd?* I'm here Urd," said the gentle voice beside her.

"Bell? What . . . what are you doing here?"

"It's alright Urd. It was just a dream," she said consoling her.

"No - *no*," she cried shaking her head, refusing to believe it.

"No we . . . had a house, it was in the hills above -"

"You're here at the temple Urd. We said goodbye to Takumi five days ago remember? Do you want me to get you something?"

"*No . . .*," she whispered as her bitter tears fell, knowing all too now where she was. She lay down drawing the covers.

"Just . . . just let me sleep Bell," she replied miserably.

Life at the temple had continued but things were different now. For it had become a place of shadows, hiding each of them as they bore the pain in their own way. Alone and in silence so as not to worry the others.

That afternoon Belldandy called to her sister as she sat alone in the garden. "Keiichi and I are going into town for groceries. Will you be alright?"

"Yes," she replied soberly. Returning to her work she thought, *what was I was doing?* "What difference does it make," she said walking away. Each day now it seemed harder for her to focus or care about anything. After sitting beside the tree for some time she realized she should probably check on Skuld. Walking to the courtyard she saw her sitting in her room through the open outer doors. She seemed to be holding

Aftermath

something in the light. She was examining the markings on Abyss.

Urd jumped to the veranda. *"Give me that!"* she shouted.

"What?! I'm not giving you this!" she replied angrily.

"You shouldn't have it!"

"I'm holding it for him until - he comes back," she cried.

"He's not coming back," she said bitterly.

"Then I'll keep it forever!" she shouted running off, her eyes filling with tears. *"And while you're at it - give me that necklace he gave you!"*

"WHAT?!"

"You don't wear it anymore! I'll keep it and I won't forget him!"

Urd gasped reeling, staring back at her in silent shock as tears streamed down her face. *"Is that - what you think? You stupid child! You don't know anything. ANYTHING!"* she screamed running for the house.

Keiichi knew Urd was in pain. But until that afternoon he had no idea how serious it really was. Returning from shopping Belldandy suddenly signaled for him to slow as they approached the temple. Jumping from the bike she ran ahead to the back gate. Coming alongside her he was shocked to see Elegance swooping frantically over Urd as she lay motionless on the ground. The angel seemed to be attempting to move her, perhaps encouraging her to stand. But Urd was utterly still. From the look on Belldandy's face for a moment Keiichi feared she had died.

"What is it?!" he asked.

"Sometimes when a goddess is in crisis she can no longer fully control her angel. During such times our other self will seek to protect us from harm. This can be a great source of comfort. Even so, the kind of harm Urd has suffered can do terrible injury to the soul."

Keiichi looked on horrified. He shuddered to imagine Belldandy in such a state. *"Has anything like that ever happened to you?"* he said fearfully.

She took hold of his hand. *"I have you Keiichi,"* she whispered. *"I have you."*

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At Belldandy's request Keiichi picked up Urd and together they brought her back to her room. But Urd appeared neither to care or respond to what was happening around her. Only when he turned to go did she speak. "*Keiichi?*"

"*Yes.*"

"Can you . . . take me to the maple tree?"

"No, not right now Urd. You need to rest," he urged worriedly.

"*I'd really like to go. It's one of the only things . . . I have to look forward to now . . .*," she muttered quietly, curling her fingers around the blanket.

Keiichi rushed forward in spite of himself throwing his arms around her, "I'll take you tomorrow Urd, I promise," he said holding her tightly.

"*Okay,*" she replied, closing her eyes to try and stop her tears.

Despite the hardships Keiichi and Belldandy's relationship grew stronger during the difficult days that followed Takumi's death. For she depended on him now in ways she never had before, looking to him for love and support each day. More and more in the evenings she would come to his room to talk and share her concerns. Keiichi would sit and listen patiently, telling her that they would make it through somehow, that it would all be alright. His calming words never failed to comfort her and she quickly became accustomed to falling asleep exhausted in his arms. Keiichi too was rapidly growing accustomed to her presence beside him at night. Skuld, who normally would never have tolerated such an arrangement, no longer seemed to possess the strength or will to protest. Or perhaps she simply saw her sister's pain and did not wish to add to her burdens. In truth on more than one occasion she herself sought refuge from her own bad dreams by curling up between them. Tonight however as Belldandy came to his room Keiichi could not seem to stop her tears, "- Bell that's not true."

"It is Keiichi! I've failed her. *I've failed Urd!* And now . . . *now I can't get her back!*" she sobbed.

"No you haven't."

"*Yes. You don't know. Because I never told you.*"

"Told me what?"

Aftermath

“Urd and I - we haven’t always been close. We were when I was young but as we grew older there were times when we didn’t see each other for long periods. It was during one such period that I fell into terrible trouble. The truth is I lay for days in the kind of state you saw Urd in today.”

He could not believe it. But now he understood why she was upset. “*Urd came back for you.*”

Belldandy nodded turning away. “*She* was the one who brought me back Keiichi. She didn’t hesitate. She came and pushed everyone aside, doing whatever was necessary to heal me, even to the point of risking her own life.” She looked to him. “Keiichi if she hadn’t done that, *we* never could have been.”

“Well she’s your sister. And that’s why you’re so close now.”

“But don’t you see Keiichi?! *She was right.* I *didn’t* do that for her. I didn’t believe in her, didn’t support her when she needed it. And now . . . ,” she cried shaking her head, “*now I’ll never get her back!* I hurt her Keiichi and I won’t ever get her back!”

He pulled her close. “That’s not true. Right or wrong everything you did you did because you loved her. Because you wanted to protect her. Urd knows that. Deep down she still loves you.”

“I always thought we could resolve the issue. But with his death it can never be truly resolved. There’s a distance between us now, a breach that will never be fully healed,” she said shaking her head despondently.

“Bell you have to trust me,” he said with strength that surprised her. “I said we would get through this together - *and we will.* You’ll see.”

“Alright Keiichi,” she said pushing herself into his arms. “I trust you . . . ,” she murmured drifting off to sleep.

The next morning Urd found Skuld sitting alone at the far end of the veranda.

“Bell told me you didn’t care if I ever woke up,” she said sitting beside her.

Skuld turned away doing her best to ignore her.

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"I thought about what you said. Maybe you're right. Maybe you should be the one to have this," she said pushing the necklace toward her over the wooden deck. "Because I know I don't deserve it."

Skuld picked it up examining it cautiously. "Why?"

"Because I didn't use the time we had wisely. I know that now. If I could have anything now, it would be to have just one more minute with him. To say everything I needed say. To tell him everything I wanted to tell him . . . but never did," she said fighting to contain her emotions.

Skuld was young, but not so young she did not understand.

"You never told him you loved him."

Urd put her head down beginning to cry.

"But he knew Urd. Of course he knew."

"But I never told him. I never said the words. As though it wasn't important enough. Why? Why didn't I just say it? What was I waiting for?!" she sobbed.

Skuld picked up the necklace placing it into her hands. "*Here.* This was only ever meant for one person Urd," she said walking away.

Echoes of the Sea

When Urd came in the door that afternoon Belldandy was waiting for her in the kitchen. “How are you?” she asked placing her arms around her.

“I’m alright Bell.”

“Urd I’m so worried about you. We all are.”

“I know. But don’t be. I’ll be okay,” she said pulling away.

“I’m just going to go for walk for a while, that’s all,” she muttered wandering into the courtyard. Belldandy watched as she slowly disappeared out the front gate. She knew her sister was courageous, and that she was fighting. But she could see now she was losing. In truth the light just seemed to have gone out of her. Urd had always had trouble in relationships; trouble opening her heart. And now? Belldandy wondered what would happen on the day love truly left her and her demonic side took over. *I must let her feel it all*, she thought. Isn’t that why I’ve left her alone so much, not interfering with her when she sneaks off to visit Takumi during the night, or when she insists on staying in her room all day? More and more now Belldandy would find her sitting alone beneath the blood maple at twilight, silently watching the sky. She hoped that if Urd reflected on all that had happened she would be able to hold on to the best part of her love no matter how painful. And in so doing, the best part of herself.

When Keiichi returned home from work that afternoon he found Belldandy sitting on the veranda. He could tell by the faraway look in her eyes she was thinking about Urd.

“She seems better these days,” he said. “She talks more. She says she’s okay.”

“She’s not,” Belldandy replied. “We’re failing. Perhaps I was wrong to leave her alone so much.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know.”

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“Well I hope she’s not gone too long, they say there’s a storm coming.”

“Then I should go get Skuld,” she said getting up.

“Skuld? Where is she?”

“Out on the parklands with Sentaro.”

“What’s that all about?” he asked giving her a curious look.

“I don’t know. After her talk with Urd the other day she just said she wanted to see him.”

By the time Urd returned it was evening and they had already gathered for dinner. Though she said nothing she seemed upset.

“Urd are you alright?” asked Belldandy gently.

“*YES! Why the hell do you keep asking me that?! I’m sick of it!*” she shouted running to her room slamming the door.

Belldandy sat in silence as Keiichi put his arm around her. A stern glance from Skuld only made him put his other arm around her. That night as they all attempted to sleep the rains began, soon falling in sheets through the fierce winds whipping the temple grounds. As the noise of the storm rumbled outside, Belldandy now heard the quiet footsteps of someone making their way in the dark hallway. Peeking through the outer shoji doors she saw Urd hug the wall before breaking from the house, running down the path toward Takumi’s grave. Without a second thought she followed her running careful to remain unseen in the shadows. Reaching the last rise in the path Belldandy saw her, sobbing with her arms outstretched around the stone marker. Creeping from the path she continued forward cautiously until Urd suddenly rose. Knowing no one could hear her above the roar of the wind and rain she now gave full fury to her grief.

“*WHY!!!*” she screamed anguished to the heavens. “*WHY DID YOU HAVE TO TAKE HIM?! Because we didn’t fit into some plan? He was all I wanted - in my heart,*” she wept falling to her knees in the forest. “*After all this time - why is that wish so much to ask? For us to be together? WHY!!!*” she cried in pain as the heavens poured down on her, her tortured face searching for an answer she knew would never come.

Belldandy looked on covering her mouth that Urd would not hear her own sobbing.

Echoes of the Sea

Turning her back to the rain Urd returned her attention to the marker. Pulling it from the ground she inscribed quickly on the back before replacing it. Then with an unsteady hand she reached up, her fingers gently caressing the golden chain sealed about tree. She hugged the tree trying hard to remember the happy days of her past as her tears fell. Minutes later she at last drew herself up, slowly returning to the temple.

When she had gone Belldandy raced to the marker, digging frantically with her hands in the mud to lift the stone. Seeing the series of inscriptions she felt for the most recent. It read:

I needed you today Tai.

I'm sad, and I'm alone.

I tried to finish our wall - but I don't know how it ends.

That's all I really want now, I just want to know - how it ends.

Come to me again in dreams if you can.

I pray I will be with you soon.

Belldandy replaced the marker running for the temple as fast as she could through the rain. When she was sure the coast was clear she made the last jump to the courtyard and across to the porch. Quickly entering her room through the outer doors she silently dried herself before stepping into the hallway.

"What are you doing up?" Urd asked coming from the bath.

Belldandy stared at her blankly. If she hadn't seen Urd with her own eyes only moments before she never would have believed she was in so much pain.

She is hiding from all of us, she thought.

"Nothing. I guess . . . I just can't sleep," she replied trying to hold in her tears.

"Well maybe we should make some -."

"*Urd I love you so much!* I don't know what I would do without you!" she blurted out hugging her.

"*I know,*" she replied backing away nervously. "What's bringing this on?"

"I've been thinking a lot about when you took care of me after Celestine. You supported me and I - I didn't support you. You were right Urd. *I'm so sorry!*"

"Shhh it's okay. Don't worry about any of that now," she said trying to calm her. "It's fine."

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"No Urd it's not! It's not fine!" she cried hugging her once more.

"Bell, you have to -." But then she stopped, staring at the necklace. The stone which had remained black since Takumi's death now appeared to be glowing faintly.

"What is it Urd?"

"I don't understand - *that's not right . . .*," she whispered holding it up. The hue had changed; it was no longer the color of tanzanite but now like that of a sapphire. Urd stared at it puzzled for a moment, then her face suddenly grew pale.

"Bell I have to go!"

"No Urd, you can't. You're in no shape to go outside. Please DON'T GO!"

"Bell I promise I'll come back. But right now *I have to go.*"

She reached out summoning Stringfellow and in an instant was gone to the storm.

"What's going on?" Keiichi asked sleepily as he and Skuld peered into the hallway.

"*Urd's gone.*"

"That's no problem," said Skuld. "I still have the Urd tracker woven to the front of Stringfellow. We can find her easily."

"We don't need to find her," replied Belldandy. "*I know where she's going.*"

Urd landed at the residence quickly rechecking the stone. But no matter which direction she walked it remained as black as night. Like a dead thing never alive. Urd turned to face the sea, her robes streaming behind her against the strong storm winds like the many prayer flags now gracing the residence. She crawled to the deserted porch sitting down despondently, burying her head in her arms trying to think.

"So you have returned Kami-sama!" said the rain soaked apparition behind her.

She jerked up looking at him. Takumi had of course told her all about their flag-preparing caretaker.

"Forgive me but it's been so long," the monk replied approaching. "What is it that troubles you?"

She put her head back down ignoring him.

But he had already guessed. "Where is Fudo-Myoo?" he asked.

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She didn't know what to say or how to say it. "That man is gone, dead now," she replied bitterly shaking her head.

"A god cannot die," Nobu said stubbornly coming to sit beside her. "Not so long as people truly believe in him."

"How I wish that were true," Urd said wiping her cheek she turned to look at the old man.

But the monk would hear none of it. "Is your faith in your companion so little? One of your kind should know better. Pray with me. Then we shall see."

"If I do will you leave me in peace?!" she cried miserably.

"Of course," replied the monk kneeling as the gusting winds passed over them.

"Very well, for the good it will do," she said somberly. "I've lain next to him, I've been everywhere he's been all these weeks. *Nothing*. And now something has changed in the stone. He is truly gone."

"When a god's power is dissipated they return to their true form. Meditate upon Fudo's true nature and you will find the path where he can be reached," advised Nobu.

Because she could think of nothing else to do Urd meditated, and hoped. But as the moments passed nothing happened and the stone's center remaining as black as ever.

"I am sorry kami," said the monk finally. "He is a god of fire. Perhaps he cannot reach us through the storm. Perhaps tomorrow," he nodded respectfully taking his leave.

For a long time Urd sat alone on the windswept porch, watching the shore as she pulled her cloak tightly around her. She closed her eyes trying to remember the details of his face, his hair, the first night he had looked at her in the candlelight.

'I come here to remember the connectedness of all living things. . . ' She opened her eyes looking to the waves, her heart beginning to race. Jumping from the porch she ran for the water diving in swimming frantically. Beyond the breakers now she let the turbulent water crash over her as she struggled and prayed. Prayed for what had once been in those dark waters. "Takumi I'm here. *I'm here!!!*" she sobbed, her voice barely audible above the storm. Though the sea gave no reply, the black waters around her immediately began to glow as the light burst forth. Once more a tanzanite radiance engulfed the

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stone causing it to burn with an inner fire. “*I’ve been so stupid*,” she cried through her tears.

Back at the temple Belldandy decided the time had come.

“Keiichi can I ask you -.”

“- I’ll go for the bike,” he said making for the shed. Indeed for the past several hours he had been expecting this moment.

“Shouldn’t you just go yourself sis? It would be a lot quicker,” said Skuld huddling under the blanket on Keiichi’s futon.

“I feel this journey will be a difficult one. I believe it will be easier if Keiichi comes with me.”

“Can I come too?”

“Please Skuld, stay here. Just in case Urd does return. I don’t want her to be alone right now. Keiichi and I will return as soon as we can.”

“I don’t like this place when I’m alone.”

“Banpei is here with you,” she said hopefully. After muttering something about Sentaro, Skuld shuffled off to sit in front of the TV.

It took them more than an hour with the bike in the rain to reach the Namegawa peninsula. “She’s down there,”

Belldandy said directing him. But as Keiichi turned off the main road she hesitated, looking uncertain from beneath her helmet. He reached out for her hand.

“Remember what we said. We’ll get through this *together*.” She nodded back bravely. “Okay.”

Parking the bike they approached shore on foot. Though Keiichi could see nothing Belldandy eventually pointed to a rock outcropping at the far end of the beach. “She’s down there by the rocks. Do you see her?” Sure enough, a hundred yards away Keiichi could just make out a form sitting at the end of a long promontory jutting out to sea. But as they drew closer Belldandy hesitated. “You go ahead Keiichi. I’m not sure she wants to talk to me right now. She’ll listen to you. Tell her we’ve come to bring her home.”

“Okay,” he replied continuing on alone down the storm-tossed beach. Approaching the rocks he saw her, sitting soaked and shivering just beyond the waves. He called to her. “*Urd!*” He sensed that she heard him yet said nothing, continuing to stare

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out to sea. Climbing the rocks however she spoke, though it was unclear whether it was to him or to herself.

"He knew. He knew from the first moment," she said her eyes searching the dark horizon. "I always thought it was some property of the stone. But it's not. It comes from the wearer's heart. It wasn't until I saw the sapphire glow in Belldandy's presence I began to understand. The tanzanite radiance was because of what I felt for him - and he knew it," she said quietly. "All this time I was so worried he was gone. But if you truly love someone they . . . *can never really go away,*" she sobbed shaking her head.

"Urd I've come to take you home."

"- I had so much regret inside because I never told him. But I did tell him, he *did* know, because it shone in the light of the stone. So I guess he really did know how I felt before -," she leaned forward closing her eyes trying to stop her tears.

"He didn't need some rock for that Urd," Keiichi replied firmly.

"Come with me now."

"Whether I leave this place or not is no longer important," she said turning to him.

"What do you mean?"

She climbed down standing beside him on the beach. "I mean don't worry about me any more Keiichi. Look there," she said nodding to Belldandy in the distance. *"There is your future.* The only one that matters. Go now and make it happen. For yourself, and for me. Be as happy as you two can be in whatever time you have left. Treasure every moment together, because the truth is *none of us* ever know how many there will be."

"I know Urd. *Thank you.*"

"Come!" she shouted to Belldandy.

Hearing her invitation Belldandy rushed forward. *"Urd I'm so sorry!"*

"No. You have nothing to be sorry about," she said putting her arms around her. Belldandy could hear in her voice she meant it. Taking hold of them Urd pulled them close. "Just be good to each other. That's all I want. I'm sorry if all that's happened interfered with that in any way."

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Together they took hands walking back toward the bike. As they did Belldandy caught Urd gazing back at the distant cliffs.

"Your house is up there isn't it Urd?"

"Yes," she replied wiping her tears.

"I'm sure that it was a beautiful house. I'm sorry I didn't get to see it."

"It was. Maybe I'll go back there someday," she said walking beside her. "You know I never told you this, but when we were young I always thought you cried too much. In those days I thought it was because you were weak. But now I know the truth."

"And what is that?" she asked taking her hand the way she used to in the old days.

"I believe it's because you love the things of this world so much," she said. "Now I think I understand how you feel." Silently Belldandy looked to Keiichi, but he knew already what she was thinking. "Well why don't you and Urd go on ahead? I'll bring the bike home myself."

"Are you sure Keiichi?"

"Yes."

Urd put her head to Belldandy and a moment later they were gone. In truth he was happy to see them go. Happy to think that they would be warm and dry by the time he got home. Though there was still much he did not know about goddesses, he sensed that now the three of them needed to be alone together for a while. So too he wanted time to himself on the long drive back to think about all Urd had said.

Over the days that followed Keiichi did his best to keep their spirits up. "Urd, the guys at the auto club have been complaining they haven't seen you lately," he would say.

"Should we go?"

Often Urd would smile. But always she would decline. For though she had grown stronger in many ways, the days for her had become a prison. A reminder of all the failures in her life; of all the missed opportunities. Secretly she wished she could be released from it. Though Belldandy, Keiichi, and Skuld did their best to comfort her and show her their love they knew there was little they could do to fix her broken heart. Knowing

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this Urd encouraged them to go on about their business. In truth she welcomed those occasions when they consented to her wishes, for it left her time to be alone with her thoughts, to cry when she needed to, and visit Takumi's grave at her leisure. All things better done in the absence of others. And so it was one fall afternoon as she sat alone beneath the blood maple that a second pair of watchful eyes began following her intently.

For several minutes the figure waited above patiently. *This is as opportune a moment as I will get*, she sighed. Carefully she touched down ten feet behind Urd with the sun setting at her back. She watched as Urd continued in quiet contemplation beside the stone marker.

"You're not still pining away for that *pet* of yours are you?" she asked rousing Urd from her reverie.

The goddess hesitated, but only for an instant. Then in a blinding burst of speed she struck with lethal fury. "*I'll kill you! I'LL KILL YOU!*" she screamed, claws sweeping in a frightening display of anger as the very air around her shuddered, striking with a viciousness only demons themselves possess. Beyond all control in rage, she struck at the target as she could, raw hate boiling in her veins. Catching Hild in the plexus Urd drove her through the nearest tree with terrifying force. The demon twisted but Urd sweeping past her defenses she taking hold of her again, reversing directions to smash her down once more, driving her to the ground with power that would have destroyed any lesser being. For Urd had studied Takumi's strategy of force re-direction well, and now applied it with maximum effect. For in her fury she sought not simply to destroy, but rather to inflict pain - the kind of pain she had been forced to endure every moment of every day these long weeks. Hild attempted to counter her, but Urd's ferocity and strength were more than she had anticipated. The furious punishment which now assailed her left her momentarily disoriented and off guard. She spent the next several minutes trying to fight off and untangle herself from Urd's all-out attack. Finally as Urd made a quick turn hitting her with an immense circular strike, Hild was able to get clear of her follow-up attack. Urd pounced but she was too anxious and Hild anticipated her,

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reflecting her force into a nearby tree so hard she nearly lost consciousness.

“Well, *BRAVO!*” Hild said smugly slowly rising to her feet. “I see not all the fight has gone out of you after all my dear.”

For her part Urd was not so quick to recover. *I fought her as hard as I could yet she barely seems injured*, she thought though in reality Urd’s attack had harmed Hild far more than she let on. But the leader of the demon realm had learned centuries before to never show weakness at any price.

“I just cannot believe all the energy you’re wasting on that deceased pet of yours,” Hild shook her head in amazement, now moving off to a safe distance. “Look at you moping around. How weak you’ve become!”

“It’s not something a *creature* like you could possibly understand,” Urd spat, her emotions returning to her. “You don’t know how much I -.”

“*Loved him?* That is what you were going to say isn’t it?”

Hild goaded sweetly imitating her voice. “Strange, you can say it now but you couldn’t seem to say it when he was alive. Why is that exactly? Is it because your love is sooo precious?” she said mockingly. Tears angrily welled in Urd’s eyes.

“Since you appear to be a slow learner let me tell you a few things about *love*. It can be useful against enemies but in truth is a costly luxury for oneself. In other words though useful, love is also fragile, transient, and disposable. *As you have no doubt come to learn*,” she said with grim finality.

Urd did her best to be strong; to stand up to her. But there was too much inside. Too many unspilt tears. Too much she could not let go in the world.

“*WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?!*” she screamed.

Hild rose above her now in all her terrible power. “*To educate you. To teach you that a demon can never truly be great if they give themselves completely to another. Because in that state there will always be weakness, uncertainty; and as such - inevitable pain.*”

“Not if one truly holds them in their heart,” Urd replied searching for something to say.

“Hmm, that sounds more like your half-sister than you. Being her usual bad influence I see,” Hild murmured dismissively.

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Urd's anger flared. "Of course, we may not be talking about *my* relationship," she hissed.

Hild winced as though struck. "Oh but we *are* talking about *your* relationship my dear. For what has your great love brought you? Upon where will you lie that pretty little head of yours now when you drift off to sleep? That cold tomb and your memories of what was can't possibly bring you that much comfort!" she snapped.

Urd trembled telling herself not to cry. Not in front of Hild. But the strain was beginning to show in her.

"Oh, missing him are we? Your little demon slayer? Perhaps you have some pictures of the two of you you can pour over. Maybe one showing the hopeful little smile you allow yourself when you curl up next to him after whispering sweet nothings in the darkness?" Hild said watching her intently.

Urd tried to rise for another attack but sagged under the weight of her own grief. Hild's words had sliced her open like knife. For among her many powers, the demon knew how to wield pain like a master calligrapher their brush.

In that moment Urd despaired for Hild's words had entered her heart. She knew now she could never hurt Hild as much as Hild could hurt her, and with ease. Overcome by the memories of all she had lost she fell to her knees. "*DO IT!*" she screamed in anguish. "*KILL ME! I'm ready,*" she pleaded. "*I don't want to go on anymore. I don't care!*" she sobbed laying her head to the ground.

Hild looked down at her in disgust. "*What a disgraceful display,*" she hissed. "*Get up!*" She watched as Urd lay unmoving below. "This won't do at all . . . not for one of my blood. Look at you - lying there in such a pathetic state. No - it won't do at all . . ." She sighed. "*Alright!*" she said after some length. *Would you like to see him again?*"

Urd remained with her head down, acting as though she had not heard. But Hild knew that she had. She repeated the offer. "*W-what?*" Urd said weakly looking up through her tears, fearing even to hope.

"Yes - that's right. You seem far too bereft without your pet to be of any use. And I can't have you behaving like this. So what do you say?" she asked leaning down.

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Urd stared at the ground forcing herself to rise. She looked up with fearful questioning eyes, glancing in the direction of Takumi's grave.

"*Oh!* Well I mean . . . certainly not *that* part," Hild said shaking her head slightly embarrassed."

Urd looked up at her miserably.

"I am speaking of the part which *does not* decay," she explained. "The part in which I believe *you* are most interested. His spirit . . . *his soul*," she murmured.

Urd's eyes grew wide in terror. "*You lie!*"

Hild smiled back easily. "Come, come now my dear, you didn't really think I'd allow such a golden opportunity to pass my by did you? I mean there he was, so *perfectly* laid out, placed right into my hands. And you up on the ridge calling out so - *desperately*. You don't think me so naïve as to not avail myself of such a situation when it arises do you?"

Urd felt began to feel sick, panic rising within her.

"I took him when I struck - at least the part which could withstand *my* power." Watching her daughter's growing look of dread her voice took on an air of venomous disappointment, "You think *I*, an expert in the desires of the heart didn't *know* what passed between you and he in the night?! I remind you that outside of your goddess stronghold there is little in this realm I cannot see - *particularly* on unconsecrated ground."

Urd began to blush.

"Oh yes my dear, I know you're not the kind to wear tokens next to your heart unless they come from one *very dear* indeed. You are after all *my* daughter."

"It's a lie!"

Hild shrugged comfortably. "Am I? I assure you I'm not. Search your feelings. Can you feel your friend anywhere up there?" she asked lazily circling her finger. "*I didn't think so*," she said piercing Urd with her violet eyes. "By the way, what exactly did your beloved pet look like the last time you saw him? I mean given the circumstances he must have been just *horribly* burned," she purred.

Urd shivered. *There wasn't a mark on him.* "What is it you want?!" she cried.

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“What *I* want? I should think it would be about what *you* want my dear. But since you ask, I want what I’ve always wanted - a chance to bring my daughter back to her true path . . . to take her rightful place at my side.”

“*And - ?*”

“-*And* you and your pet can do . . . whatever you want. What’s the problem? After all, didn’t you say that you and he were *all* that really mattered?”

Urd looked down biting her lip. “He would never agree to it.”

“Oh I’m sure you can convince him. After all . . . you are *my* daughter.”

“No, it’s more than that,” she growing stronger. “We promised each other we would never betray who we are. I – will never join you!” she said defiantly.

“Yes well . . . that’s a nice sentiment my dear,” laughed Hild.

“And of course it’s entirely your decision. I guess I’ll just have to find some *other* way of entertaining your pet over the next *thousand years* or so,” she said moving off.

“I - need time to think about it,” Urd said tugging at her sleeves.

“Oh of course dear. Take all the time you need,” she replied, watching as Urd turned to make her way back to the temple.

She had put up a good fight but Hild knew she had her.

Everything was going according to plan. Now it was just a matter of time . . .

“Hurry Keiichi! Before it melts!” yelled Skuld dragging him along.

“I told you we still have a few more items to get. Besides you could help carry some of this,” he said toting the ice cream with a collection of other assorted groceries.

“*No*, we don’t need anything else,” she insisted. “If Urd wanted something else she could have just come along. We can get the rest tomorrow, can’t we big-sis. Big-sis?” she called down the street. Ahead of them they saw Belldandy suddenly lean down pressing her hands to the wall.

“What is it Bell?” Keiichi asked coming to her side.

“*It’s Urd*. Something’s very wrong with Urd. Keiichi, Skuld and I should go home right now!”

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“Okay, I’ll see you there,” he said dropping the supplies into the sidecar.

Emerging in the tea room Belldandy and Skuld searched the house but saw no sign of Urd. When they located her moments later, she was quietly sitting on the temple roof watching the setting sun.

“She looks fine to me,” shrugged Skuld.

“I don’t think so. *Urd!*” Belldandy shouted up to her.

“Yes?”

“How are you?”

“I’ve had kind of a rough afternoon -,” she said leaving out all mention of Hild’s appearance, the offer or her own bruised ribs.

“I thought that might be true,” Belldandy nodded.

“Yeah it’s true alright,” she said coming to stand beside them.

“Bell can I ask you something?”

“Of course - anything.”

“Well it’s just . . . I just wanted to know if you can, you know, *feel his presence* up there anywhere,” she said trying to keep her voice calm.

Belldandy concentrated intently for several minutes before answering. “No, honestly I don’t. But that doesn’t mean anything Urd. You know how vast the heavens are. No one beyond the upper council could tell with certainty the placement or presence of any one particular spirit.”

“Of course. I was just curious.”

“I’m sure he’s there and that he’s at peace Urd. When the time comes, you’ll see him again.”

“Thank you, I’m sure you’re right,” Urd replied feeling a hollow ache in her stomach. For she knew now Belldandy was not nearly as certain as she appeared.

It was close to midnight when Urd rose from her bed quietly gathering the things she would need. Bundling them together she hesitated momentarily. *No, this is the way it must be*, she told herself. Moving down the hall she stopped at the first door and silently slipping inside. Coming to the edge of the futon she knelt down, gently kissing the sleeping form on the forehead.

“Whaa?” Skuld moaned sleepily.

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“*I love you Skuld,*” she whispered.

“Yeah - umm that’s good,” Skuld replied turning over drifting back to sleep. Urd went to the door and was gone. She did not say goodbye, or even look in on Belldandy that night before she left. For she knew that to do so would have robbed her of any determination to do what lay ahead. Arriving at the residence she called out in her heart to Hild as she always knew she could. Now it was simply a matter of time, of waiting until she chose to answer. *This may be the last time I see this place,* she thought. Looking to the walls she drew a quick final notation. But almost as soon as she began she stopped, realizing now how she truly wanted to spend her final moments. She took out the note writing quickly, attaching it to the cords of Stringfellow when she had finished:

Bell,

I’m sorry it had to end this way. But this is something I had to do. I know that you and Keiichi will be alright and take care of one another. I know I wasn’t always a good sister to you, and that at times I was a burden. But I want you to know Bell - you were always a good sister to me. Thank you for everything . . . most of all for being my friend. I wish you all the love and happiness you deserve.

P.S. I’m sorry I deceived you. But I couldn’t let you see what I was truly going through.

Your sister always, Urd.

A moment later Urd as surprised to see not Hild but Mara standing in the doorway, flanked by two additional first order demons. “*We have come for you Urd,*” said Mara in a voice that gave her the chills.

“I’m ready.”

Mara waved the others back entering the residence alone. “So this is it,” she said surveying the surroundings.

Urd said nothing. Though the response displeased her still Mara came forward. In a voice barely above a whisper she

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leaned close. “Urd are you sure about this? This isn’t something you can change your mind about you know.”

Urd folded her arms staring out the doorway to the sea. “How long have we known each other?” she asked solemnly.

“Too long.”

“-Then you know I mean it when I say if you ever speak to me again - *I will kill you.*”

“*Hey!* You know I didn’t have anything to do with his -.”

“-*Kill you,*” she repeated coldly. “You wanted a demon, *I assure that’s exactly what you’re going to get,*” she seethed pushing past her outside.

“*Yeah well technically we just were speaking tough guy -,*”

Mara muttered following her outside to join the others. As fog rolled in over the beach, Mara raised her hand to open the demon gateway. Urd took a long last look at the residence then stepped in. As unearthly light rose on all sides of them they were gone. An instant later they appeared in the core of the demon realm before Hild’s assembled legions.

Belldandy awoke from a dead sleep with Keiichi beside her in his room. “Urd!” she shouted running into the deserted hallway looking around.

“Why is that the only word I seem to hear these days?” Skuld complained rolling out of her bed. “I need a vacation from Urd! I’m even seeing her in my dreams now,” she yawned. “Though the dream version is nicer than the real one,” she mused.

“Bell?” Keiichi called sleepily sticking his head into the hallway. “Just come back to -,” he stopped spotting the eyes of a glaring Skuld. “Just come back to - *your own room* so you can get some rest,” he said nodding to Skuld, who neither changed position nor reduced the intensity of her glaring.

“*I can’t find her anywhere,*” she said racing outside.

“I think it’s okay Bell. I didn’t want to mention this, but sometimes I think she sneaks out to go, you know, *visit him.*” But Belldandy was not listening. Under the moonlight she reached her hand up to the heavens. “*Stringfellow!*” she cried. At first nothing seemed to happen. But as Keiichi and Skuld gathered on the porch they saw her turn expectantly to the

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southeast. A minute later Stringfellow bore down on the temple at terrific speed. In the instant it passed before her, Belldandy snatched it from the air like an arrow in flight. Keiichi realized there were times her power made even him shiver. "Show me your memories," she commanded. "I thought goddesses couldn't extract memories from things?" he said standing kneeling with Skuld.

"Stringfellow is hardly a thing!" she replied indignantly. Together they saw Mara entered the room eventually leaving with Urd. Skuld shuddered as a reddish background glow appeared a moment later from beyond the doorway.

"You don't think -?"

"*I don't know,*" Belldandy replied worriedly.

"Hey did you guys see this?" Keiichi asked untying the note from Stringfellow. Quickly Bell took it and started to read. But the natures of its contents were all too apparent as her hands began to tremble. "*Skuld!*"

"*No!*"

"Yes. She has gone to the demon realm," she said her hands dropping to her side.

"Can't we go get her? Didn't we do that before?"

"WHAT?! What are you talking about Keiichi!" yelled Skuld.

"When she was the Lord of Terror."

"She was a demon - on *Earth!*"

"So we can't go get her?"

"*IN THE DEMON REALM?! There is only one way a goddess enters or leaves there,*" Skuld replied cynically. "*As Hild's guest - or sealed.*"

"In other words -."

"In other words *Urd is gone,*" Belldandy said holding Stringfellow. "And there's nothing we can do to get her back."

Though she feigned indifference Hild had long awaited this day. Surrounded by her attendants she reclined comfortably on her throne as Urd was brought before her.

"*I am here,*" Urd said in a voice that sounded as though chiseled from stone.

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"And what do you expect for that?" Hild asked challenging her. "For you are in my house now -," she replied as the demons around her smirked.

"*You're right.* I don't expect anything. Certainly not for you to keep your word," she said impassively. "I came here only to show you that I fear nothing - least of all your minions," she said shoving them aside. "You may kill me now if you like. And you would be wise to do so. For I am ready for oblivion and would happily take any one of you with me." She sneered extending her palms appearing both magnanimous and menacing, "*The truth is - I don't care what you do anymore!*" Her fury was fearsome as she stood in the inner courtyard, an eerie fire alight in her eyes. None of those present doubted for an instant that she meant what she said, or would kill without hesitation. Those closest to her casually began to back away and even those at some distance slowly edged toward the nearest refuge. For this was hardly the first time Hild had attracted the wild, volatile or dangerous.

Above them Hild clapped her hands together laughing. "I'd expect nothing less from my daughter," she replied rising confidently. "*YOU SEE!*" she shouted to all those in attendance. "*THIS is the heart of a true demon! Give me twenty like her and our problems with the upper realm would soon be over!*" But her words seemed to have little effect upon Urd who continued to stand silently, looking into her eyes with a cold indifferent stare. A stare which secretly made even Hild nervous. "But I suppose you do deserve *some* reward," she said waving her hand bringing forth a purple luminous sphere. "*Here,*" she offered directing it toward her.

"What is this? This isn't a proper seal."

"Oh I assure you it is. And a particularly powerful one. After all I couldn't afford to lose so valuable an asset by say - having you attempt to escape and unseal it with the goddesses help now could I?" Her violet eyes glowed powerfully, "No, this seal could not be broken even if you stood within the inner sanctum of Yggdrasil itself my clever young administrator. Not that there's any danger you'll be returning there anytime soon is there black-wing? No, this seal is drawn from my own power. Your pet *will* remain there as long as I desire it. But

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you may *visit* him now if you like. Urd approached the sphere but herself afraid to touch it, afraid to finally know if it had all been an awful trap. But in the end she was more afraid not to know. That was what drove her forward. Placing her hands to its surface she now gained full knowledge of the truth. *She has him!* Immediately she felt his presence wash over her, once more aware of the reverberation of his heart. She had promised herself she would remain strong, particularly in front of these scum. Quickly she turned her away shutting her eyes, trying desperately to stop her tears as her hands clung to the sphere. It was hardly the view of their new recruit Hild wanted relayed to her fellow demons. "Perhaps this unseemly display is better handled in a more *private* setting," she observed waving her hand as night enveloped them.

"Tai!" Urd whispered in the darkness.

Immediately she felt the response, "Urd? *URD!*"

She put her head down rubbing the seal, "I've missed you - *so very much*," was all she could manage.

"And I you," he replied sounding immensely relieved. "I felt as though a great wave washed over me and I was lost, alone. Are you alright?"

"Yes," she whispered trying not to cry.

"The battle?"

"We won."

"Why can't I see you?"

"It's complicated. Hild has captured you."

"Then how are we able to speak?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm here as well."

"But if she captured you as well why haven't we - ?" There was a long silence as the realization sank in. When he spoke again it was the old Takumi. "Please tell me you didn't come here to find me. Just please tell me that *Urd*," he said sounding remarkably irritated for a sphere.

"I'm sorry. I - *I couldn't leave you in this place*," she said softly, her eyes searching the darkness.

"And now the cow has us both! Urd get out if you can. At least I'll know you're safe."

She shook her head. "That's no longer an option. And I had to come. *There were days . . .*"

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"I know Urd, *I know*," he said his voice softening. He sounded tired. "What will happen now?"

"She says if I do what she instructs -."

"No. I can't let you do that."

"We have no choice."

"*Wonderful*. We're in real trouble now," he said falling silent.

For several minutes there was nothing. "Tai?" she called finally.

"I'm thinking. Urd do you still have – *that item* I gave you?"

Panicked she looked up reaching for her throat. "*Of course!* I told you would never take it off," she said breathing a silent sigh of relief.

"Then I might have an idea. But it would be dangerous. And it would get ugly. *Real ugly*."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we'd have to fight dirty."

"Well that would just be terrible," she said a grim smile coming to her face.

"*I had a feeling you might say that.*"

The following evening Urd was again brought before Hild.

"Come, come, I have a gift for you," she said leading her through the inner courtyard to the front of the great hall. At the foot of the steps a cluster of demons gathered, surrounded by a much larger group. She turned expectantly to Hild.

"*They* are to be your first legion," she replied. "Assistants in your securing of the human realm."

"I see," Urd replied coolly.

The queen of the underworld came forward placing a hand to her shoulder, "Do this for me and you will see *much more* of your friend." As Urd began her descent down the steps to the group the crowd began to cheer. Growing up Urd had always been an outcast, or at the very least an undesirable to many in the heavens. But now as the crowd grew before her they cheered, calling her name, seeing in her a new power for the future. Raising her hands to them now Urd too could begin to see that future. A future where thousands of demons would eventually call her name, where she would have all the power and respect she deserved, perhaps even craved. Hild would not keep Takumi sealed forever, eventually he would be free and

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once that happened they would - create whatever future they desired. No one would stop or even question them. Yes, looking beyond the crowd now she could almost see that future . . . *almost*. She lowered her hands catching Mara's eye as she turned. "*Dammit* -," Mara muttered watching her go. Slowly she climbed the steps back toward Hild seeming to pace her strides. Half-way up she spoke, "It would be my pleasure to use them my lord, if only these minions were not such pathetic dogs!" As such kidding was commonplace in the demon realm many of those assembled began to laugh.

"Then you will just have to improve them," Hild rejoined from on high.

Urd tilted her head to one side. "Perhaps I could, if only their leader were not such a *pig*."

Any ongoing laughter quickly ceased as the demons began to look at one another questioningly. Those nearest Urd on the lower landing closed in waiting for any signal to attack.

But Hild merely smiled. "I don't think I heard you dear," she said leaning down from the top of the stairs threateningly.

"I said unless you're planning to go on a recruiting drive in the near future you'd do well to keep these dogs from my sight!" she hissed turning on those nearest her like a cornered animal.

"Perhaps this is your method of training," Hild suggested, giving her daughter one last chance at repentance.

"Goddesses do not command demons, *nor do they take orders from them*," she replied defiantly.

Hild's smile faded. "Careful. It would appear you need a lesson in hospitality my dear." At these words the demons closest to her attacked. But their assault only made the tanzanite stone around her neck glow more brilliantly.

Fighting back she burst forth with her power scattering them like toys. "Believe me, I'm utterly through being *careful*," she snarled. As the first group of demons fell five more, larger and stronger quickly encircled her. Though she was unable to defend against all their attacks she remained curiously unharmed, the stone's fire growing more intense with each passing assault.

"*BEFRIA!*" she cried releasing its power at her new attackers. The resulting blast echoed within the inner courtyard, taking

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demons from their feet as the shock wave fractured the surrounding stone. The scene was quickly becoming chaotic as now even senior demons began to back off wary of her assault. "If you think these simpering mutts you call subjects can intimidate me - *think again!*" she shouted turning between them.

"*Impressive.* Perhaps I should have a look at that little trinket," Hild said extending her hand. But as she attempted to do so the stone's radiance increased rapidly, sound beginning to emanate from inside its crystalline heart. Urd felt the pendant growing hot against her skin.

"Aaah!" Hild cried withdrawing her hand suddenly, unable to release it. "Impressive yes, impressive indeed. But if you think for one second that ancient bonding charm will protect you from *my* power, I assure you you're sadly mistaken. I believe it is time for you to learn your proper place here." She descended the stairs extending her hand as Urd immediately felt the grip of her tremendous power take hold forcing her down. The radiance of the stone now began to fill the entire chamber as Urd struggled to resist. A second later she turned, breaking free to stand once more.

"*This is one minion who won't be bowing to your will!*" she cried. "What did you think?! That I'd simply bow down and be your happy servant? That I'd be so overjoyed to see the soul of the one you destroyed whenever it pleased you I'd obey your every whim? Are you really that stupid?!" she screamed her indigo eyes beginning to glow.

Hild clenched her fists but her voice remained calm as she spoke, "*Urd, you are about to make a very serious error,*" she said as winds throughout the fortress began to moan.

But Urd had no intention of backing down. "You think I fear you?! I told you before *I'm ready to die!*"

"*Then perhaps you should taste what that is like!*" Hild shouted enveloping her in a fearsome firestorm as the surrounding demons ran for cover. Urd cried out in pain as the ferocity of the flame threatened to overwhelm her. Cut off from the world and all she knew in that moment she knelt down against the heat, focusing her mind to shut out the pain. Then with tremendous effort she rose, plunging hands into the

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fire. “*ELYSIA!*” she screamed as lightning burst from all sides of the chamber instantly vaporizing stone and suffocating flame in its shock wave. A moment later the figure loomed from the shadows and dust on the shattered stone steps.

“*She has the power,*” they whispered fearfully, “*to draw from the demon realm itself!*”

“Now you have what you desire!” Urd cried coldly coming into the light. “A demon vicious and without fear. Now I can truly give you the answer you seek!” she hissed, her face a mask of dark fury.

“URD -,” Hild warned threateningly.

“-As to whether I have love for my mother. That is what you *really* want to know isn’t it? *Well of course.* Of course I loved - *her.*”

Hild’s eyes went wild at the mention of Belldandy’s mother.

“-But as for you . . . I never loved you. *And I never will!*”

“URD!”

“I pity the cold dead thing you’ve become you shriveled old hag!”

In that moment Hild’s fury was unbound. She struck without thinking and without hesitation.

Urd dropped down keeping her hands low and together doing her best to consolidate her defense. For an instant the protection held before the necklace flared and exploded under the power. The freed energy arced back through the fortress at Hild who spun barely avoiding it. The power of the Demon Lord’s strike slammed Urd into the stone steps, her motionless body tumbling down into the gateway beyond. With no one left to direct her anger upon Hild screamed at those around her, “*Does anyone else have anything to say to me?!*” she shrieked in pain looking at the now empty spot. The surrounding demons cowered back in fear. When none answered she screamed, “Take a good look, for it should be clear to all by now that I will not hesitate to destroy anyone, *anyone* who opposes me!” she cried furious before her throne.

“Mistress?” Mara said slowly, looking up petrified.

“Does she *really* think this is over?” Hild continued ignoring her. “Oh no. I can and *will* do far more harm to her than the pain of death. For there are still those she loves. And I’ll start

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with that *pet* of hers. Oh I'll enjoy tormenting him over the next several decades," she muttered tossing back her robe "Mistress?" Mara offered.

"WHAT!" she cried reaching back to place her hand on the sphere behind her. Her hand touched the shelf just as she looked into Mara's terrified eyes. Instantly she whirled facing the seal. For where she had expected to find the sphere there lay now only rubble. Standing with her back to her subjects she quickly calculated likely scenarios. Turning back a moment later she was her usual relaxed self. "Well, seems their love wasn't quite so *indestructible* after all," she observed sweeping the fragments from the shelf to the floor. Around her relieved demons began to laugh nervously. "Clean that up!" she shouted to no one in particular. "-And someone bring back what's left of Urd. Depending on how much there is she might make a nice display for the lobby," she mused.

"*It would be my pleasure Lord,*" boomed a voice in the back as Mezzumura rose making his way to the gateway.

"*Excellent,*" murmured Hild.

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High on the windswept mountain among the barren boulder strewn field the body lay in the darkness. A moment later it stirred, feeling as though every fiber of its being had been torn and twisted. But pain no longer mattered to Urd. She raised her head searching for what she prayed would be there. Finally she saw it, thirty feet ahead of her on the left, a second form lay in the darkness. She struggled crawling forward slowly make her way. She stretched out her hand, finding that life was once more within him. Dropping her head to his shoulders she wept with tears of relief. "Thank you," she whispered looking up at the heavens. "*Thank you.*"

"Takumi we're out - *we're free*," she said pushing him over. But looking at him she gasped, for the face she had known was different now, his features darker, more sinister. Opening his eyes Urd saw they had become black, his hands drawn like talons.

"*TAKUMI!*"

"Urd." She recognized the voice as his but it sounded low, muffled, as though rising from the depths of great well. Slowly he rose to survey their surroundings. He appeared to see yet did not see; he spoke, but did not look at her.

"Where are we?" he murmured.

"In the mountains. Hild's power succeeded in breaking the seal. Its force . . . has returned you to corporeal form," she said tentatively reaching out her hand for his. He did not move or even seem to notice. He stood silent before his gaze was suddenly drawn north.

"What is it?" she asked.

"*They are coming . . .*," he muttered without emotion. A second later Mezzumura plunged through the portal. Urd moved landing the first strike, but in her weakened state there was comparatively little she could do. Pushed beyond her limit

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Mezzumura came quickly and without mercy. Unable to hold him off she quickly dropped to the ground unconscious.

“*NO!*” snarled Takumi rushing in as the two crashed to the ground. But like Urd, Takumi was no match for the demon’s superior strength. The massive influx of Hild’s power had allowed him to attain physical form but left him with little residual strength to face Mezzumura’s powerful onslaught. Though he fought back furiously the demon could not be overcome. Mezzumura quickly gained the upper hand smashing Takumi to the ground.

“Hmm, somehow this all seems rather - *familiar*,” he mused.

“Except this time I don’t think she’s going to come save you, do you?” he gloated watching Urd’s still form. Takumi continued to fight but he was now only a minor annoyance to the demon. “What’s the matter night crawler? I thought you were supposed to be tough?” he taunted pinning him to the ground. “Oh and don’t worry about your girlfriend -,” he hissed. “Hild’s expecting a corpse and that’s exactly what I’ll give her - *after* I’m finished.” The images in Mezzumura’s mind told Takumi all too well the horrible details of his plans for Urd. Takumi’s fought back but overwhelmed by the demon’s power his body sagged, then collapsed completely. The demon roared in fury, “You really think I’ll let your end be that easy? *After all the pain you caused me?!*” he cried leering down at him.

Takumi struck instantly using the only weapon left to him. His fangs caught Mezzumura by the throat clenching down, holding him in a death grip.

“*AAGH!*” screamed the demon. “*You stupid little -*” The wound was little more than an annoyance to Mezzumura. Both knew in seconds he would crush the life from him. “Is that the best you can do?!” taunted wincing from the pain. “*Pathetic!*” He redoubled his efforts to punch him into submission. As he did however, a strange feeling of tremulousness began to come over him. Slowly at first, the sensation was now growing stronger with each passing moment. The demon tried to shake him off but found he could not, and he dared not release a hand to do so. Worse still Takumi’s resistance was growing stronger, his hands tightening around his own. He attempted a quick

final blow aimed at crushing his opponent's skull. But with a whimper of defiance Takumi raised his arm to deflect the strike at the last instant. He punched once more but Takumi matched him, catching the fist in midflight. Both bodies now trembled from the force of their exertion, as neither had any illusion as to what the price of failure would be. Slowly however it was Mezzumura who was being pushed back, as Takumi now fought to bring his shoulders from the ground. "*No . . . no it's not possible!*" yelled the demon, forcing him down as the feeling permeated his body. Sensing his opportunity Takumi swept his leg up and around Mezzumura as the two tumbled, grappling. Breaking free they now rose to face one another on the bolder strewn slopes. For a moment each stood their ground eyes silently testing the measure of the other, each waiting to see what the other would do. But it was Mezzumura who moved first quickly darted to one side attempting escape. Yet Takumi had no intention of letting him go. In a bound he was beside him, bursting to the air hammering his fists at the center of his chest to send him crashing back to the ground, falling with such force Mezzumura thought his body had shattered. He struggled to rise but his opponent dropped down quickly executing a powerful reverse sweep cutting his feet from under him. Mezzumura frantically searched the dust but Takumi leapt from nowhere, striking him such force that he felt the bones shatter as he tumbled over and over into the field beyond. He struggled to move as the sinister figure now approached, stalking him like some dark god of the underworld. Aglow with demonic energy, something fearful seemed to flicker in his eyes, something savage and inhuman. "You are a messenger of Hild, are you not?" he asked coldly standing over him. "Yes," Mezzumura replied calculating his answer. "Good. Please give her a message for me," he asked politely. "What message?" Only when he looked into his eyes did he understand his opponent's true intent. But it was too late. Takumi struck instantly, mercilessly tearing him to pieces. When it was over he rose, brimming with demonic energy to stare upon the northeastern horizon. Buffeted by the mountain cold winds he cried with inhuman fury at the night sky. Then

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he turned, considering the silent form at rest on the slopes above. A moment later he was beside her taking her into his arms before running wildly into the forests below.

An hour later Urd moaned in the darkness, muttering as though awakening from a bad dream, “Takumi . . . *MEZZUMURA!*” She sat up with a start but saw no sign of either of them. She saw she was now lying in a small grassy meadow somewhere on the mountain’s lower east slope. The air around her seemed warmer now. Struggling to her feet she began to search the mountain terrain. Approaching the southeastern face twenty minutes later she spotted the outline of a lone figure, quietly seated at the edge of a cliff overlooking the lights of the distant Kanto plain below. It seemed to her they had been there for some time.

“*Takumi?*” she called uncertain. The figure cocked its head at the sound, slowly rising to face her. In Urd’s long life there had been days of both joy and sorrow. But this day, this one in particular, she knew she would remember forever. For what emerged from the shadows that night into the moonlight was none other than Takumi Sato. Not the dark fiend of an hour before, or even the being who had escaped Jufukuji but the man himself. For a long moment she could say nothing as tears of disbelief streamed down her face.

“*URD!*” he shouted coming down the slope.

“*TAI!*” she cried breaking into a run.

He caught her as she flew to his arms, together falling to the ground. For the moment she neither cared how or why, all she knew was he had returned to her. In those precious moments the night and heavens seemed close in around them, protecting them from the outside world. Takumi held her close staring up at the stars. “*I never thought I would see you again,*” he cried shutting his eyes, embarrassed by his own tears.

“*You said it would work,*” she whispered nuzzling him.

“Yeah - but I lied. I had no idea if it would work.”

She shoved him back at suddenly furious. “*WHAT?!*”

“Well what choice did you give me?” he shrugged. You said you wouldn’t leave without me. I assumed I’d probably be killed, but it might allow you to escape.”

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Her eyebrow twitched. "THAT'S IT! Next time *I'm* the one who'll be making the escape plan!" she shouted.

"Yeah alright I'll make a note of that - *next time*," he laughed, having no desire whatsoever for a follow-up experience. He lay back happily but then grew puzzled. "*Urd?*"

"*Yessss?*" she said narrowing her eyes at him.

"Are you alright? There's something wrong with your face," he asked peering up.

"Huh?"

"There are like - *marks on your face!*" he cried concerned.

It took her a moment to understand his words. She laughed shaking her head. "You mean you've never seen those before?"

"*WHAT?!*"

"No of course you haven't -," she muttered. "You are resurrected of the spirit now, and so see with the eyes of the spirit. You see things as we do now - as they truly are."

"*You mean you've always had those marks?!*"

She nodded knowingly. "Yes. They're a sign of my stature as a goddess."

"*Holy cow is there anything else I've missed?!*"

"Probably lots of things - you are a man after all. It kind of goes with the territory," she stated matter-of-factly. She thought a moment. "Actually there probably *is* something else you should know about me. *Come!*" she commanded as Elegance immediately sprang forth.

"WHOA!" he yelped jerking at the sudden appearance of the being. "What's that?!"

"This is my angel - World of Elegance."

"Aha! So you *are* an angel!" he accused.

"No. Elegance is a manifestation of my inner self. She works with me to support my higher powers."

Takumi looked over the beautiful yet fearsome being suspiciously.

"It's okay you can touch her," Urd encouraged amused by his hesitation. "Go on."

Takumi seemed reluctant. "Tell you what, I'll just put my hand here and if *she* wants to touch *me* then . . ."

She smiled as Elegance brushed against him, slowly taking his hand in hers.

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"Oh, she's warm," he said surprised. "It's like your touch."
"Well yes, what did you expect?" she shrugged. "*Elegance*."
At the call the angel dissipated. She lowered her chin to his.
"Should I . . . ask about Mezzumura?"
"Let's just say he had certain plans for you. Plans he won't be able to execute. *Ever*."
"*I see*."

"You have any idea where we are?"

She craned her neck searching the surrounding terrain. "If I had to guess I'd say we we're somewhere on the eastern face of Mt. Akagi. They must have realigned their primary gateway here following the battle. But I don't care about any of that now. Are you alright Tai? I mean really?"

"I think so. You?"

"I've definitely felt better," she replied sagging against him.

"But given the circumstances I can't complain."

"Good, that's good," he breathed rubbing her back.

She turned drawing her leg up suggestively. "So you're saying you're not tired?" She peered into his eyes.

"*Urd*," he cautioned glancing around.

"*What?*" she replied slyly.

"You know this is not exactly a private place."

She sat up looking toward the forest. She could indeed now sense the presence of others nearby. "What is this place?" she asked.

"I think we're next to some sort of campground."

"*Camp-ground?*"

You know camping, a place where people set up tents and sleep outdoors."

She considered the information. "Doesn't *sound* like much fun. Is it possible for us to obtain one of these ten-ts?"

"That's not usually the way it works."

"Hmm, leave it to me. You stay here."

Mr. and Ms. Ogata had looked forward to spending time with their daughter Hijiri to show her the wonders of the out of doors. Unfortunately Hijiri did not seem to share their enthusiasm spending much of her time commenting how boring the forest was and how she wished something exciting

Light

would happen. And so she was not displeased when, as they sat around the campfire discussing what they might do the next day, the strangely dressed visitor suddenly stumbled into camp.

"Hello there camper-*persons*," she said announcing herself to the stunned family. "How are you . . . all?"

"Umm, *dear*?" Mrs. Ogata said looking to her husband.

"Daddy, an angel!" Hijiri cried happily.

"Umm, yes well . . . I see your tent over there is not presently occupied. I was wondering if I could borrow it?" Urd asked hopefully.

"*Pardon me*?" Mr. Ogata said looking up at her from across the campfire.

"Oh don't worry, I only need it for *a little while*," she whispered trying to placate their mutual looks of concern. The revelation did little to help her case.

"*Did you just come down from heaven*?" Hijiri asked excitedly.

"Miss I think you'd better go," Mr. Ogata demanded finally.

"Oh alright then -," Urd huffed marching off into the night.

"Angel don't go!" cried Hijiri.

At her departure the girl quickly returned to the evening's main activity of poking the campfire vigorously with a stick. "When I grow up I want to be an angel just like her!" she proclaimed.

"Dear when you grow up I certainly hope you don't become an *angel* like that. Honestly, these college kids seem to get worse every year," Ogata grumbled to his wife.

To Urd's very pleasant surprise the next morning found her warm and comfortable. "Ohh the ground here is so soft," she muttered rolling over.

"That's because you're sleeping on a mattress Urd," Takumi said matter-of-factly lying next to her.

She opened her eyes. "*What*? Where are we?"

"In a tent, as you requested."

"How did we get here? And why don't I remember it?"

"I think the answer to both questions relates to the large collection of college students we came across late last night at the lower end of the campground. They're up here for some yearly sporting event and were in the midst of having a huge party when we arrived. Given the events of last night we were

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both definitely in the mood for a party by the time we arrived - and so *somebody* did a fair amount of drinking,” he said.

“It still doesn’t explain how we got the tent.”

“Ahh, well it seems there were some last minute changes to several of the sleeping arrangements once the party began. So I convinced them to let us use one of the vacated tents. Given the impression you made last night it wasn’t very hard.”

At that moment they heard a voice call from outside, “*Ryuchi, you in there man?*”

“No - Sato residence,” Urd replied cheerily nuzzling him. But then she noticed the rays of sunlight streaming in through the open flap of the tent.

“Takumi!”

“Yeah I see it. Don’t worry. I seem to be fine.”

“How do you know?”

“I went outside about an hour ago to see the sunrise. *Very beautiful*. Though it still doesn’t compare with you.”

She inched closer. “Have I told you you look even more handsome in the sunlight?”

“Have I told you I can still see those symbols on your face?” he said kissing her forehead. Exiting the tent that morning they were greeted with claps and cheers from a number of the nearby college students.

“Why are they doing that?” she asked.

“Look how you’re dressed.”

“I always dress like this.”

“Yeah but they don’t know that. I also think we were a bit loud last night in some of our victory celebrations. Oh look, you already got some fans,” he nodded, pointing to a knot of college students busy ogling her.

She waved back easily. “What’s everyone getting ready for?”

“I asked about that this morning. Seems most of them are from Tokyo University, up here for some big motorcycle race through the upper reaches of Mt. Akagi.”

“Is the Nekomi Tech team racing?”

“Who?”

“Keiichi’s school.”

“Oh. *Hey -*,” he shouted to a passing student. “Is Nekomi Tech here?”

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"I thought you said you were from Tsukuba?" replied the student.

"Yeah but we support Nekomi Tech!" shouted Urd.

"*Traitors*," cried several U of T students behind them cried good-naturedly.

"*Definitely*," replied Urd hugging Takumi.

"The various university teams are camped out all over the mountain," said one of them. "I think the Nekomi Tech team camped out last night near the starting line at Miyosawa, over on the far side of the mountain."

"*Miyosawa* huh?" Urd pondered mischievously.

"You guys do this often?" asked Takumi.

"Every year we race from Miyosawa on the south face of Mt. Akagi to the shrine and caldera lakes on top, then out and down the north face to Takanosa. Miyosawa to the summit is about ten miles and from there to Takanosa is a little under eight so we can do a number of circuits per day."

"Well that sounds - *hey where are you going?*" Takumi asked as Urd disappeared down the hill.

"*Arranging transportation -*," she waved joining a group of students gathered at the bottom. After a few minutes of discussion, Urd and Takumi found themselves riding in the back of a pickup truck with a throng of college students headed for the top of the mountain. For more than an hour they traveled around the base of the mountain before reaching the main road extending up the mountain face to Miyosawa and the summit. Along the way they spotted members of a number of teams busily securing the roadway in both directions. As it reached the summit the truck pulled off the main road stopping along the far side of lake Akagi-Ohnuma. Piling out with the rest of them Urd took hold of his hand. "Did you see the look on Tamiya and Otaki's face as we passed them? I think they recognized us!" she exclaimed.

"Who, the two big guys dressed in unitards out in the middle of the road yelling like maniacs? Yeah, they were kind of hard to miss."

"Yeah you know Tamiya and Otaki, the ones who dug -." She stopped suddenly.

"Huh?"

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“Nevermind.- *it’s nothing*,” she squeaked.

“They’re from Nekomi Tech?”

“As are some of the other maniacs around here.”

“And Keiichi and Belldandy?”

“Well I didn’t see Keiichi on the way up, but I feel we’ve been getting closer to Belldandy for some time now. Unless I miss my guess she’s – *yes*, over there. Do you see her?”

He could just make her out half a mile ahead on the other side of the road dressed in a beige jacket. She was standing quietly among the trees above the rest of the crowd, her back to the summit.

“And *there’s* the little troublemaker,” Urd said pointing toward the edge of the lake. “You see her? Down by the roadway?”

Skuld was considerably easier to spot. She was standing at the edge of the track speaking excitedly with a girl he recognized as Keiichi’s sister.

“Should we go and say hello? I mean considering we’re back from the demon realm and all? Though come to think of it we didn’t bring any presents or anything.”

“Not just yet. We’ll see them soon enough. I want to have you all to myself for awhile,” she said leaning back, drawing his arms around her. “Besides they’re here at the race. Maybe they don’t even know I’m gone yet.”

As the contest got underway Urd and Takumi cheered with the rest of the crowd for whoever seemed to be passing by at the moment, the sound echoing as each group of riders approach up the southern face from Miyosawa. Reaching the level of the summit, the pitch of the engines changed as each group of riders rose then disappeared behind Mount Jizo-dake before darting out the left side of the pass. Passing between them on their right, they then shot down the straightaway bordering the eastern edge of lake Akagi-Ohnuma and the Mt. Akagi shrine, before once again dropping into a series of hairpin curves beyond the north end of the lake. Taking the last turn they dropped out of sight descending the backside of the pass toward Takanosa. As they were racing in groups ten minutes apart, it was difficult to for Urd and Takumi to know who the overall leader was at any given moment that morning.

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However as the second group came into view Takumi thought he saw a shape he recognized.

“Urd look. Is that Keiichi?!”

“Yep that’s him,” she said watching the familiar *K1* insignia on his jacket flash past as he headed for the shrine.

“They’re fast. He’s riding well.”

“Yeah but look at Bell,” she said nodding. Takumi saw she had moved down to a spot overlooking the treacherous hairpin curves, clasping her hands silently in front of her as Keiichi wove his way back and forth before accelerating out along the north face. “Looks like she has nothing to worry about,” he commented as the bike dropped out of sight toward the back end of the course. At the side of the road he saw Skuld making a rapid series of notations on her pad. Above her Belldandy had turned and was now watching the mountain summit in the direction of last night’s unpleasantness. “Urd do you see that? You think she knows we -?”

“More likely she senses the gate,” she replied. “I would guess we came out about a mile from where she’s standing on the other side of the peak.

“Maybe she senses demons. Do you think they sent more through?”

She shook her head. “I don’t sense any - and I know my demons,” she smiled leaning back to kiss him.

“Funny.” Watching the successive rounds of racing that morning it was clear Keiichi was having very a good day on K2. Not all racers were so fortunate. As Keiichi passed the last hairpin on his third and final heat of the day, two riders behind him collided careening off the road. Alerted by the sound and smoke behind him Keiichi swerved sharply returning in the direction of the crash.

“Urd!”

“Bell’s on it,” Urd replied as they watched Keiichi rush down into the flames, emerging a moment later with the injured biker. To the amazement of all both men appeared miraculously uninjured. As the onlookers gathered to check on the two Takumi saw Belldandy and Skuld race over to hug Keiichi. “She’s got a good man there,” he murmured watching the scene.

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"I know the feeling -," she teased tugging him along. "C'mon, let's see if we can't find some transportation home." True to her word half an hour later they were rearranging blankets and sleeping bags making room in the back of the pickup truck for the long ride back to town. Heading down the mountain the truck's gentle sway soon rocked Urd to sleep as they traveled the road back beyond the confines of Hachioji over the next several hours. Takumi lay back enjoying the quiet solitude, happy to feel the warmth of the afternoon sun on his face and Urd asleep in his arms. He tried to recall the last time he had known either. A part of him hoped that the ride would never end but all too soon they had said their goodbyes to the group and were climbing the familiar steps up to Tariki Hongan temple.

"Did we arrive before them?"

"Looks that way. Well I don't know about you but I could definitely use a long hot bath," Urd said disappearing into the house. Alone now Takumi ventured out onto the grounds of the temple. In the late afternoon sun it felt as though he had not seen them in a long time - and never so quiet. Half an hour later as he sat on the veranda he heard rumbling behind the temple as members of the Nekomi Tech auto club dropped off Keiichi, Belldandy and Skuld. He waited quietly, wondering how they would react when Skuld came prancing around the corner. "*Urd says you have something of mine,*" he said coming up behind her as she stared down at the pond. She froze, turning in horror.

"And where is your robot friend?" he added for good measure. She continued to stare back wide eyed. "*AAAAAAGH!*" she screamed making for the safety of house only to crash into Urd as she came out to the veranda.

"No you're not seeing ghosts. It really is *us* you little pest," Urd said feigning indifference as she dried her hair with a towel.

"*I don't know, I thought I heard Skuld -*," Keiichi called coming around the corner still dressed in his racing leathers. He looked at the entryway, taking in Urd casually leaning against the door.

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“*BELLDANDY? You really need to get out here!*” he cried. A second later the goddess flew around the corner to spot her sister at the door.

“URD!” she shouted taking a step toward her.

“*Hello Belldandy,*” said the low voice beside her. She stopped in her tracks, turning to see the figure of Takumi Sato before her on the porch.

“Mr. Sato!”

He stepped down to her. “Given everything that’s happened I don’t think you need -.” To everyone’s amazement Belldandy rushed forward immediately throwing her arms around him tightly. Takumi stood by awkwardly, tentatively hugging her back as he threw Urd a curious glance. For her part Urd merely shrugged returning his puzzled look. Still Belldandy continued to hold him whispering. Their embrace went on long enough Keiichi seemed to have developed a dry cough.

“Hey don’t I get a hug too?” Urd complained finally.

“Of course Urd,” Belldandy said releasing him. The men shook hands as Belldandy put her arm around Skuld and together they all went inside.

That evening each told their story, most significantly Urd who now described (as least some) details of Hild’s visit as well as her departure, descent and eventual escape from the demon realm; relating Hild’s unintended fracture of her own seal. She was somewhat more vague about the events on Mt. Akagi as was Takumi, except to relay that Mezzumura would not be bothering them again.

“Mt. Akagi? Keiichi said looking up. We just got back from a race there.”

“*Really?*” Urd and Takumi replied together.

“How did the bike perform? Was it too heavy?” said Takumi.

“No, it did pretty well. I came in third overall.”

“That was only because of Keiichi’s racing. My engineering was perfect,” announced Skuld pointedly.

“-And because they couldn’t use Keiichi’s time for the third race,” Belldandy reminded her.

“Oh? And why was that?”

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"I was disqualified for that round," he replied, feeling no need to mention the injured biker or his rescue. Urd smiled holding Takumi's hand.

For her part Belldandy described finding Urd's note and their actions since her departure. By the time the first stars of evening had appeared each had told their story. With important one exception. No one had mentioned anything regarding a certain red maple standing behind the temple. Takumi did notice they seemed a bit uncomfortable as he relayed his view of the battle and his subsequent meditative state. Reading their faces he tried to lighten the mood. "Until I heard Urd's voice I didn't really know where I was."

"Let's face it," Keiichi said relieved, "*-we all knew where you were.*" The two men laughed until Takumi looked up puzzled. "Umm . . . what do you mean exactly?"

Keiichi's eyes grew wide. He looked to Belldandy panicked.

"Tai, there's something in all the excitement I - really didn't have time to tell you," Urd said slowly.

"Oh? What's that?"

She began to say something but seemed uncertain how to continue. Belldandy explained that many things had happened but then she too fell silent. Looking at the silent faces around the room Skuld finally piped up. "You died. Oh and we buried you -," she added taking a bit from her cookie.

"What?!" he said imagining it as some sort of joke.

"Yeah, you're still back there," she nodded.

"WHAT?!!"

"*Skuld please be quiet,*" Keiichi urged hushing her, sorry for bringing the matter up.

"*Well it's the truth!* I made a nice headstone and everything," she complained.

Takumi looked to Urd stunned.

"Yes . . . *it's true,*" she replied finally. "Your - 'physical' being was destroyed in the battle. So you were brought here, to the temple."

"You're . . . *kidding,*" was all he could say. Urd shook her head quietly. Only now did he begin to understand. He grew pale. "Well, how long?"

"Today is October the 22nd," replied Belldandy.

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"FIVE WEEKS! Urd I need to speak to you - *outside*," he said leaving them. After a moment Urd rose to follow.

"Should we come with you?" asked Belldandy.

She shook her head walking out. She found him at the edge of the courtyard on the verge of tears.

"*It's alright -*" she said holding him. "You are reborn of the spirit now."

His head rose looking back at her incredulous. "*I'm not upset for myself you idiot!* You thought I died?! You had to . . ." He stopped unable to speak. He couldn't even imagine what she must have gone through over the past weeks.

"Yes, there was a ceremony and I . . . I placed you in the ground," she said trying not to cry.

He looked down shaking his head, his voice pleading, "Urd I'm sorry. *I'm so, so sorry -*"

She stood beside him. "It's okay . . . *just please don't do anything like that ever again, alright?*" She smiled back weakly. He could feel her shivering.

"So I'm buried out there somewhere?"

She nodded. "Not far from here."

"Where?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't even want to think about it."

"I hear you," he acknowledged looking up at the night sky.

"But there's one thing I still need to ask you. If you thought I was gone, *really gone*, why did you accept Hild's offer? You must have known it was likely a trap."

She said nothing but the look in her amethyst eyes conveyed volumes. Takumi took hold of her, no longer able to hold back his tears. "*What did I ever do to deserve you?*" he whispered hugging her as though he would never let her go. For a moment they nestled under the stars until -

"*HEY*, how long are you guys going to be out there? It's getting kind of boring watching you you know," shouted the small voice from the porch. They turned to see Belldandy and Keiichi in the doorway, each with an arm around Skuld.

"No, no," urged Belldandy quickly. "You two stay out there as long as you like."

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“Hmm, well at least *she* seems to have warmed up to you,” Urd mused continuing their embrace. “By the way what did she say to you earlier?”

“*Oh*, she said if it didn’t work out between you and me she’d be happy to – *ooph!*” Takumi dropped to her knees in response to Urd’s playfully hard punch.

“Such a relief for me to know your terrible sense of humor survived intact. Now about that conversation?”

“She said she knew if anyone could bring you back from the demon realm, it would be me.”

“Aww, that’s sweet. Completely untrue of course, but still sweet.”

“Well it’s good to see so little has changed in my absence. *Now let’s go inside*,” he said tugging her.

“Why?”

“*To make sure nothing else has changed.*”

As she so often did these days, the next morning Megumi arrived at the temple in time for breakfast. “*Hello Megumi-san!*” she heard Belldandy call from the kitchen. Ducking into the tea room she was surprised to see her brother already at the table.

“*Hey Kei*, you sure look like you’re in a good mood this morning. Still thinking about the race?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all. Do you remember that friend of Urd’s?”

She nodded politely her face growing somber.

“Well it seems he’s come back to us.”

“*WHAT?!* Keiichi what the heck going on?!”

“*Hard to explain* would be an understatement. I’m not sure I really understand myself. But the fact of the matter is everyone’s in a pretty good mood.”

“Oh my gosh what about Urd? Does she know?!”

“Umm – *yeah*. I think she’ll be sleeping in late today.”

“*I most certainly will not Mr. Morisato*,” said the voice from the outer hallway as Urd strolled in at that moment looking very relaxed.

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A moment later she was followed by Skuld who looked considerably less so. "Well I'm glad to see *somebody* around here got a good night's sleep," she bellowed glaring at her. "What, didn't you sleep well Skuld? Because I certainly did." "How could anyone in this house sleep with all the racket coming from your room?!" she cried.

Keiichi and Megumi looked at one another doing their best not to smile. "*Heh, heh, heh,*" Megumi murmured stirring her tea. Urd looked back at them indignant, "*Oh come on guys, get your minds out of the gutter!* He's been nocturnal all this time, he's still getting used to a normal schedule."

"Oh . . . *sorry,*" they replied in unison feeling foolish for jumping to conclusions.

"Well I should hope so - ,," she continued, picking up her tea marching down the hall. "*Heh, heh, heh,*" she muttered stopping at the kitchen. "Bell, can I talk to you for a minute?" Her sister turned from preparing breakfast, she herself looking more relaxed than she had in weeks. "Sure Urd, what is it?"

"Well there's something I wanted to discuss with you. Something I didn't mention last night," she said biting her lip. Belldandy listened as Urd described Takumi's appearance immediately after exiting the gateway. When she'd finished Belldandy replied, "Yes, I thought it was something like that." "*You did?!*"

"Yes. Given the events you describe it was the only thing that makes sense. A direct transfer of Hild's power is the only thing which could have broken her own seal and opened the gateway. The enormous infusion of her power through your protection is what allowed Mr. Sato's energy to achieve its present form."

"But his appearance at the gate. Do you think he's . . . okay?" Belldandy thought a moment, looking out the window to watch as Takumi caught up with Skuld in the courtyard. Soon they fell in line alongside one another beginning to practice their control abilities.

"They seem to be getting along well," she observed.

Urd came to stand beside her. "Yeah - *it's weird.*"

"Not really."

"Why do you say that?"

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“Because basically they’re on the same level.”

Urd had never thought of it like that. But of course she was right. Despite his strength, Takumi’s abilities were actually quite limited, confined largely to objects he could see directly.

“In some ways they are going on the journey together, encountering the same joys and difficulties. I believe that is why they are getting along.”

“Yes, but do you think he’s - *okay*?” Urd persisted.

“I sense that he is. What he received from Hild was power but power alone. Our form is not dictated by our power, but by our spirit. Just as the path of a river does not determine the nature of its waters but rather the heart from which it flows. What I believe you witnessed on Mt. Akagi was Takumi’s attempt to settle the nature of the energy he received; which it appears he was able to do. Though he may retain traces of his past, I believe that power now resides under his control.”

“Thank you Bell,” she said turning to leave. But she had no sooner done so than she spun on her heels.

“*THAT* was why you were hugging him so tight when you saw us! *You were checking to see if he was really okay!*”

Bell shrugged continuing to hum as she stacked the dishes.

“Well what would you have done if he *wasn’t* okay?!” she demanded.

Belldandy looking outside narrowing her eyes. “Certainly looks as though we’ll have nice weather today,” she observed. *Bell, sometimes you give me the chills,* thought Urd.

In the happiness at the days that followed Urd began to see joy in things she never interested her before. Things which had seemed boring and unimportant only a year earlier now seemed somehow vibrant and exciting. And so it was one day as she knelt outside the western temple wall looking at wildflowers she suddenly began to feel an all too familiar sensation. She turned quickly to see Hild’s ominous form standing easily atop the wall above her.

“What do you want?!” she shouted immediately on guard.

“*Me?* Oh -,” her eyes scanned the temple grounds, “I just wanted to see how my favorite daughter is doing, as well as her . . . *companion,*” she said pacing the wall. “That is what’s

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happened isn't it? You and your pet managing to break free with that little ruse? Oh and by the way I seem to be missing a demon."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, unless you're somehow trying to tell me I'm smarter than the ruler of demon-kind. As to your missing assassin perhaps you could put his face on a milk carton, not that I imagine it'll generate much response. Something tells me you'd considered what might happen to him long before you ever let him go. As for myself, I have no plans to call upon you in Hell anytime soon. Please do me the same courtesy," she snapped paralleling her mother's movements.

From the corner of her eye Hild saw Belldandy now appear in the temple courtyard. Quietly she stood at the edge of the walkway listening for any sign Urd might need assistance, her sapphire eyes burning intensely in the midday sun. Turning to her side Hild scanned the forest beyond looking for any sign of Urd's companion.

"You wanted to see me and you have. *Now go!*" shouted Urd.

"Well, to be perfectly honest -," she said lowering her voice, "you present me with something of a problem. You see I can't exactly have you *and* your companion wandering free. Not after everything I've said. I mean what *will* people think? They might lose confidence in me -," she said flashing her a menacing smile.

"You could do with a little less confidence," Urd hissed moving to her side as she prepared for the coming assault. Behind them Belldandy materialize her staff as Skuld came to her side to join her. Hild also felt, but did not yet see, the impending arrival of Valkyries. Strolling along the top of the wall she now turned to speak to Belldandy directly.

"Do we really need to make a scene here, especially in front of children?" she said, her eyes falling upon Skuld. "I mean would just *hate* to see any *innocents* get caught up in any unpleasantness."

Belldandy took a step closer to Skuld but made no other movement.

"As a goddess first-class I order you to depart this place at once!" she replied fiercely.

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"I don't really think you're in a position to order me anywhere," Hild said continuing stroll beside Urd atop the wall. "The fact of the matter is my dear Urdy I need some kind of offering in order to leave you in peace. I'll make it simple. I'll accept either you, *or him*." Urd clenched her jaw now understanding the true nature of her visit. "Oh, I know how attached to him you are, but given all that's happened I think it's more than fair. After all, I *never* said you could take him away or that I would return him to you. Be reasonable. Give him to me and be done with it. I promise I'll let you visit him whenever you like. Believe me in the fullness of time there *will* be others."

Urd felt her heart racing as she prepared to strike. But then she heard her sister's cry from the other side of the wall, "There is no way you are taking him from this place!" Hild turned to see Lind and two other Valkyrie had now joined the growing group in the courtyard. *My but that Lind is a quiet one when she wants to be*, she thought. *I'll have to remember that*. The look in the Valkyrie's eyes told her that she was more than ready for a fight.

Urd walked ahead but Hild kept pace with her atop the wall as they moved under the cool boughs of the great oak to escape the midday sun. "You expect me to give you an answer just like that?" she said crossing her arms. "It's not fair asking me to make such an important decision all of the sudden. I need time to think. Besides, I have a feeling your time here almost up. You should leave - *while it's still possible*," she threatened. But Hild merely laughed feeling immune to such threats.

"Come now, I grow tired of this stalling. Let's get down to businesses little one. It's you or him. And believe me, if you think your friends assembled on the other side will change the outcome - *you are sadly mistaken*. So which will it be dear, you, or him?" She leaned down her voice becoming dangerously impatient. "*YOU - OR - HIM?*"

"*YOU!*" cried the voice beside her. Hild flinched but it was too late. Takumi's bite caught hold as he dropped from the overhanging limb, the two crashing off the tiles atop the wall before hitting the ground on the far side. Normally Hild would have removed such an irritant with ease, but her surprise and

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awkwardness of their position worked in Takumi's favor for the moment. So too as she thrashed at him they seemed to share a strange connection, pain reverberating in her own mind. *Why did I not sense him?* She began to feel lightheaded as Takumi's eyes turned black from the enormous influx of power. But just as quickly he willingly released her, dropping down, his face drawn with dark energy. Stumbling Hild threw a frenzied strike quickly shunted aside by Urd and Takumi's combined power.

"What is it that concerns you?" Takumi asked politely, almost mockingly taking a half step toward her. "I only wanted to say hello - when I heard how much you *missed us*. And perhaps to provide some small token you could remember us by -," he said placing his hand to his neck in imitation of the spot where Hild now carried a wound. The demon lord sprang back quickly raising her hand to her throat. For it had had been some time since anything had penetrated *her* flesh. Takumi eyed her wondering if even when fully healed it might not leave some small reminder of the day's encounter. He paced before he now neither approaching nor retreating, "Is it true you need us because you're worried about your standing in Hell? If so perhaps it's time for new leadership -," he suggested his eyes dark with venom. "After all, I can see how one might become addicted to the suffering of others," he said muttered staring at her intently.

Hild dropped her shoulders stepping forward.

"If you wish to continue this by all means let us do so," he replied lightly. "*For I'm feeling strong today*. Besides, to tell you the truth - *you taste good*," he whispered.

Hild scowled clearing her head. She sensed the others approaching now from the far side of the wall. "We'll continue this another time -," she promised in a voice that would make any sane person shiver, fading to the shadows with a simple wave of her hand.

Urd grabbed for him. "Are you alright?"

"I think so. Still a bit shaky though."

"Is it true what you said? Could you have taken her?"

He laughed the color beginning to return to his eyes. "*Are you insane?! I see now more clearly the true nature of goddesses*

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and demons. Each of you are connected through your own unique stream of energy, some modest and intermittent; others robust and immensely powerful. In the instant I was connected to Hild I saw what she is surrounded literally by oceans of power. I doubt I could absorb a fraction of it if I had a week.”

Back in the courtyard the sudden attack on Hild and her disappearance behind the wall drew cries of surprise.

“What was that!” cried Lind.

“Tanuki! (raccoon dog),” Keiichi shouted quickly.

Lind turned to eye him suspiciously.

“BIG TANUKI!” Keiichi tried again hoping his enthusiasm would make the conjecture sound more convincing.

Amused though she was at the thought that Hild may have been attacked by a rabid tanuki, she continued to stare at the vacant spot atop the wall. “I only saw it for an instant but - *was that Takumi Sato?!*

“Umm, well it’s kind of involved,” Keiichi began.

“I’m sure -,” she hissed casting a wary glance in Belldandy’s direction. She jumped to the top of the wall coming down on the far side behind Takumi and Urd.

“Oh look who’s here,” Urd announced, clearly less than pleased at the Valkyrie’s sudden arrival. “If you’re going to stand there could you please lower your axe? For some reason it seems to make Takumi nervous,” she observed.

Lind appeared not to hear, stepping forward to take his hands.

“It can’t be,” she muttered in disbelief. “I held you in my arms -,” she said slowly raising her hand to his chest.

“Trust me it’s not there -,” Urd snapped quickly stepping between them. “The part you carried around is still -.”

“Did I miss something?” interjected Takumi.

“I may have left out a few minor details of your burial,” Urd replied waving her hand.

“You’ve come back then,” Lind said continuing to stare.

“Yeah, yeah it’s him, no need to get sappy about it,” Urd growled, acutely aware she was still standing far too close for her liking.

Recalling the content of their last conversation and noticing the intensity of Urd’s continued glaring Lind replied, “Given that

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you are both . . . unharmed, I will take my leave.” And departed without further ceremony.

“Yeah you do that,” hissed Urd. “*And stay up there choppy,*” she said watching her go.

Of Love and Goddesses

With all that had happened, the members of the Morisato household urged Urd and Takumi to stay put - at least for the time being. On a morning soon after Keiichi passed the door to Urd's room, glancing in on them as they slept. He was amazed how Urd, a goddess who frequently caused more than her fair share of trouble could look so innocent while she slept. Somehow she seemed younger now, almost child-like as she lay curled up in front of Takumi. *Why is it so easy for them, and so hard for -*

"Just look at those pervs!" demanded the voice below him also peering through the doorway.

"Skuld they're not doing anything wrong."

"Oh of course you'd say that Keiichi Morisato! I know your plan. You'd like that kind of thing to become commonplace around here. Wouldn't you?"

"Sleeping?"

Skuld turned on him unamused. "You can forget about it mister. If you think for one minute I'm going to let this place become a big snuggle-fest -."

"Weren't there nights when all of *us* bunked together, after the funeral?"

"*That* was an emergency situation!" she cried marching off embarrassed at his demonstration of her hypocrisy.

A few days later she was back though, bothering him as he sat on the floor of the shed adjusting the suspension of K2. "Urd and Takumi have started some kind of secret exercise program, running through the woods at all hours of the afternoon and evening," she announced.

"*Uh-huh*," he replied only half-listening.

"Well don't you wonder what that's all about?" she asked passing him the socket wrench. "And why are you messing with my calculations for K2?"

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"The suspension's a bit tight" he said hoping the response would save him, or at the very least make her drop the subject.

"But why all training all of the sudden? Do they know something we don't? And why when they come back do they always have leaves on them? And does Urd always laugh like an idiot these days?" she demanded.

He hoped Belldandy would choose this moment to call him in for dinner. But when no call came he replied, "Well she's happy. They get to spend time together now. You can understand that, right?"

"*Of course!* But why so much running? I think they're up to something," she said rubbing her hands together.

"*Well . . .* they're probably just out doing some intensive training, making sure they're ready for anything," he replied offhand tightening the front fork.

"Then why don't you and Belldandy go with them on these training sessions if they're so important?"

"Err well . . . I don't think we need to train. I think we're fine just the way we are," he said starting to blush.

"Well maybe not you, but what about big-sis!"

His eyes grew wide at the thought. "Maybe you should go ask your questions to Urd Skuld. I'm not very familiar with goddess requirements."

"I did!"

"What?! What did she say?"

She gave Takumi a sly look she thought I couldn't see and said,

"*Well what do you think Tai? That might be very instructive,*" she reported mimicking her sister.

"What did *he* say?"

"He gave her the same look you're giving me now . . . like you have to go to the bathroom."

"*Somehow that doesn't surprise me,*" Keiichi muttered drawing up the torque wrench.

Skuld was not the only one attuned to changes at the temple.

The next day as she walked the forest Belldandy put her arms around an ancient cedar tree. At her touch the wounded rotted wood at the base of the tree began to fall away and a protective scar form in its place to protect what lay beneath. Standing up

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to inspect her work she moved her hands gently over the tree, encouraging its pale leaves to turn green once more. *"There you are -,"* she said reassuringly before moving deeper into the woods. Ducking under the branches of an overlying dogwood, a small bird dropped to her shoulder to begin busily chirping. *"Yes it certainly is,"* she nodded. *"What?"* she said looking up to see a number of similar birds gathered on the branches above her. Each quickly joined in the conversation chirping insistently. *"Well I don't really see how I can help with that. Removing all squirrels from the forest wouldn't be fair. Besides, they say that some of you have been swooping down to tug out bits of their fur to line your nests."* At this most of the branch's occupants began vehemently protesting their innocence. However one soon began plaintively chirping an alternative version, one which seemed to implicate several of his colleagues on the surrounding branches. Angrily the embarrassed birds chirped back at him. *"I thought it might be something like that,"* she nodded.

The bird on her shoulder continued. *"Well, I will speak to them about that,"* she replied heading for the willow. *"It's just -."* At that moment she heard a crash up ahead. Going to investigate, she soon heard a familiar shriek as she approached the edge of a small clearing. Peeking in she was surprised to see Urd and Takumi tackling each other at the far edge of the meadow. She took another step before quickly ducking down in the shadow of a large fern, realizing now that something altogether different was occurring. She raised her head looking over the leaves while at the same time drawing up her left hand to block the view of the bird on her shoulder who chirped half-heartedly in complaint. Though her initial impulse was to leave, something inside bid her to stay. For as a first-class goddess her eyes could behold far more than any human could see. And so what fascinated her about the scene before her was quite different from what might interest the average human. She watched as the energy of their spirits moved gracefully along currents of air in a kind of synergy with one another, their luminous patterns changing and intertwining, becoming more intense with the passing minutes. Finally as Urd cried out her gaze was drawn upward as Elegance burst forth, fierce

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and beautiful toward the heavens. Tears of happiness came to her eyes as she watched her sister's angel soar up then gently float back to earth, her wings gently covering the two figures as they lay quietly side by side. Patiently she waited for an opportune moment then quietly took her leave, returning to the temple to consider all she had seen.

The next morning Belldandy awoke before the rest of the household, walking the temple grounds to smell the scent of the autumn air as it rolled down from the mountains. She sat on the veranda for some time in the cool morning air, alone with her thoughts before returning inside. She had just finished cooking the rice when Urd appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning Bell. Can I have some of that?" she asked eyeing the teapot.

"Sure," she said not quite looking her in the eye.

Urd sat down quietly sipped her tea before sneaking a glance down the hallway. "So was everything alright the other day?"

"Yes. I think the cedar will be fine if I give it a few more days care," she said sipping her own tea.

"Good, good. But actually I was referring to when you were watching Takumi and I making love," Urd replied casually.

"*PHFFFT!*" Belldandy gagged, spitting out most of her perfectly prepared tea.

It was difficult to catch her sister off guard, but ooooooh so enjoyable when she did," Urd thought contentedly.

"Huh, wha-?" Belldandy murmured belatedly pretending not to hear as she reached for a towel.

"You heard me Bell. Either that was you the other day or we *really do* have some big squirrels in that forest. So?"

Her sister looked out the window washing her cup, blushing furiously as she thought of what to say. But she quickly recovered replying, "Well, what little I saw. . . *was very beautiful.*"

Now it was Urd's turn to fall silent. *Dammit! How does she always do that? How does she always turn these things around on me?!* She put an arm around her. "Spoken like a true first-class goddess Bell," she said turning to go.

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“Urd, is it... *very* important to them?” Belldandy asked nervously.

“*To them?* I have no idea.”

“*Urd I’m serious!*” she cried furrowing her brow worriedly.

“Well let’s just say their means of communicating are more limited than ours. So they tend to put more emphasis on simple things - like touching.”

Now Belldandy asked the question she feared most. “Urd, do you think I’m a bad companion because -.”

“*Bell -*,” she murmured shaking her head at her reassuringly.

“The last time I looked Keiichi didn’t seem to be suffering much. You know I love to tease you and *perhaps* from time to time I may have provided my own . . . *assistance* to try and move things along. But the truth is the only thing that matters is that you and Keiichi communicate in your own way; letting things happen in their own time and place. *No matter what anyone says* - including me. Besides, Keiichi saw through to your true form right from the start. So when it comes right down to it I think he understands things more deeply than most human do. The truth is when the time is right - you’ll know.”

“*Thanks Urd -*,” Belldandy said pulling her feet under her as she looked out the window returning to sipping her tea.

“No problem kid, anytime.”

One might have concluded from Urd’s sage words that she was now content to no longer interfere in her sister’s personal affairs, letting things follow their natural course. That is, unless they had observed her now race down the length of the hallway to her own room, pressing the door aside.

“*Takumi wake up!*” she said shaking him.

“Uh – wha-?” he mumbled rolling over sleepily, trying to escape her continued prodding.

But she would not be so easily ignored. “*Tai get up!*”

“*Huh?* Why?”

“Because Belldandy is doing some serious considering.

“About what?”

“Never mind about what.”

“Does this have something to do with you?”

“All you need to know is that we’re going to the aquarium today. And you’re getting Skuld to come with us.”

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“Why me?”

“Because she trusts you.”

“You’re not saying you want me to manipulate Skuld’s trust so that she follows us are you?”

“Yeah basically. Now here’s the plan . . .” she said shoving him off the bed.

Diligently Urd explained to Belldandy that she, Takumi and Skuld had decided to go to the aquarium that day. Though Skuld watched as Belldandy and Keiichi stayed behind, she was curiously under the impression that they would soon be joining them. Before she knew it Urd had opened the gateway and they were gone. Sitting alone in her room now, Belldandy’s fingers began to wander through all the pictures she and Keiichi had collected over the years. Turning the page she stopped at one showing her asleep against him at the race track as he sat in his leathers, waiting for his turn one afternoon. Pulling it gently from its cover she took it with her as she crossed the hallway into Keiichi’s room. Given the hour she knew he was still asleep, and so quietly closed the door behind her as she snuck in to sit beside him. Brushing the hair from his face she slid silently under the covers as Keiichi turned slowly opening his eyes. “Is everything okay Bell?” “Yes,” she replied putting her face close to his. “Keiichi, can I talk to you?” “Sure-,” he said, beginning to notice the unusual intensity in her sapphire eyes.

“*Hey this isn’t Sea World!*” Skuld shouted exiting the gate. “No, this is our residence - which Takumi and I have not had a chance to see together in some time. On these walls I have drawn all the important parts of our story together. He and I were talking last night, and since you looked after Abyss while he was . . . away, we thought you should inscribe a section here as well. “Really?” she asked excitedly. “*Really?*” Takumi echoed softly behind her, almost as surprised.

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"Yes," Urd muttered nudging him quietly. For the next hour, the two enjoyed relatively solitude reclining together on the slab serving as their porch. A porch which Takumi noticed had been rather firmly shored up toward the west in his absence. He checked its position, only to see Urd smiling happily back at him as his head came up. "Something?" she asked sweetly. "No. I was just thinking how pleasant the twilight hour must be from here," he replied grudgingly.

"Really? Hmm I think so too," she replied settling back.

"Alright now what?!" Skuld cried sticking her head out the doorway, done with her work.

"Now we go to Sea World," replied Urd.

They began to leave but Takumi grabbed her, "Urd, have a look at Skuld's drawing," he said directing her. Peeking inside she observed an overly large and rather cartoonish version of Skuld standing atop Tariki Hongan temple, heroically thwarting demons on every side as Takumi (denoted with X's over his eyes) lay on the ground begging for help. "Oh and I see she didn't leave you out -," he added pointing to the drawing of a small unconscious figure collapsed in the corner surrounded by numerous empty sake bottles.

The goddess mumbled something he couldn't quite make out adding, "I'll put some *realism* into that when I return."

Together the three set off down the cost road walking the four miles to the marine park. But halfway there Urd took another detour from their path.

"Now what are you doing Urd?!" moaned Skuld.

"I've got one more stop to make before we reach the park. It's not far."

"Our groundskeeper?" asked Takumi following along behind her.

"Yeah."

Eventually they came to the weathered gates of the Buddhist temple where Urd inquired after the one called Nobu.

"Aww don't tell me we have to go in there and pray or something!" shouted Skuld kicking a rock down the path.

"Don't worry. I'm sure not even Urd would put you through such a terrible *ordeal*," he mused shoving her forward.

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Soon at the gates a familiar face appeared. He approached Urd resolutely but then noticed the familiar figure at her side. He smiled broadly revealing crooked teeth. “I *knew* you would return,” he said raising his hands. “I knew you would not abandon the faithful.”

“*Yeah*, that’s just the kind of guy I am . . . *apparently*,” he replied blushing.

Urd reached out taking hold of Nobu’s hands. “I just wanted to thank you for reminding me to always . . . *have faith*,” she said coming close to tears.

“Of course, of course,” he said unaware of what a close call it had been. Soon he began discussing something about vigilance at the residence but a low moan from Skuld forced Urd to say they would see him soon but now had more pressing matters to deal with. A short time later they arrived at the marine park and actually spent several enjoyable hours there before Skuld began to suspect something was amiss.

“Shouldn’t Belldandy and Keiichi be here by now?” she asked impatiently.

“Yes I would think so,” Urd replied her voice full of mock concern.

“I’ll go call the temple, motioned Takumi.” He returned several minutes reporting he had been unable to reach them (not surprising given he hadn’t called), and suggested they may have been delayed at the shop. This appeared to satisfy Skuld for almost another full hour before she again became concerned as to their whereabouts. Takumi decided now would be a good time to relay to her a flavor of ice cream (coffee) which he said was his favorite but which Skuld had never tried. And so they began to search the nearby city of Kamogawa trying to procure a sample. During their expedition, Urd commented on how familiar Takumi seemed with the city’s back streets and alleys, but he let it pass. They had almost finished their ice cream in the early afternoon when the look on Skuld’s face told them their time was truly up.

“Okay we need to go find big-sis right now!” she demanded.

Knowing they had run out of excuses Takumi matched her tone concern. “You’re right Skuld, you’re absolutely right! We

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need to find out what happened to them! Don't you think so Urd?"

Urd who was off enjoying the afternoon sun replied somewhat less convincingly, "Yes . . . we should probably go back to the temple."

Arriving in the courtyard Urd made sure she was out in front. Carefully she surveyed the temple grounds but saw nothing out of the ordinary. In fact she thought the temple had never looked more beautiful. But then that she spotted the traces of tiny lantana flowers growing in the shape of footprints across the front walkway. She rubbed her hands together eagerly, "Tai, why don't you and Skuld go around back and see if the bike is there."

As they explored around back Urd raced into the house looking for Bell, only to find her knitting quietly in her own room.

"Hi Bell. How are you?" she asked as casually as possible.

"I am very well Urd," she said smiling to herself.

"So you had a good day with Keiichi then?"

"Oh it was great!" she replied excitedly.

Urd laughed placing her hands behind her head in a self-congratulatory manner. "Tell me all about it!"

"I think we had one of the best conversations we've ever had. I mean we really communicated, free of all barriers."

Urd's contented expression slowly began to change. "But that isn't *all* you did right?" she asked quizzically.

"You said this morning that things happen in their own time," Belldandy said defensively.

Now Urd was thoroughly disappointed. "You mean *nothing* happened?!"

"Well I didn't say *that* -, " Belldandy muttered turning aside.

"Then something *did* happen?"

"I told you, Keiichi and I communicated freely for the first time."

"Oh you guys communicate all the time! There's nothing *but* communication around here," she grumbled frustrated. But then she began to consider her sister's words more carefully.

"Wait, what do you mean by *absence of all barriers*?"

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Belldandy murmured the angelic translation of her thoughts to Urd setting her eyes ablaze. “- and so I could feel the emotions of his heart directly as we spoke,” she continued.

Urd smiled wryly. “You know here they call those boundaries *clothing* Bell.

“I’m well aware of that,” she replied quietly.

Well . . . it’s a start, thought Urd. “Keiichi must have gotten quite an eyeful,” she added thoughtfully.

“Oh Urd I’m not you! I climbed under the covers. Oh and I found out some very interesting things about the human body. It seems that when a man -.”

“*Yeah Bell*, thank you -,” she said waving her hands. “But I think I’ve heard enough for one day.”

They turned hearing Takumi and Skuld enter the house.

“Well I found Belldandy,” Urd said poking her head into the hallway. “She’s in her room. *I think they had a problem with the bikes and that’s why they couldn’t join us at the marine park*,” she announced loud enough for all to hear. Not that it would do much good. She knew her sister was incapable of lying. Still she could hope.

“Tai maybe you should go look for Keiichi,” she suggested.

He pulled her to one side. “Did I miss some proclamation making me your servant? *Go to the aquarium, go get Skuld ice cream, go find Keiichi*. What’s next?!”

“I thought we already establish that you’re my pet?” she shrugged matter-of-factly.

He looked over smiling threateningly.

“*Okay, okay*, but please just do this one thing for me alright?

Go find Keiichi. I just want to be sure he’s . . . okay,” she said shoving him out the door.

As per her request, he began to search the temple grounds looking for Morisato. But he turned out to be harder to find than he had expected. Ten minutes of searching had still not turned him up. Then he saw him. He had been right under his nose all along. He of all people should have known to check the trees overhanging the west wall. He saw him now, lying almost hidden atop one of the larger branches. He looked very relaxed, his eyes closed soaking in the setting sun.

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"K1, everything okay up there?" he asked.

When Keiichi gave no particular response he took to the tree.

"You okay Morisato? You seem kind of out of it."

"*The sun is so beautiful-*," he replied as though in a dream.

"The trees too. I never realized quite how much. And the land surrounding these hills. We're so lucky to be able to -."

"Yeah, they're all pretty great -," Takumi nodded impatiently.

"So . . . look, now that we've seen the hills, the birds, the trees and such maybe we should just go inside?"

"Hmm . . . *carry me*," Keiichi murmured curling up on one side going back to sleep.

"*Dammit* . . ." Takumi muttered under his breath.

When he eventually took Morisato inside, Belldandy laid him on his futon kissing his unconscious yet happy face.

"*Goodnight Keiichi*," she whispered.

Urd had managed to discreetly relay at least a broad outline of what had occurred to Takumi, including the fact that Keiichi would probably sleep until morning.

"I suppose I should start making dinner," Belldandy said coming out of Keiichi's room.

Urd turned to Takumi giving him her most sympathetic of looks. "Tai I wonder if -."

"*Yes of course I would be happy to go*," he replied in a rather monotone voice. "C'mon Skuld, let's see what we can rustle up to eat," he said rummaging for keys to the bike.

The weeks that followed strengthened Urd and Takumi's, to say nothing of Belldandy and Keiichi's relationship. In fact everything seemed to be going quite smoothly until one day Takumi began asking about the details of goddess relationships. "What are their customs?" he said following Keiichi along the western wall.

"I don't know. What do you mean?"

"Well for instance as far as gods and goddesses are concerned, are you and Belldandy married, engaged, generally recognized as a couple, what?"

"Umm, I guess we've never really discussed it," he replied somewhat surprised by his own answer.

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"I mean do they even *get* married? And what about those like Urd?"

"That's easy. I'm pretty sure there *is* no one like Urd," he said. But the more they spoke the more Keiichi realized he actually had no idea about any of it. Eventually they decided to go seek out Urd to try and find some answers. Which in retrospect may have been a mistake.

As they approached she could tell something was up.

Whenever they started acting like addled schoolboys she knew something was afoot. After some debate regarding who would actually ask the question Takumi began, "Urd, we were sort of wondering about . . . certain customs." As she listened to their inquiries she realized the potential complexity of answering them in any way they would understand. But instead of trying to explain things she simply said, "Why don't you go ask Belldandy. She knows far more about such things than I do." And so later that afternoon they approached Belldandy looking for answers.

"I guess what we're trying to ask is, is there some official custom that's performed to show that you and someone else really are together. You know similar to getting married? Oh, and it's really Keiichi who wants to know."

"*Hey!*"

Belldandy back puzzled. "I'm not sure I understand. Didn't you give Urd that necklace as a symbol of your love?"

"Well . . . yes," he replied.

"And Keiichi and I, we've also exchanged some very precious gifts."

"That's true," answered Keiichi.

"That meant we always wanted to be together?"

"Yes."

"Well then I guess we're already married," Belldandy said simply, returning to her chores.

Slowly Keiichi and Takumi exchanged glances. The look wasn't exactly one of shock, but certainly contained elements of surprise.

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When she returned to the temple several hours later, Urd found Belldandy curled up reading a book. "So did the boys come and question you?" she smirked.

"Yes. They asked about our customs."

She nodded shaking her head. "And what did you tell them?"
"The truth."

Urd furrowed her brow looking over puzzled. "*Which is?*"

"I told them we're already married."

Her eyes grew wide. "What? Bell you're kidding me!"

"No," she replied innocently.

"*Oh Bell, you didn't!*" she groaned.

"Why? What's wrong with that?"

"Bell getting married is a big deal down here. The closest thing I can compare it to where we're from is; well it's sort of like *soul-threading*."

Now it was Belldandy's whose eyes grew wide. "*WHAT?!*"

"I see now you're beginning to get my point. It's a whole big thing with a ceremony and everything. You didn't think that's what it was, did you?"

She shook her head.

"I'm guessing you thought it was more like *presentation*, right?"

She nodded.

"Yeah initially I thought the same thing. But some time back when I was investigating earth love rituals for – well let's I just needed to – I discovered it's not. So I'm guessing when you told them they freaked."

"No, I don't think they *freaked*," Belldandy replied, not quite certain of her meaning.

"Bell, *exactly* what did they say after you told them?"

"Umm, they said they needed to go outside and play," she recalled.

"*Great*. In other words they freaked," she said stepping outside to scan the temple grounds. "Now if were two idiots where would I go?" she asked looking up. Sure enough there they were. Tucked away on one the higher boughs of the great oak Keiichi and Takumi sat huddled in discussion. Walking closer she could begin to make out parts of their conversation,

"*No, I really had no idea -.*"

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“-I think its fine. It's just that we look kind of -.”

“- yeah definitely a surprise.”

“Should there be some kind of formal -.”

“-how would you even get a certificate for that?”

“Hi guys,” she called to them.

“Hello Urd,” they replied in unison, trying to act as though the scene was entirely normal. “We were just up here uh -.”

“Playing?” she suggested. “Look, Belldandy told me what she said. Now can you two come down here so that we have a normal talk about this like grown-ups?”

After additional minutes of whispering, Keiichi and Takumi climbed down the tree and together they all sat down that night to discuss the matter in detail.

“Okay, so are we clear *now*?” Urd said rising to stretch in the tea room.

“I should hope so!” Skuld replied crossing her arms to glare at Keiichi once more. Neither of man seemed very happy now.

“Yes,” Takumi nodded soberly. “We’re not married because pieces of our soul haven’t been sewn, or hammered, or something-ed together yet.”

“- Oh and that’s because goddesses *don’t have* formal marriages,” Keiichi added in a similarly depressed tone. “They just kind of go from one relationship to another.”

“Ugh! That’s not what I said at all!” cried Urd. “Belldandy is that what I said?”

“You’ll have to forgive me Urd. I kind of nodded off there when you were discussing relative temporal planes of commitment,” Takumi said rolling over feigning death.

“I give up! You try Bell.”

“I think what Urd is saying is that each of us has made a sincere commitment to be together. And that’s what relationships in heaven are like. They are not defined by a specific ceremony but rather by the strength, depth, and length of the bond which exists between two people. It is something no ritual can forge or dissolve. But if you have specific ceremonies which provide you with comfort that you would like to discuss, we’d be happy to do so. We just want you to understand how it is in our world.”

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“So where does that leave us exactly?” asked Takumi. Urd came to sit between them. “Well, Belldandy and I have been thinking. Given where we are we think we should have a presentation party.”

Now it was Skuld’s turn to groan.

“And what is that?” asked Keiichi.

“It’s a big semi-formal gathering where a particular god or goddess let’s everyone know through means of ceremonial introduction the person they are *with*. Belldandy and I don’t see any harm in it since it’s already pretty obvious around here.”

“So it’s like an engagement party?”

“Well let me put it this way. Peorth has had *three* presentation parties,” she said as she and Belldandy tried to suppress all signs of smiles. “But in truth that’s not unusual for a goddess, particularly one so highly sought.”

“So it’s simply a way of acknowledging who you’re dating *now*,” Takumi said. Urd could hear the disappointment in his voice.

“No. There are plenty of individuals who a person might *date* as you say, but are never introduced through presentation. Think of it as a way of notifying people of the person you consider to be a strong possibility for a very long-term relationship. What goddesses’ would call *soul-threading*. But there’s no reason to go into all that now. Just consider it a formal excuse for a party. Belldandy and I think that given everything that’s happened, we’re all overdue for one.”

Looking to their respective partners, the sisters could see that both were in a better mood. As Belldandy had anticipated it struck the right balance between acknowledging their importance while relieving them, at least temporarily, of everlasting commitments. Though Skuld was not particularly pleased with the plan as presented she brightened somewhat when Keiichi and Takumi both indicated they wanted her to escort them to the party.

“Alright if we’re all in agreement, Bell and I will leave tomorrow to begin making the arrangements,” Urd said biting into the last cookie.

Repentance

Early the next morning Belldandy and Urd departed to Yggdrasil to begin preparations for the party. After wandering the temple for some time Takumi decided it was finally time to ask Keiichi and Skuld about that which he had never had the nerve to ask Urd. Not so much its location for he had long since guessed that, noting the small angular ravine behind the temple which Urd carefully avoided whenever they traveled the forest. But he had questions about the funeral itself and what had happened in the days afterwards and he knew now the time had come to see it all.

In response to his inquiry Skuld was now eagerly leading him through the woods, followed by a more hesitant Keiichi Morisato.

“So . . . this is it?” he asked as they arrived.

“Yep, this is the place,” Skuld said slapping her hand atop the marker stone. “I did the inscription work here,” she said eagerly pointing out several details on top.

“Umm yeah, neat,” Takumi said exchanging nervous smiles with Morisato.

“Maybe we should give him some time alone to take all this in Skuld,” Keiichi suggested.

“*Well I just wanted to show him -*,” she complained her voice trailing off as Keiichi led her away. Takumi sat down considering the spot. He tried to imagine all the preparations Urd had put into place. *Strange to think of me down there*, he thought putting his hands over the marker. He noticed now it had been shifted from its original position, perhaps several times. Pulling it up he felt the engraving on the back surface and saw now all that Urd had written in the days and weeks following his death. He examined each inscription, not all of which he understood, as Urd’s presence burned brightly in his heart. For the first time he felt the full weight of their relationship and it unsettled him somehow. He promised

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himself that one day soon he would write a response to each of the thoughts poured out upon the stone. Setting it back into place he stood up, passing his hands curiously over the golden chain encircling the nearby tree. He pulled back calling to his companions, "I think I've seen enough." He clambered down the hill to where Keiichi and Skuld sat as she practiced controlling maple seeds in the air around her.

"Wasn't my carving good?!" she asked waving her arms as the seeds swirled in response to her movements.

"*The best*," he nodded starting for the temple. "But there's still one thing we need to do."

"What's that?"

"*Abyss*. It's time it had a proper home. But that can wait until tomorrow," he said rising up the path.

At dinner that night it was plain that each of them missed Belldandy and Urd in their own way. Still the three of them managed to enjoy their time together. In truth Skuld did not exactly mind being the center of attention, and Takumi used the opportunity to get them to tell him as much as possible about their early days at the temple. He was particularly eager to hear about any interesting or embarrassing stories concerning Urd, or what they might know about her childhood. He had a feeling such information might come in very useful someday. From their tales in the cozy halls of the temple he came to know much about the lives of the goddesses. In return he told them of nights at the seaside residence, and of he and Urd's excursions in Tokyo.

"So the woman pestering Urd that night was named Sayoko, and she's a friend of yours?" Takumi asked still trying to understand.

"Umm, something like that," Keiichi replied showing him designs for several of the prototypes he was considering. "In either case Urd seems to enjoy torturing her," he said as Skuld yawned, moving off to curl up in the unoccupied living room.

When Takumi awoke the next morning, he decided to examine Urd's rather curious shelves of ingredients (something else he hadn't had the nerve to do in her presence) before phoning Narita Temple.

Repentance

"Hello?"

"It's me."

There was a very long pause on the other end of the line.

"TAKUMI?" replied the stunned voice sounding as though it were an impossibility. "Is it really you?!"

"It is."

"I'm sorry I – had heard rumors you'd died," said Tenori.

"A bit of a clerical error I'm afraid," he responded. "But more to the point I have Abyss and am ready to bring it to you."

It seemed now there was an even longer pause at the other end of the phone. "You're kidding!"

"No. In fact I can bring it to you today if that's convenient."

Tenori laughed. "Yeah - I think I can make time for that. You know I'm not joking, everyone thinks you're dead. Nobody knows what what happened to you!"

"Let's just say it's a story for another time," he replied hanging up. But as the minutes passed he began to reflect on Tenori's words. With everything that had happened he hadn't stopped to consider the outside world. He took up the phone and dialed Okubo's number. A moment later he heard Sen's familiar voice.

"Tenori says everyone thinks I'm dead. I just wanted to call you to let you know I'm not," he said hearing a sudden shuffle in the background. He tried to sense what might be happening in that small kitchen so far away, deciding finally Okubo must have signaled the news to Naru. Yet when Sen spoke his voice seemed calm, perhaps even bored.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me. Someone always seems to turn up *eventually*." The continued noise in the background made him wonder if Naru still worried about him. "Why were you speaking to Tenori?" he asked.

"Much has happened since we last spoke. But I told him I would bring Abyss to Narita so it can be studied." Okubo fell quiet as though lost in thought.

"Will you be coming down?" asked Takumi.

"Yes - I believe I will," Okubo replied finally.

"Good. Because there's a number of a thing I'd like to discuss with you. Things I should have said long ago. But we can speak of these when I see you."

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“Then I will speak to you soon,” Okubo said hanging up. After thanking Skuld once more for her care of Abyss, Keiichi and Takumi made the trip out to Narita to place the weapon into Tenori’s care. Approaching the main gate Tenori came forward, embracing him warmly.

“You did what no one else could do Takumi. And I knew you would,” he said nodded respectfully.

“It took all our efforts,” Takumi replied humbly.

“True. I was just being kind,” he grinned placing his hands into the sleeves of his robe.

With a final handshake under the Niomon gate Takumi turned, passing the temple’s dedication to Fudo-Myoo. He stopped a moment smiling before descending the steps to where Keiichi stood waiting. As they prepared to leave he looked up one last time at the gate but Tenori was already gone. Sitting in the sidecar on the trip home Takumi felt an enormous sense of relief wash over him. Though he now knew that the stone he and Sorano had worked so hard to retrieve had been destroyed, he took some comfort in the fact it was no longer under demon control. So too, he was thankful that Sorano’s seals were now back in rightful hands, and that her story would be known to all. Finally he was thankful that the weapon of the gods, entrusted to a nameless warrior more than 800 years ago would now stand where all men could see it. As for himself, he simply looked forward to seeing Urd again, perhaps hoping he wouldn’t make too much of a fool of himself in front her friends at the upcoming party.

Arriving at the temple Keiichi and Takumi relaxed with Skuld in the courtyard, enjoying their last day together before Urd and Belldandy returned that evening. In the calm of the afternoon Keiichi sketched out two new design modifications to K2 as Skuld and Takumi practiced their fundamentals of control. As the sun now dipped low in the sky they sat quietly side by side on the veranda listening to the wind when the phone began to ring. Each of raced to get there first but it was ultimately Skuld who was triumphant. “Yes!” she shouted happily. “What?” she replied disappointed.

“*Takumi*, there’s a woman on the phone for you,” she said as he bolted up.

Repentance

“- and it’s not Urd,” she said passing him the phone. “She sounds upset.”

He stared back taking the phone. “Hello?”

“Taku-chan?” The voice on the other end sounded frail, as though coming from a thousand miles away.

“*Naru?!*”

“Takumi . . . I - don't know how to say this. It’s Sen. He’s - gone.”

“What do you mean?”

She started to cry. “He’s gone Takumi. That’s all I know.”

He could not believe his it. “Dead?”

“*Yes . . .*”

It seemed impossible. Deep down he’d always believed that nothing could ever harm or even truly age Okubo. That he would always be there. Perhaps that was why he’d let so much time go pass without seeing him. He stooped down his mind racing. “At Takkoku no Iwaya?”

“No. Somewhere near Narita.”

He felt the icy stab quickly filling his chest. “*When?*” He whispered only with great effort.

“I don't know. A little over an hour ago.”

He looked at the clock. It was now 5:15.

“They need someone to go there and -,” but she could not continue. “Takumi could you please go?”

“Of course,” he said feeling the numbness taking hold of his limbs. Trembling he hung up the phone, moving to steady himself. “What’s wrong?” asked Keiichi coming inside.

At first he said nothing, forcing himself to stand as he stumbled to the doorway. He knew now that something had gone horribly wrong, and that somehow he had been the key to it all.

“I think Tenori’s in trouble,” he said finally trying to focus his mind. He picked up the phone dialing the Narita-san directorate. “Is Sensei Nukura there?!” he demanded when they answered.

“No I’m sorry. He’s gone to the National Museum in Tokyo,” replied the voice.

Takumi slammed down the receiver. “They’re after Tenori and Abyss though I can’t imagine why,” he cursed. In his heart he knew Tenori was probably already dead, that whatever had

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been planned had likely already occurred. But if there was a chance that something still might be done, he knew what they did in the next few minutes would be critical.

"Think, be calm, *concentrate*," he muttered pressing his hands to his head. He feared to take the next step, to know for certain. Yet he knew no matter how great his fear, he must do something. He looked to Skuld. "Is there some way you can track the position of the number I'm calling?" he asked hopefully.

"*Of course*. It's not really hard you know."

"It's not?"

"Not when you're a genius," she replied placing her hand to the TV, commanding it to bring up the necessary optical projections. A minute later she was inside the Yggdrasil network. Unsure of what he was seeing Takumi glanced to Keiichi who nodded encouragingly. Quickly he dialed the number. A moment later to his great relief Tenori answered.

"*Tenori*," he breathed keeping his voice as calm as possible.

"I have Abyss. I'm at the Museum," the voice replied. Takumi stopped for a moment, hesitating. "That's good. Perhaps we can celebrate tonight," he said cautiously as Keiichi looked on bewildered.

"Perhaps. Though some of this might take some time. Maybe we can meet around midnight?"

"Yeah alright then. Let me know," he said patiently.

"I will." And with that he hung up.

"Why didn't you warn him?!" Cried Keiichi.

"Because - I don't know - he doing what I was, controlling his breathing - his tone - his voice," Takumi said pensively.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I think they may already have him."

"If that's true why didn't he indicate it?"

"I don't know. Maybe he can't. Maybe he knows we can't help him. Maybe he doesn't want anyone else getting hurt - or killed."

"If that's true we need to help him," Keiichi said determinedly.

"*Right.*"

Repentance

“Umm, we may have another problem,” Skuld said peering at the monitor. “This says he’s south of the National Museum, near the Ueno train station.”

“So?”

“So there’s a ticket registered in his name departing from Ueno station on the Tohoku Shinkansen at 5:25 pm.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I told you. I’m a genius.”

“Actually she kind of is,” acknowledged Keiichi.

Takumi looked to the clock. “In that it doesn’t matter,” he said bitterly. “Effectively they’re already gone. That train leaves in a little over five minutes. In an hour they could be anywhere.” They sat in silence for a moment until Keiichi jumped up, running to the shed. “C’m on!”

“What are you doing Keiichi?!” Takumi yelled following behind. “Please don’t tell me you’re doing what I think you’re doing.”

“We can catch them,” he said pulling out K2.

“*Impossible*. That station is more than forty miles from here in the center of Tokyo.”

“Right. Which is why we’re not going to Ueno. *We’re going to Omiya.*”

“I get it,” cried Skuld. “The train doesn’t stop or divert prior to reaching Omiya station. So if you get there before they do -.”

“We can catch them, even if they intend to get off or switch trains,” Keiichi said as the engine roared to life.

Takumi looked on in disbelief. “Keiichi I know you’re good. But even you can’t beat the bullet train. Doesn’t it travel at like 170 mph?”

“Only over open terrain,” he said with grim determination.

“Through populated areas it has to travel a little slower.”

“A *little* slower?! Still, it must be 40 miles to Omiya from here.”

“More like 38,” he said throwing him a helmet as he pushed the bike into the alleyway. “And we’ve just wasted 60 seconds having this conversation.”

“Skuld is this even possible?” asked Takumi.

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"It takes the Shinkansen about 25 minutes to reach Omiya from Ueno. Of course you'll still have to get to and from the highway which will take -."

"*Let's go,*" said Takumi grabbing hold of the rear rail of the bike.

"Should I call Urd and Big-sis?" Skuld shouted as they began to move off.

"Don't worry them just yet. We don't even know for certain what's wrong. Besides they'll be back tonight. If we find out anything more we'll call," Takumi said as they backed into the street.

Keiichi turned to him pulling down his visor. "I'm only going to say this once."

"What's that?"

"*Hold on and go with my movements.*" And with that they accelerated down the hill toward the highway.

Looking out from her post in Yggdrasil's central control Peorth was happy for Urd. And like many others she looked forward to any good excuse for a party. Still, whenever Urd was about things tended to flow less than smoothly. And she could see that today was going to be no different as she spied Ex, Ere and Chrono gathered around her discussing the object Urd had placed onto the table.

"But shouldn't a presentation dress be well . . . a little more flowing?" remarked Chrono.

"Yeah and maybe lighter in color?" added Ere.

"Oh the heck with that, nobody expects that from me," replied Urd waving her hands.

"They're right of course," said Peorth coming up from behind.

"You should put that poor thing out of its misery - if you ask me."

"Well I'm not asking you," quipped Urd. "Though I suppose I should consider you as something of an expert in these matters," she said playfully.

Peorth stepped back crossed her arms frowning. "If that's your way of saying I'm a highly desirable goddess then I suppose that's true."

Repentance

Urd put a hand to her shoulder. Somehow it seemed harder to dislike her since the funeral. "That's exactly what I'm saying. Besides I'm depending on you to lend a certain flair and dignity to this occasion."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It seems a lot of the younger gods aren't interested in coming unless you do."

Peorth straightened her shoulders. "Well in that case I suppose it's my duty to -."

"By the way where's your next presentation going to be - in the park out back?" chuckled Urd.

Peorth smiled raising her eyebrow in imitation of Urd's. "And where is yours going to be - *right now*?" she replied smugly.

Urd realized her error. "Well it's umm . . . going to be in the park . . . out back by the temple," she muttered quietly.

"*Urd*," came the call behind her.

They turned to see Belldandy approaching, who like Urd carried a garment in her arms. The group could see it was both light and beautiful, everything they had been demanding of Urd's own gown.

"Do you see why I'm not going with this approach?" Urd muttered to them. "I'd rather not be directly compared with my sister on that day . . . given I have been my whole life."

"What are you doing?" asked Belldandy joining the group.

"Oh, they want me to wear something like what you've got Bell. I told them no way."

"Well I'm sure whatever you wear will be fine Urd."

"*Really? Because this is it*," Peorth said holding up the gown.

"Give me that!" Urd snapped snatching it away.

"Well I think it is very nice."

"Thank you Bell. I think so too," Urd said with a backward glance at Peorth. "Is everything ready?"

"I think so. It's been so good to see everyone. Still, it will be good to get home."

"Yeah I was thinking the same thing."

"Do you think everything's been alright while we've been away?"

The Twilight Hour

“Of course. The protections we set up would have warned us if a demon so much as came near the temple. Besides, how much trouble could they get into in three days?”

If Takumi had thought flying with Urd was terrifying, he realized now it paled in comparison to his current death ride with Morisato. It didn't feel so much as though they were *passing* the surrounding cars as attempting to avoid striking the many multi-ton objects littering the roadway. He had no illusions as to what would happen if they collided with something at this speed. They would both be dead, Keiichi from the impact and he from what Belldandy would most certainly do him if Keiichi was in any way harmed. As frightening as the view appeared from the back Takumi didn't even want to think about what it must look like from Keiichi's perspective. He tried to block out the sound of the wind, the bike, and the metallic blurs whizzing by them on either side as they made perhaps their 10th instantaneous left-right sweep across traffic as they raced toward the station. Coming over a small rise in the road he heard Keiichi yell something over the roar of the engine. Then he saw it, far to his left the outline of the oncoming train. A second later the roadway dropped away, passing beneath the rail transit lines before once again rising on the far side. As they came up Keiichi made a sharp right turn, accelerating past the narrow roadway dividers marking the station entrance racing onto the upper parking decks.

“I can make it from here,” Takumi shouted jumping off. “I'll call you when I know something. You should get back to Skuld. We don't have any idea yet what really might happening tonight.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” replied Keiichi.

Takumi slapped his shoulder departing. “Thank you. And don't get killed on the way home.”

“*Same to you,*” replied Keiichi pressing the bike in a tight arc before accelerating down the roadway, disappearing the way he had come. Reaching the highway he looked back, catching one last glimpse of Takumi Sato as he darted over the roof of the station.

Repentance

Poised at the roof's edge Takumi waited silently in the shadows for the arriving Ueno train to disgorge its passengers. Seeing no sign of Tenori, he waited until the last possible moment before jumping onto roof of the train as it pulled away. Though it had appeared to be a simple task from the platform, he quickly realized landing just how slick the top of the train was. He tumbled precariously for several seconds until managing to pull himself to safety along the car's central groove. Silently he waited and watched as the train passed through station after station heading north. Coming from the temple everything had happened so fast he had had little time to think. But now as he rested watching the passing scenery unfold it seemed he had plenty of time to think. To think of things he had not dared to consider at the temple. It was not until they reached Utsunomiya almost an hour later that he finally spotted Tenori exiting the train. Yet he seemed to be alone, carrying nothing of significance with him. Cautious in the shadows, Takumi waited until he knew for certain to which train Tenori was headed. Once onboard he waited until the last possible moment before jumped to the station roof, then over and down onto the outbound train as it pulled away. Forty five minutes later they reached Nikko station. He watched as Tenori walked out heading to the rear car. As he did he noticed him scan the surrounding platform with utmost subtlety. The act alone sent chills down Takumi's spine. His heart began to pound so furiously he was certain it would give him away. Not quite believing his eyes he saw Tenori pay the attendant and take possession of an oblong package. His mind seethed trying to comprehend what was happening, trying to discern what it might all mean. Careful to keep him in sight he called Tariki Hongan temple.

"It's 7:30, where have you been?!" cried the small voice on the other end.

"I'm in a city called Nikko."

"Yeah, I think I've heard of it," Skuld replied sarcastically.

"Do you know where he is? Because he turned off his phone an hour ago."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Takumi said grimly.

"Let Urd know where I am when she gets home."

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“Don’t you want me to send her a message right now?”

“No . . . I don’t,” he said his eyes growing dark as he shut off the phone. Dropping to the shadows on the far side of the train he silently began to stalk his old partner. As much as possible he paralleled Tenori’s movements, careful to always stay on one side or the other of him and never trail his path. Slowly as they moved through the darkened streets Takumi prepared himself for what would come next, cursing his own stupidity. *Of course it wasn’t demons! They have no need for trains,* he thought angrily.

Approaching the outskirts of the city, Takumi heard the rushing waters of the Daiya River closing on his right. But as Tenori reached the Shinkyo Bridge over the Daiya he abruptly changed course, moving back circuitously through the narrow city streets toward the forested hills on the opposing side of the valley. *He knows or he suspects,* thought Takumi. Now is the time to act. With practiced skill he broke from his path rushing moving ahead. A moment later he leapt, dropped down directly in front of him.

“*TAKUMI!*” he cried. “I’m - surprised to see you.”

“I assume you mean *alive*,” he said gritting his teeth.

“What ever do you mean?”

“I mean you’re going to give me *that*,” he growled motioning to the object in his right hand.

“What?”

“Don’t play games with me. I want *it* and *you*, right now!”

His eyes blazed with malevolent intensity. “I know Tenori. I know about it all.”

“Hmm somehow I doubt that,” he said stepping back. “But in either case you appear to be unarmed.”

“*This isn’t the dojo and I’m not here to score points!*” Takumi threatened.

“Which is good since I do not think you are my equal.”

His patience evaporated. He struck to immobilize with blinding speed. But Nukura’s counterstrike was more than a match for him and he tumbled to the ground. Instinctively he rolled assuming a defensive posture, trying to control his alarm.

“It appears *we both* have a few surprises for each other, eh?”

Tenori shrugged pulling Abyss free of its shroud.

Repentance

“How?!”

“Let’s just say it’s a benefit of my current employer.”

Takumi stared at him now as though he were a stranger. “You helped me only to obtain the weapon,” he accused. “*And you killed Okubo!*”

“A loss that was both unexpected and unfortunate. If only those sent to take care of you that night at Jufukuji had succeeded, it would also have been *unnecessary*.”

Takumi reeled as his words struck home. Only now did he understand the depth of his deception as the awful realization took hold.

“That attack killed the one I was with! *She was only a girl Tenori!*” he cried, bitter tears of regret welling within him.

“-And would have killed you too had they known what were doing. But I don’t pretend to understand their methods. I should have gone along of course, but I was told they were powerful and that there was ‘*no way*’ you could escape. They underestimated you Takumi, I must say.”

“Why didn’t you just wait? I would have brought it to you as I promised. *You know I would have!*” he screamed in torment.

“Yes, but what about your little friend? Was *she* going to hand over the stone as well? I don’t think so. No the only way to be certain of getting *both* items was to obtain them as soon they were discovered. When those sent to retrieve them came up missing I knew you had somehow managed to escape.

Naturally I told my employers I would contact them as soon as you called, but of course you never did. I continued searching for Abyss, but by the time I learned you were using it to eliminate those in your path you seemed to disappear from view. No doubt you had secured allies by then. Later I was informed that several individuals had, on their own initiative, set a fire - killing you. From there the trail seemed to grow cold and I heard nothing more on the matter. That is until you miraculously appeared - *dropping it right into my hands*.”

Of course, thought Takumi. After the fire the weapon had been stored in the temple with Skuld. They must have been unable to sense it there, probably due to protections Belldandy had put into place following Mezzumura’s attack. Even if they had discovered it later in the chaos of the battlefield at Mt. Akagi,

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there would have been little opportunity to seize it through Lind's legions of Valkyrie.

"But why steal it now? I lost the stone soon after Jufukuji. And now it is destroyed. What possible purpose does any of this serve now?"

"You still don't get it do you? I assure you it still has purpose to me. Well beyond its power to sense tears."

But Takumi could hear no more. For it was not what he needed know. He needed to know why. "How could you do it Tenori?! You were part of my family. *Yet you've taken the lives of innocents!*" he cried heartbroken.

"What family? We were part of the same school once, but we chose different paths years ago . . ."

"Time does not change what -."

"Oh you sound like the old man Takumi! Time *does* change. *It changes everything!* I went out into the world as you did and I saw. I saw the falseness, the delusion, the naiveté of our views. Don't you see? *The world you believe in is a dream Takumi! It does not exist!* People like you and Okubo are part of the past, not the future! No one believes that old ideology anymore. There is only what one can be obtained now, in the moment!"

Takumi stared back across the blackness his heart hardening.

"Believe me Tenori, whatever future awaits humanity, whether beautiful or shrouded in darkness - it depends on us. On someone to believe in it, care for it, cherish it. That world is not yet realized, but it will come because of those who seek to make it so. Not for themselves, but for all mankind. But I have not come to convince you Tenori. I have come to *inform* you. *I have come collect upon your sins,*" he hissed cutting off his last avenue of escape.

"Careful," chided Tenori moving smoothly to counter him.

"For I know now you are sensitive to the power of this weapon."

"As are you," snarled Takumi.

"Yes, but I'm the one who's armed. And given our relative experience I believe that will make all the difference."

"Easy or hard Tenori, you're giving me that weapon."

"Oh I intend to. By all means - *come!*" he threatened.

Repentance

Both knew it would be over in the next few seconds. As hate boiled within him Takumi fainted twice at Tenori slash before leaping in ferociously.

Too easy, thought Tenori plunging upward as Takumi burst down upon him. But falling Takumi twisted to the left, crossing his arms in front of him as the blade thrust home, catching the shaft just behind the blade. Continuing his turn he struck the ground the blade plunged past him narrowly missing his chest. Continuing his momentum Takumi spun counter-clockwise, delivering a powerful back fist to Tenori's jaw with his left hand. The impact made Tenori lose his grip on the back end Abyss which Takumi quickly replaced with his own. Shadowing Takumi's movement on the other side Tenori now quickly attempted to counter him as each completed their turn in deadly symmetry. Then with a powerful twist of his body Takumi swept the end of the weapon upward in a circular arc, forcing it to pass between them. As it came level once more he turned changing direction at the center of rotation, the force ripping the weapon from Tenori's hands causing him to tumble to the ground. He rolled quickly springing to his feet but Abyss was already at his throat. He watched as his opponent's eyes burned with hatred gripping the blade.

"*Well, well, what do we have here?*" asked the quiet voice suddenly behind them.

"*Hild*. Why am I not surprised," Takumi replied continuing his track of Tenori. "Let me ask you something. Are you somehow shorthanded in Hell? Because every time I turn around you seem -."

"Are you volunteering?" she asked cutting him off easily.

"Maybe I just want to see you again? But in answer to your question -," she snapped her fingers as instantly a dozen demons instantly on all sides of them, "-No."

"This is between me and him Hild. And I'm going to *finish* it."

"Oh, well then all means don't let me interrupt you," she replied as they both looked on in surprise.

"But do be quick about it. I've wasted far too much time on this pursuit already this evening."

Takumi looked back hesitating.

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"Oh are we shy about killing in front of others now?" she taunted. "That must be a rather *recent* event. In any case I'll just turn my head if it makes it easier for you."

Takumi's gaze returned to his opponent his grip tightening. Tenori judged his intent and was in motion. In an instant the weapon crossed the space between them and was silent.

"Well, well, will you look at that -," Hild said turning to observe the aftermath. Before her the blade lay at the base of Tenori's throat as Takumi stood over him silently fighting back tears.

"*Killing you* - won't bring them back," he said sadly. "-Nor will it honor their memories," he said giving up backing away. Slowly she turned back starting down the hill.

"All done then?" she mocked. "In that case, Tenori I believe I told you to bring the item *directly* to me on Akagi, did I not?"

"I was - just on my way . . ."

"*To double cross me*," she said pointedly.

"*No!* I would never -."

"So if I were to go to the hotel down there, I would *not* find men waiting with a rather considerable sum of money for you?" she asked, her violet eyes beginning to glow.

Tenori grew pale. "It - was always my intention to -," he began weakly.

Bored with the explanation Hild snapped her fingers as his body burst to light. As its glow faded, Takumi saw it coalesce into a small sphere floating in Hild's left hand. Now cooled she tossed it in the air casually. "*Humans*. Their greed never ceases to amaze me," she said thoughtfully. "I suppose that's why they fascinate me so. Imagine, trying to double-cross *me*?" She laughed throwing the sphere over her shoulder to the waiting demons.

"That's not greed, its stupidity," replied Takumi. "And as for humanity, you weren't dealing with a very good example of it," he nodded walking on down the hill.

Hild smiled watching him go. "*Oh Takumi dear*, aren't you forgetting something?" she said raising her hand.

For a second he actually considered running. That is until he the utter futility of any such effort became clear.

Repentance

"You're not taking this Hild. It doesn't belong to you," he said backing up.

Hild looked up bursting into laughter. "It doesn't *belong* to me? Is that what you really just said?! What are you - five years old?! Trust me you're in no position to tell me what I can or cannot do," she replied her smile evaporating. "After all, I'm not standing under any *tree* branches today," she observed menacingly. "And though I would just *love* to talk to discuss this further with you; I simply don't have the time. This little adventure has already cost me far too much."

Takumi knew his time was up. If he was going to do anything, now would be the time. "*Shield*," he cried throwing the weapon away as Hild reached out her hand.

For a moment the barrier seemed to hold. "Wow you're doing well," she shrugged causing him to swell with pride before adding, "-considering I'm using a ten-thousandth my true strength." A wave of her hand and the protection shattered as Abyss flew toward her. But in the instant it passed between them it was struck, obliterated by an enormous burst of energy throwing Hild, Takumi and everyone else nearby to the ground. "Yes, I was afraid that would happen," Hild sighed rising to dust herself off a moment later.

Takumi looked back puzzled struggling to his feet. Then it hit him. "The Almighty One!" he gasped.

She shrugged. "Which is why the instructions I give are meant to be followed *to-the-letter*," she growled to those behind her. "That double-crossing fool wasted valuable time. As soon as it departed the temple it was only a matter of time before being picked up on the Yggdrasil system. Well let's see if *He* has anything else to say tonight. *No?*" she asked after a moment's continued silence, the thunderheads moving slowly off into the distance. "In that case it would appear you and I are all alone now Takumi Sato. It seems they have forgotten you. Not surprising, since you were never really one of them," she said walking to within a pace of him. "So I wonder, do you have anything you'd like to say to me?" she asked eyeing him as a predator eyes its prey.

The Twilight Hour

"Only what Urd said before, we . . . have no plans to visit you in *h* - the demon realm. Please do us the same courtesy," he said trying not to tremble.

"No, I was thinking more of an apology. You know - for all the *trouble* you've caused me," she muttered placing a hand gently to his shoulder. He realized now that with Abyss gone she had plenty of time to make him suffer. He stood quietly. "Whatever you're going to do Hild; just get it over with."

"Really?! Oh very well -."

Takumi closed his eyes at her approach but there was no pain, only the faint brush of her lips against his cheek, the touch disturbingly similar to Urd's. To his amazement she then simply walked away, fading with her demons into the surrounding darkness. "Do be sure to give that to my daughter when you see her," she called over her shoulder disappearing into the trees. A moment later the winds of a terrific cyclone arose in the distance only to vanish as quickly as they had come. Takumi shivered feeling suddenly weak as he sat down on the silent hillside. He looked up at the stars for perhaps fifteen minutes before a burst of light overhead signaled Urd's arrival on the ground beside him.

"*Tai are you all right?!*" she asked looking him over from head to toe.

"I'm okay," he said weakly.

"*What happened? Did you retrieve the weapon?*"

"No. It's been destroyed. By the Almighty One."

"What?! Hild didn't get it?"

"No. But she got Tenori. And there was a moment when she could have gotten me. But instead she just . . ."

"What?"

He leaned over kissing her. "She told me to give you that. *I thought for sure she was going to kill me,*" he said trying to stop his shivering.

Urd put her arms around him looking up. "I don't think we have to worry about that for now," she mused.

"Didn't she say she needed one of us as a demonstration of her power?"

"Yes but you have to understand how she thinks. Now that she's seen everything I think she'll leave us alone for a while."

Repentance

“Why?”

She looked off sheepishly. “Well, because . . . I think she sees you as her best chance for err – *grandchildren*.”

“Ahh,” Takumi replied blushing.

“Don’t get any ideas. I should tell you for a goddess it’s not just up to us.”

“I understand completely -,” Takumi replied not really understanding any of it. “*Still*, I suppose there’s no harm in practice,” he suggested putting his arm around her.

“*Yeah* - kinda’ cold out here,” she observed shaking him off.

“Yes, but do you see that beautiful hotel down there? I have a funny feeling if we inquire we will find there has just been a most unexpected cancellation.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Well I suppose I could use a hot bath. Besides, Bell and Keiichi deserve a night alone. It would be terribly inconsiderate of us not to take into account their feelings.”

He smiled back at her. “Urd you know Skuld’s still there. If you really wanted to give them a night alone -.”

“*I don’t*,” she sighed.

“Me either.”

Urd stood up putting her hand around his waist as together they walked down the hill. “Tai, are you alright? Skuld told me everything that happened.”

“*No I’m not*,” he said sadly shaking his head. But having you here helps - a lot.” They continued on but Tenori’s interest in Abyss still bothered him. “Tear. Sorano said the same thing to me once. Urd?”

“Yes,” she replied snapping off a piece of her earring and tossing it to the wind.

“What are you doing?”

“Letting Bell know where we’re tonight so she won’t worry.”

He realized there were still many things about goddesses he did not understand.

“Is that what you wanted to ask me?”

“*No*. The foundation stones. They need to be here on earth right?”

“If they’re to be used. For only in this realm do the gateways to both domains exist simultaneously.”

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“Have they ever had a connection to the word *tear*?”

“We commonly refer to them as the ‘Tears of Heaven’.”

So that was what she wanted. It had never occurred to him that Abyss might be used to locate *other* stones. But in Hild’s hands he felt certain now that was precisely what she had planned to do if the opportunity ever arose.

Urd gave him a nudge. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but I just realized something.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not that bright.”

She took his hand pushing open the lobby door. “That’s okay - I already knew that,” she whispered happily approaching the front desk.

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Three days later Urd and Takumi returned from Nikko.

Coming to the front gate they could see a transformation was already beginning to take hold of the temple.

“You see Skuld I told you they’d come back,” Keiichi shouted from high atop the ladder as he busily strung paper lanterns from one side of the yard to the other. Reaching the front porch the two men shook hands, smiling like boys caught up in some great adventure.

“Good to see you in one piece Keiichi.”

“Same to you old man. You know Skuld missed you guys a lot.”

“I did not you, you, lying *liar!*” she protested. “And I told you my calculations say we need more lanterns!”

Over the next few weeks the preparations continued at an ever increasing pace. Every day Takumi saw more and more people at the temple fewer and fewer of whom he recognized. Keiichi noticed as the day of the party approached he seemed to grow increasingly nervous. “It’ll be alright,” he urged, watching as he paced the front of the shrine one afternoon.

“Of course,” the other replied. “*After all what could go wrong?*”

Our partners, goddesses whom are among the most beautiful women in existence will be here, surrounded by numerous other superhuman deities while we stand to one side; forming a sort of – contrast.”

Keiichi smiled but also began to furrow his brow. “Not that we’re worried.”

“No of course not. *What’s to be worried about? It’s just a little party -*,” Takumi said, mimicking Urd’s remark the previous evening.

The morning of the party eventually came with Takumi lying to one side in Urd’s small room continuing to brood. *This is ridiculous*, he thought. If I’ve faced Hild, why am I so

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concerned about this goddess-party-thing? After all, it's just a measure of how we are to be perceived throughout their whole community. And things have gone so well so far with all the goddesses I've met, - *Belldandy*, - *Lind*, - *Skuld*. Yeah I'm sure meeting a *couple hundred of them today* will pose no problem at all, he thought sullenly. *I know what I'll do. I'll roll over and look at Urd*. The sight of her sleeping face never fails to – “*Augh!*” he cried turning around only to see Urd staring back at him from an inch away.

“Well today's the day. Are you ready?” she teased.

“Ready? *Of course I'm ready*. Extremely ready!” he replied scowling.

“Then maybe you should get dressed. I have a feeling today's going to be a *busy* day.”

He thought the correct phrase might be *long day* as pulling on his clothes he heard her call, “What is that you're wearing?”

“This? This is what I'll dressing in today,” he said tugging on the indigo haori coat. On its back, chest and shoulder it bore mons of four white diamonds arranged in a larger diamond motif.

“I don't know if that's really right for presentation.”

“I thought we weren't going to be traditional,” he said eyeing her earthen toned gown. Besides, Naru gave me this. It was Sen's.”

She grew silent. It had only been a few weeks and she knew the issue still pained him greatly. But then she smiled watching him wrap the right side of the coat over the left securing it in the manner reserved for those to be buried.

“You *sure* that's the way you want to go?”

“I'm told it's the way they're *used* to seeing me,” he said mischievously.

“Yeah, *great*,” Urd said re-tying the coat from left to right, “maybe we should try for a happier note today?”

He walked the hallway only to spy Keiichi sitting quietly in the tea room. “*Hey*, what are you getting on my case for? *Keiichi's wearing a sweater!*”

Urd smacked the back of his head, “*Belldandy made him that sweater!*”

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“Well at least no one will confuse us,” Keiichi said observed taking in his appearance.

Takumi grinned in response. “Probably just as – *holy cow Skuld, look at you!*” Behind them Skuld entered wearing a dress of Indian mahogany which seemed to sparkle in tiny iridescent flakes of red and blue.

“It’s cool isn’t it? I formed aluminum oxides and silicates doped with chromium at high pressure. *Then - .*”

“*Good morning,*” Belldandy sang coming out in her apron.

“Is that what you’re wearing today?” Takumi asked puzzled.

Urd’s hand moved again but this time he caught her. “I hope you’re not thinking of making a habit of that,” he cried grabbing her.

“*Let go.*” Belldandy and I discussed it last night. She’s coming down later in the day. *Alright you guys,* you have some work to do don’t you?” she said shooing them out the door.

For the next several hours they each took turns running up and down the forest path connecting the parklands and the temple trying to finish their preparations. Returning on their final trip of the afternoon they could see that a group of goddesses and others had already begun to gather with Urd and Belldandy on the veranda. As expected, Keiichi and Takumi took turns shaking hands and nodding politely. From a number of arrivals clearly not from this realm of existence Takumi frequently heard the word *Yggdrasil* mentioned when he asked what they did. Made him wonder how big this ‘Yagdraszelle’ really was. In one group he was pleased to encounter several goddesses with the names *Axe*, *Ear* and *Crono*. He listened now with rapt attention as they told him a rather different version of a story Urd had previously relayed.

“Hmm I see - so basically you’re telling me she crashed an entire section of the heavens?” he asked eyeing her suspiciously across the porch.

“Sacrifices are sometimes necessary to save the place,” Urd shrugged waving her hands. “It’s probably hard for you to understand it all thought.”

“Tell me, does she use that justification *a lot* when things explode?”

“*Yes!*,” they shouted in unison.

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“Oh, they just don’t remember it right - in the midst of the panic and all. Now you’ll have to excuse us sir -,” she said leaning down to grab up half a dozen bottles of sake. “But we administrators have an important staff meeting we have to attend right about now,” she said directing them to the rear of the house.

“*Good,*” cried Chrono. “Now we can find out what *really* goes on around here. I’ve heard so many rumors,” she said following behind.

“*By the way -*,” shouted Takumi as they disappeared around the corner, “who’s watching Yggdrasil *right now?*”

Urd shrugged continuing toward the shed.

“*Actually that explains a lot,*” he muttered returning to the courtyard. As for Belldandy, Takumi was beginning to think she must be some kind of celebrity in the heavens given the amount of attention she was being paid. Walking with the gathering of them now down the half-mile path through the forest he almost felt sorry for Keiichi. But as they entered the meadows Takumi realized it was he who was truly alone. For he knew almost no one. By contrast Keiichi was quickly surrounded by the growing number of the Nekomi Tech Auto Club members. Much to his relief Skuld soon found him, and together they walked through the ever growing crowd.

“It’s the beginning of December Skuld. It should be cooler. How are you keeping this place so warm?”

“*Genius,*” she replied casually passing the impromptu stage they had finished only hours before. “You see those big rocks we scattered around here? Well inside each of them is a small amount of radioactivity-.”

“What?!”

“*I’m kidding.* You see, I’m a genius of both invention *and* social conversation.” They wandered on, passing beneath the banners of lanterns running out from the stage. As they did Skuld called on Noble Scarlet to quickly begin lighting each in turn. Her enthusiasm soon had several completely aflame.

“*Noble Scarlet,*” she cried as the diminutive angel zipped about attempting to control the fire only further fanning the flames. “What will the other goddesses think?!”

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But Takumi's attention had been drawn elsewhere. "Who's that over there?" he said noticing a particularly striking goddess walking up the path back to the temple. "The one dressed in - *err*, leather?"

"That's Peorth remember? The one whose gate you jumped through."

"Of course! *That's* why I recognize her . . . Not an altogether unattractive woman really," he said taking note of her outfit.

"Let me give you a hint mister. There really aren't a lot of *unattractive* goddesses out there."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he said embarrassed.

"Plus she's a major -."

"Don't say it Skuld."

"*P-e-r-v*," she mouthed silently. As they approached a gathering of the Nekomi Tech auto club members alongside one of the central tents, Takumi became aware of two men staring at him intently.

"Hey Otaki, you see that? Doesn't he look like the guy we buried a couple of months ago?"

His friend looked over squinting. "To tell you the truth dude, I kinda' stopped asking questions about things at Keiichi's place a *long* time ago."

"Hmm, good idea," agreed Tamiya.

"Hello, how are you today?" Takumi nodded trying to greet them.

The two stared back saying nothing. "Yeah that's definitely weird," said Tamiya as they moved off in search of more food.

"*Definitely weird* . . ."

Takumi turned to Skuld quizzically.

"Oh that's just -."

"*Something else you forgot to tell me?*" he said, reciting the line he had heard frequently over the last several weeks. "You know Skuld, sometimes I wonder what *else* you haven't bothered to tell me."

"Oh I'm sure that pretty much covers it," she said racing away as she spotted Sentaro coming out of the forest.

"*Uh-huh*," he replied facing the crowd. Unfortunately for Takumi Sato, at that moment one more thing no one had bothered to tell him about was headed directly for him.

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“So *this* is what all the fuss is about? She can’t possibly be serious,” cried the flamboyantly dressed figure now appearing before him with a group of others. Several chuckled.

Takumi turned on them hesitantly. “*Umm*, do I know you Tinkerbelle?” he asked surveying the newcomer.

“You should if you’re spending time with *my Urd!*” replied the man.

In all fairness it could be said that Takumi Sato possessed several bad habits. One was his tendency to circle things he viewed as hostile. It was a habit born of the dojo which had helped him over the years determine the space his opponents were willing to defend. And so it was now that he slowly began to circle his new visitor. “You want to run that by me again?” he said tightening the muscles of his upper body. Fortunately for the festivities Keiichi’s sharp eyes spotted Takumi’s deliberate movements. For he had seen this behavior before. *Oh this could be bad*, he thought darting through the group. “*Excuse me, pardon me, coming through,*” he yelled pushing his way past auto club members to reach the group. Takumi was moving patiently now, careful to keep his hands low and in front of him. Though meant to be so, the gesture did not come across as entirely peaceful. “You have something *specific* you want to say to me Tinkerbelle?” he growled gritting his teeth.

“I said - you’d best watch *your step* if you’re seeing *my Urd*,” the man replied forcefully.

“I don’t know what you’ve been drinking Tinkerbelle, but you should stop. *Now*. Before something *bad* happens to you.”

But the man had already turned his attention to the crowd.

“Who is this *Tinkerbelle* of whom he speaks?”

“A character from a children’s story,” Takumi interrupted coming behind him. “One I assumed you’d be familiar with, given the fact you obviously buy your clothing from the same place. Tinkerbelle, you know, as in *a little fairy pixie*,” he hissed closing his fists.

“What do the Pixies have to do with this?” the man replied throwing him a confused look.

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His rival could no longer contain his amusement. "You see, I just *knew* someone like you would know all about *little pixies*. Now about that *something bad that was going to happen to you* . . ."

At that moment Keiichi finally broke into the group, "Out of the way- coming through!" he yelled. "Okay Takumi, come on, lots of things to do today -," he said pulling his stubbornly resisting companion along beside him.

"Ta-ku-mi?" muttered the man. "That name means *artisan*. Tell me what are these arts you know?"

"*Good question*," he replied turning from Keiichi's rather persistent grip. "And one I'll be more than happy to answer for you," he said facing his him. "But first what is your name Tinkerbelle?" It was however Keiichi who first provided him the answer, whispering in his ear. He burst into laughter.

"WHAT?! Keiichi, you have *got* to be kidding me! I mean the name, the clothes, the attitude - they all go together so *perfectly*."

His ego now been bruised, Troubadour pushed out from the crowd calling to him. "Come here *creature*, for I am not done speaking with you. For that is most certainly what you are. For you are *not* one of us." There was a general murmur of agreement from Troubadour's supporters.

"Oh you needn't worry about me going anywhere," Takumi said drawing himself to his full height.

"Oh man!" Keiichi groaned at their escalating conflict. "Hey can I get a little help over here!"

Skuld now pushed her way to the front of the crowd. "Alright Keiichi, what is it you've gotten yourself into this - *uh-oh*," she said taking in the scene.

"I think you pretty much get the picture," he replied.

"Yes it is I, *Troubadour!*" said the man, announcing himself as one might announce the coming of a king. "Surely you understand now to whom you speak," he said thoroughly pleased with himself. Takumi looked back at him bewildered.

"In truth I've never even *heard* of you before this moment. Not that in matters. Because if you've come here to upset Urd, *believe* me everyone will know your name when I 'm done - ripping you to pieces," he said dangerously.

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Though the response entertained some in the crowd Troubadour recovered quickly.

“So it’s just as we were told, you are indeed a vicious beast. Oh and by the way if you do not know my name you need look no further than upon the wrist of your beloved. For I assure you *will* find it there.” At this, Troubadour’s supporters in the crowd began to enthusiastically jeer Takumi.

But he did not seem to hear them. In fact in that moment he did not seem to hear anything; his face registering nothing but shock. “*What did you say?*” he breathed coming close. From the look on Takumi’s face Keiichi wondered if the day’s festivities might not end in a funeral. The crowd too seemed to grow quiet. But Troubadour sensed his opportunity and sprang. “You did not know? *Ah*, but of course you didn’t. I see it now in the dull look in your eyes. Why would she tell you? You’re but a passing moment in her life; whereas she and I have known each other for many years. How clear it all is to me now. How could I possibly have been concerned?” he said triumphantly.

Takumi looked at the ground saying nothing. As the moments passed Keiichi began to feel inwardly embarrassed for him. Skuld too seemed distraught. “*Deck him*,” she whispered finally coming alongside him. But Takumi merely stood there, brooding pensively before taking hold of Troubadour’s hand. “I hope that all you have said here today is the truth, *for if not -*,” his grip tightened menacingly, “*believe me you will regret it.*” Then he simply walked away, away from the crowd and away from the party, making for the small hill at the end of the meadow. Skuld, who couldn’t bear to hear the murmurings which erupted behind her chased after him; but Keiichi grabbed her as she passed. “*Let him go Skuld.*”

“Get off me Keiichi!” she protested pulling free, continuing to run, catching him only as he reached the crest of the hill.

“That Troubadour’s such a jerk. Why didn’t you just punch him?”

“It wouldn’t solve anything . . .” he said somberly looking to the horizon.

“... or maybe we should just go find Urd?” she suggested hopefully, becoming more and more worried at his tone.

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But Takumi simply continued to gaze into the distance. "Is it true?" he asked finally.

"Umm, what?" she said, hoping he was not asking what she thought he was asking.

"-You know. Everyone in the heavens knows - apparently. *Everyone but me.*" he said forlornly.

"Well Troubadour was a long time ago. Almost before I was born," she tried hopefully.

"I see. And the bracelet?" His tone was not improving.

"Umm, I don't know really," she replied starting to tremble.

He looked down at her. "What does your sister always say?"

"*That a goddess should always tell the truth -*," she said her dark eyes beginning to cloud.

"So?"

Skuld continued to look up but said nothing, the tears welling in her eyes. She was beginning to think that today might not wind up being such a happy day after all.

When Keiichi finally located Urd, he found she was not at the party at all but rather sitting with Peorth and half a dozen other goddesses in the utility shed. Approaching he could see they were all enjoying themselves immensely, having already consumed a considerable volume of sake; at least by any human standard. He spied Urd with her back to the doorway as Peorth sat on the ground across from her nestled against K2. Just before he reached the doorway Peorth silently signaled to Urd who immediately reached behind herself, throwing him into the center of the group much to the amusement of the collected goddesses.

"Ah there's my little Keiichi," she purred over-affectionate from too much sake.

"*URD!*" he cried.

"Aww c'mon Keiichi it's just us girls here. You can tell us the truth. Isn't this your dream come true?" she said waving her arms around the collected goddesses.

"Hi Keiichi!" Peorth chimed along playfully, tossing back another large glass of sake.

"Urd knock it off! I've been looking all over for you"

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His announcement only provoked wilder responses from the goddesses. As their self-appointed ringleader Urd played it for all it was worth.

"I see - so that's how it is," she said moving toward him slyly.

"We always knew strange things were going on down here,"

Ere laughed delighted.

"After all - why else would Urd stay," howled Ex.

"Oh you don't know the half of it," Urd said giving them a knowing wink, putting her arms around him affectionately.

"But not with this guy -," she slurred weaving a bit as she spoke. *"No this guy . . . he's a goood guy,"* she stated exuberantly squeezing Keiichi's cheeks. *"Now if we could just get him and Bell a bit more -,"* Keiichi preferred not to imagine what her uncoordinated hand movements were meant to imply.

"Right Peorth? Peorth?!" Urd yelled calling her.

"Aye-aye captain," Peorth replied saluting immediately before passing out onto Keiichi. The goddesses shrieked with laughter as her unconscious body slumped in his lap.

"That's the problem these days! Issss jesss impossible to find good help," she grumbled lifting one of Peorth's limp arms.

"We know that's why we work with you!" yelled Ere.

"Urd listen to me! I have something to tell you!"

"Shhhh," she said not hearing a word he'd uttered. *"We're having a veeery secret goddess meeting in here,"* she said waving her arms drunkenly as she attempted to stand, moving to retrieve yet another bottle of sake. *"It's all very husssh husssh,"* she said almost tripping over Keiichi and Peorth on her return. The rowdy goddesses started to chant, *"Sake, sake."* She slid down the wall beside him. *"Don't tell anyone this Keiichi,"* she whispered opening the bottle, *"But I'm veeery happy right now."* She leaned against him slowly sipping from the bottle. He smiled watching as she chatted with the other goddesses. Every now and again there were moments like this when he felt like he could see the real Urd. The girl that must have been so long ago when she and Belldandy were young. He was thankful that in her present state she probably had no way of knowing how very important to him she really was.

"By the way -," Urd said now eyeing him suspiciously, *"You didn't hear what I was saying about Lind earlier did you? I*

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mean I don't really *know* if she has something stuffed up -."

Another outburst of laughter from the group cut her short.

"Urd will you please *listen* to me for a minute? Troubadour and Takumi just got into this big -."

The mention of the two words together seemed to have a sudden and sobering effect on her. She began to snap out of her sake-induced stupor. "What?! What did you say?"

"Troubadour and Takumi, out in the field," he repeated.

"Where? Where is he now?" she said getting up.

"Which one?"

"*The other idiot*. My idiot can take care of himself," she said reaching the door. She stopped. "He hasn't done anything rash has he?"

"*Who? Takumi?*"

"You know someone else who does rash things?!" She looked out squinting into the afternoon sunlight. "I mean we're *trying* to make a good impression today."

He stared back at her a blankly.

"Oh shut up Keiichi! People already *know* I'm a screw-up. Now what happened," she said wobbling a bit as she walked to the side of the temple.

"Well it's kind of complicated."

"But nobody's dead yet?" Keiichi could tell from her tone she was only half-kidding.

"No, the last time I saw them they were -." Without further hesitation she was gone in the direction he'd pointed.

He stood watching her go when suddenly he heard the calls from the shed. He turned to see three of the goddesses attempting to drag Peorth's unconscious body out of the shed in a most ungainly fashion.

"Hey Keiichi is there anywhere we can leave this?" they said dropping her where she lay. "We want to go back to the party."

"*Jeez*. Okay, I'll take care of it."

"Thanks Keiichi, you're the best!" they cried in unison.

"Yeah sure, the best - *at getting myself into these situations*," he said trying to pick up the scantily clad goddess from the ground. Once he was sure he had a hold of her he headed for the house. But he'd no sooner turned the corner than ran into

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Belldandy. The two looked at each other awkwardly for a moment as Peorth snuggled in his arms.

"My, she certainly looks comfortable there," Belldandy observed.

"Umm well, she passed out you see," he began.

"Uh-huh."

"-And then they asked me to take care of her," he continued.

"I see."

"So . . . should I just put her in Skuld's room?" he asked trying to curtail the conversation as quickly as possible given Peorth continued nuzzling against him.

"Perhaps," Belldandy shrugged.

He looked back as innocently as possible. "I'm kind of in trouble aren't I?"

"Maybe," she said giving him an encouraging smile.

He sighed. "Well okay then. Hope I see you out there," he said carrying his cumbersome package into the house.

Urd's anger grew as she approached the parklands. *"He didn't even want this. I could see how nervous it was all making him,"* she thought testily. What she wanted most at that moment was someone to vent her anger on. As it turned out she didn't have to look very far. Approaching Troubadour's group she heard his voice cry, "Really Urd, if you were so desperate for companionship I would have gladly answered your call." The muscles of her jaw clenched hearing several of his companions chuckle. *Be calm,* she told herself. No roasting, no burning. *Not yet anyway.* This is a social occasion after all.

"Honestly Troubadour I just didn't consider you," she replied evenly. "The truth is I've simply reached an age where I've outgrown *boys* and need to be with a *man*." At her words members of the crowd including Otaki and Tamiya began to yell their support.

"Urd please, that mongrel? He is not our kind. I'm sure that with a short refresher you'd forget all about him and eagerly rekindle our love," he stated confidently.

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"Interesting proposition. I gladly accept your offer," she replied. There came a few gasps but mostly stunned silence from the crowd.

"I'm not surprised," shrugged Troubadour.

"Yes I will gladly fly to your arms and forget all about him, provided you can show me you are at least his equal. After all, a person of my status should be with the best possible man."

"That shouldn't be hard. I should think the possessor of that title is already obvious."

"*Really?* So you've fought Hild's demons single-handedly, freeing my sister from their power *and* destroyed a devil of Mezzumura's rank? I'm sorry I couldn't quite hear your answer?" she hissed to the crowd.

"These things you *say* he's done, how do we know that any of them are true?" shouted one of Troubadour's comrades.

"*Because I was there,*" murmured a voice at the back. A moment later Lind emerged from the crowd to stand before them. Long feared for her ferocity even in the heavens the crowd seemed to shrink back on her approach.

"I can tell you what I saw. I saw him take Hild to the ground. I saw her depart while he remained. Perhaps not surprising, given it was he who lifted the barrier protecting the demonic gateway in the mountains." Murmurs broke out among the crowd upon hearing the news, in no small part because the repulsion of Hild's forces was an event known to many present.

"No, that cannot be true," remarked Troubadour. "For that man was killed."

"-And is risen again," replied Lind. "It appears some souls are hard to kill - *even for Hild,*" she added for dramatic effect. Looking to the crowd, Urd now saw nothing but wide-eyed silence.

"I have seen him in battle, he does not hesitate. One wonders how he would react in - *other* situations," she mused, allowing the thought to sink in. Troubadour seemed suddenly reluctant to meet her gaze. Instead he looked to his left - directly into Urd's awaiting eyes.

"So should I go ahead and set up that match with Hild?" she asked aloud. "I'm sure she would just *love* to meet someone who thinks they can best her."

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Troubadour seemed to go pale. After some seconds of reflection he answered, "Urd my love, you know that your happiness is my heart's only desire. And to that end we must each travel our paths to the great destinies which await," departing without further explanation or elaboration as quickly as possible.

"Yeah, somehow I thought that would your response,"

muttered Urd. "*Man* what did I ever see in the guy?"

She turned sheepishly now to Lind. "*Err*, thank you."

"I only spoke the truth. And what I did I did not do for you."

She turned to leave but stopped. "I forgot to congratulate you. *May the two of you use your time well*," she said disappearing into the crowd.

Urd stood staring after her. *Well maybe she isn't all bad*, she thought. Still, it bothers me to hear her talk about Tai like that. In either case it takes care of one of them. Now to deal with the other.

She spotted him before long, standing alone on the hillside looking east. Drawing closer she saw his head was down, arms folded against his chest. *Is he upset?*

"Hey there you are," she said landing lightly beside him.

"Hello Urd," he said not looking up. He sounded grim.

Yep he's upset. "So - should we head back to the party?"

He looked away. "I was just hearing about your past," he replied thoughtfully.

"*Hey!* I never said I didn't have one!"

"True enough. And the bracelet? Is it true you still wear it?"

Unconsciously she covered it with her hand. *Dammit why do I still have that thing?* "C'mon, you can't let something like that upset you."

But Takumi remained impassive. "No it's not that. It's true I was surprised but it just - - I just need some time to think. I'll see you later," he said walking away.

"Tai!" *How dare he! And on today of all days!*

"Urd what are you doing over there?" called Exe. "Come on back to the party."

It wouldn't do any good trying to talk to him now anyways, she thought. Best to just leave him be for the moment. Still, as she

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returned with Exe to the party she gave a long parting glance in his direction.

Up in the kitchen Belldandy stood surrounded by a number of fellow first-class goddesses, busily preparing all they would need for the evening's festivities. Outside several Valkyries with whom she'd grown close over the years walked the grounds admiring her new earthbound home. Together they discussed all the recent events in the heavens; along with more local goings on.

"Just saw your sister Bell. You know, the one you're supposed to *presenting* with today? Seems she's got one boyfriend too many down there," observed Saga walking in from the veranda. "*Oh?* Well it's great they all have a chance to visit," Belldandy said trying not to sound too concerned.

"-And Peorth is already passed out in the back," announced Sunna amused.

"*Well that I did know -*," murmured Belldandy.

"And the sun's not even down yet. Yep, looks like it's shaping up to be one of your typical parties," Var chuckled nudging her friend good-naturedly.

Belldandy looked up from the pot brushing back her hair.

"They're celebrating Var. And in truth we have a lot to celebrate and be thankful for," she observed.

"-I think you need something called *on-ions* for this," Sunna mused anxiously peering into one of Belldandy's cookbooks.

"Yes I'll go get some," she said ducking outside

As she walked to the garden however, Belldandy sensed that something was not right. Moving to the side of the temple wall she began to search for its source. Reaching the ridge she spotted him, sitting alone on the far side of the maple tree.

Slowly she made her way down, calmly kneeling behind him.

"Takumi?"

"*Yes.*"

"Are you alright?"

He shook his head continuing to look forward. "Yes I'm fine; thank you for asking," he replied reluctantly.

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But she was far too attuned to accept this. Though she sensed the source of his concern she wanted to be certain. "*I'm sure Urd will be missing you at the party,*" she ventured encouragingly. Though he said nothing she felt the surge in his anxiety.

"That's not important now," he replied.

"But you love her don't you?"

"That's not the same thing as . . . *deserving her,*" he observed somberly. "If you love someone, *really* love them, shouldn't you do what's best for them? *No matter how much it hurts?* In the beginning all I thought about was being with her. About how she made me feel. I just thought about myself. But now, now I think I understand why you didn't want us to be together. You knew I could never live up to her; not really. That eventually I would let her down. I tried not to think about that for a long time. But the more I think about it now the more I know I'm not the best choice for her," he said struggling to continue. "I know you were just trying to protect her Belldandy. *I know now that's all you were ever trying to do.* In the end - she's a creature from the heavens. And I . . . *I'm not,*" he said sadly.

Belldandy listened as he gave voice to the impossibility of their future together. And she knew well of what he spoke, for had she not wrestled with the same thoughts herself so many nights? *In the end, wouldn't they be happier if -?* She felt his words move through her heart just as she felt the wind in the trees, the water creeping over the earth, and fate as it swept its hands over the landscape forever changing it. But so too she could see things which he could not, and carried a possession of hope in things yet to come. And it was this which she now sought to convey to him, as they knelt together that day in the forest. "I understand of what you speak. But I know now it's not up to any one of us."

"She deserves more. To deny that is to accept one's own selfishness."

"Isn't that up to her? Shouldn't you trust her enough to let her make her own decisions?" she replied remembering Keiichi's words. But she could feel her thoughts were no longer reaching him.

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"This life is a dream," he said looking at the tender words carved in the gravestone. "But I do not think it is a dream which can last -." She knew now his emotions had finally closed him off from any outside influence. "I just want you to know how thankful I am to all of you for giving me a home - *and love*. I will always remember you Belldandy. I wish you and Keiichi much happiness."

In that instant her heart went out to him. She looked up saying, "There is no one I would trust to protect Urd's heart more than you, and I would be proud to have you in my family."

Takumi closed his eyes turning away, embarrassed by his own thoughts and emotion at her words. But as a goddess such things did not matter to Belldandy. She continued, "Because that's how we feel Takumi. It's true that when you came I was afraid. Mostly because Urd had never let someone so deeply into her heart before. I was afraid that if anything happened, in the end she would be more lonely and isolated than ever. But now I know that the two of you are just part of what's supposed to happen. That you're an important part of what's to come."

"You know or you think you know?"

She put her hand to his shoulder standing up. "All our actions guide the future. But that is all they do. They *guide*. In the end there is only what you're willing to fight for, what's in your heart." She released him returning to the temple.

He looked back at her as she reached the ridge. "Belldandy, may I ask you something?"

"Yes," she replied brilliantly illuminated by the setting sun.

"Were you ever . . . a *Valkyrie*?"

"No," she said shaking her head. "*But my mother was*," she murmured quietly, continuing down the far side of the hill.

Arriving at the temple Belldandy saw Urd pacing anxiously at front of the house.

"Have you seen Takumi?" she asked.

"Why?"

"WHY? WHY?! Because Skuld wants to build an interactive map of him. *Why do you think I'm looking for him?! That stupid Troubadour.*"

"I don't think that's really the problem."

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Urd turned to stare at her. "So you *have* seen him."

"Urd I need to talk to you," she said pulling her to one side.

"So talk!"

"*Not here,*" she replied glancing toward the kitchen. Together they crossed the bamboo gate and up the steps into the main temple. Entering Belldandy closed the door behind her stepping close to her older sister.

"What's going on?" asked Urd.

Though Belldandy was nervous she knew what she had to do.

"Urd, what would you do if something happened and Takumi . . . well he didn't love you anymore?" she said quietly.

"WHAT?!" was all Urd could reply.

"What would you do?"

"Is this some kind of joke?! Because it's not funny. And I don't have time for it now!" she growled.

"*No, its not.*"

"I don't know. I guess I'd be sad," she said crossing her arms.

"Urd, *listen*. This is serious. *What would you do if he didn't love you anymore?*"

Urd's irritation was becoming more palpable by the second. "I don't know sis, it's not something I think about. Anyway it's not going to happen."

Belldandy continued to stare, her eyes pleading. "Urd I'm asking you - *what would you do?*"

Slowly Urd's expression began to change. "Why the hell are you asking me this? On today of all days?!" she cried anxiously.

But Belldandy merely continued to look back sadly.

"WHY?!" demanded Urd, the stress beginning to tell in her voice. "Did Takumi say something?"

Reluctantly Belldandy nodded.

Her eyes went wide with shock. "Well what - did the two of you talk about?" she asked fear beginning to show in her face.

"Urd, *what would you do?*"

Urd stared at her trying to read her thoughts and began to tremble. The truth of her question was beginning to sink in. But when she spoke her voice was clear, "I don't have to worry about that because," her voice suddenly began to waver, "*- because he loves me Bell.*" Her eyes began to tear as she

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pointed a trembling finger to her sister, desperate to convince her, “He *does* love me,” she shouted crying. “And he - *he will always love me*, because . . . *because he said so!*” she sobbed. She was speaking more to herself now than Belldandy. “He wouldn’t just leave, *I know he wouldn’t*,” she said tears streaming down her face. “Because -*he means so much to me!*” “*I know Urd*,” Belldandy said taking hold of her. “I’m just not sure he does. Have you ever told him how you feel? *Really?* About everything?”

“*Why are you saying all this!*”

“Because he feels the way you do right now Urd. He’s worried he’s not worthy of you, that eventually he’ll disappoint you. That’s why he thinks you’d be better off in the long term without him. Urd you need to -.”

“Okay Bell I get it,” she said breaking away, wiping her tears as she ran for the door. “Where is he Bell? Where is he *right now?!?*”

“When I left him he was at the marker, beside -.” Urd was gone before she could utter another word.

For most of her life Urd had worked hard to feign indifference. On any normal day she could easily have sprung into the air and landed right beside him. But today day she ran, ran from the temple like when she was a child trying to catch the receding shape of her mother as she faded away.

Please just let him be there, she thought running down the path. Reaching the ridge she spotted him, kneeling down as he looked at something.

She raced from the hill coming up behind him. “*Hey you*,” she said immediately chastising herself for the words. *That’s not the way to begin*, she thought.

Takumi continued to kneel quietly. Looking over his shoulder she could see his hand was upon the central symbol carved into the gravestone. Tears welled in her eyes. “*I never taught you what that meant*,” she said quietly.

“Yes, but I know. I know what it must be.”

Her tears were falling freely now. “*Yes but I never said it Tai!* I never said the words - *I love you!*” She threw her arms around him holding him tight as she let her emotions go.

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"I know," Takumi said bowing his head. "That's why what happens now is so important. That's why I want you to be happy and have everything you deserve."

She tightened her hold on him as though he might vanish on the spot. "*Don't even think about it Tai,*" she said pressing her head against him. "Don't even think about giving up on us. *Not now.* Not after everything we've been through. I mean I know you're stupid - but you're not *that* stupid," she said hugging him. "*I love you so much,*" she muttered, tears falling on his shoulder. "I just could never come right out and tell you because - I don't know I was - *embarrassed,*" she said shaking her head. "You and I - the way we are, I was just way too concerned about what you might think of me if - but I should have told you. I should have told you that day on the ridge," she cried.

Takumi reached back grabbing her hand. "What *I* would think? *Embarrassed?*" His voice was bound, choked with emotion. "Not possible indigo. Because I've already screwed up enough for both of us. The truth is I'm here because I didn't have the strength to leave. Because - I couldn't imagine going on without you." He shut his eyes trying to hold back his tears. "*I just hope I haven't disappointed you too much or screwed everything up beyond all -*" But he could say no more. Beside him Urd cried, but now they were tears of happiness.

"You haven't," she said shaking her head.

"*You're my life,*" he said humbly pulling her to him. "Let's just live as we can - experiencing the world each day, helping it forward," he said looking to her amethyst eyes.

"*Sounds good to me,*" she replied curling up in his arms.

For several minutes under the maple tree everything was calm. The last rays of the afternoon sun shone down on them as they kissed passionately. But all too soon they heard a rustling in the trees on their left. "*Oh my god why don't you guys get a room already!*" bellowed the tree. "Making out on the gravestone that I helped carve?! I'm going to need serious therapy if I keep having to see this stuff!"

But Urd and Takumi were too thankful for each other in that moment to pay her much mind. Finally Urd shouted, "Skuld you know we love you."

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"Yeah? Well I don't need your love. From either of you! So there!" said the tree shaking.

"But if that's true why aren't you at the party? Why would you be here for any reason other than to spy on us?" asked Urd.

The trees grew silent. "I just needed to - I was just checking . . . what is this an interrogation?! Everywhere I go it's always an interrogation, - where are my tools, - where's the TV, - what happened to my motorcycle, - why are you looking at us like that." They heard her voice echoing as she retreated back down the trail. "I don't know, you try to help -."

"It's okay Skuld!" Takumi cried. "You know we're happy to have you stay."

"Yeah," chimed Urd. "-And if you do you just might learn something," she replied hugging him.

"Oh man," moaned Skuld, her small footsteps now rapidly retreating down the path.

"Hmm, looks like you're not that entertaining after all Indigo," Takumi said turning to her.

"She's not the one I'm trying to entertain. Now come here you."

"Hey weren't we supposed to make some kind of an appearance today?"

"Yeah but you have to understand. Time is kind of relative when you're a goddess. When Belldandy received her first class goddess license the party went on for four days."

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By the time Urd and Takumi returned to the party, Belldandy had changed and joined Keiichi below. As she came now into the illuminated meadow with several of her fellow goddesses it felt as though in some intangible way hope itself had come upon the grounds.

Urd stood with him among the darkening trees at the park's edge. "*Do you see that?* I've been compared to *that* my whole life. You know what I mean?"

He nodded. "Yes I know. It's the same magic I feel whenever I look at you."

"Awww, that's so sappy," she said pushing him over.

"You'll pay for that comment later trust me," he said rising to catch her as they descended into the crowd. They soon found that Peorth had apparently recovered enough to rejoin the party, spotting her waving happily with several others at the far side of the stage. Urd continued through the crowd, unaware Takumi was no longer following her. An instant later she heard him shout her name so loudly she was sure everyone in the park had heard him. She froze. "What are you doing?!" she hissed turning around, a desperate look beginning to form on her face.

Takumi ignored her continuing: "*Let it be known to all gathered here today that I bow before no man -*," he shouted as smiling guests began to crowd around them.

"*Tai . . .*," she whispered pleadingly.

"*-but I gladly kneel at your feet,*" he said lowering himself dramatically before her. The crowd burst into laughter with cheers and applause; perhaps Peorth most of all.

"*Tai we do not* make speeches like that at these sorts of things," she said trying to pull him upright. "Now get up you old fool!" she said blushing intensely.

He rose at her side eyeing her mischievously, "Are you *certain* of that?"

The Guardian

Like much of the crowd Belldandy had laughed and cheered them on. That is, until she *too* heard her name called. Now it was Urd's turn to laugh as Belldandy spun around wide-eyed in shock. "*Oh no, no Keiichi -*," she waved as he called to her. "**BELLDANDY!**"

The guests quickly fell silent to hear him speak.

Urd turned suspiciously to her partner as he looked on, clearly quite pleased with himself. "You and Keiichi made some kind of childish immature little bet didn't you? Tied to your manhood?"

"*Possibly,*" he muttered continuing to stare in their direction.

"Belldandy," Keiichi said lowering his head. "*You are my friend, my companion, the one with whom I share all that is my life. For you I would walk into the very fires of Hell.*"

Urd looked over puzzled.

"I helped with that part -," Takumi said proudly.

"Yeah - *great,*" Urd replied wholly unimpressed.

"*I - cannot imagine my world without you,*" Keiichi stammered growing nervous. "*What I'm trying to say is, Belldandy you are my goddess. And I love you above all else in this world.*"

Takumi had no idea what the normal protocol was for an event such as this. But at that moment Belldandy flew to Keiichi's arms as Megumi and the auto club members cheered wildly.

"*Humph,*" Skuld said watching the scene dismissively.

"You see what she just did there? Now that was nice," observed Takumi.

Urd shot him a glance throwing back her silvery hair, "Tai considering I *actually have* walked into those fires for you, I'd say I'm pretty much covered."

"*I see your point,*" he laughed kissing her.

Like a rather large cat Peorth now pounced upon the stage.

"Well if there are no further *love proclamations,*" she said looking to Urd and Belldandy, both of whom still looked a bit mortified, "perhaps we might hear from the *third* sister."

The lights flashed and Skuld suddenly looked up in terror from the center of the crowd. But just as quickly Sentaro jumped in front of her shouting, "Well she's cool, and an excellent mechanic. So leave her alone!"

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Though Belldandy and Urd each had made their feelings plain to their partners; no one received a kinder look that evening than the one Skuld now gave to Sentaro's turned back.

"*Well with that said* - let's get this party started!" Peorth shouted taking up her position onstage. Her sultry voice thundered across the field as Ex, Ere and Chrono jumped up joining her in song:

Ooh baby do you know what that's worth?

Ooh heaven is a place on earth,

They say in heaven - love comes first,

We'll make heaven a place on earth . . .

"I'll never understand the goddess fascination with singing," Takumi said shaking his head as Urd dragged him into the throng. To his left he saw Keiichi and Bell moving gracefully if somewhat restrained to the music contrasting with he and Urd's more exuberant style. At least he thought they were exuberant, until he saw Skuld and Sentaro's performance up by the front of the stage. "*Urd - look at Skuld*," he shouted from the midst of the dancing crowd. "She gets that from me!" she shouted back. Onstage Peorth was in her glory, playing to the rapt attention which both gods and humans alike now paid her. Looking over crowd her voice rang out with the power of a true goddess at its full strength,

In this world we are just beginning,

to understand this miracle of living,

Baby I was afraid before,

But I'm not afraid - Anymore!

"Hmm, very - *athletic*," Tamiya said staring up at her in awe.

"Huh? Oh yeah, *athletic*," Otaki echoed similarly entranced.

At its end Peorth leapt from the stage as other goddesses jumped in eager to demonstrate their vocal prowess.

"Peorth!" Urd signaled as she landed in front of them. "I trust you're enjoying yourself immensely?"

"Not bad," she said glancing at the numerous pairs of admiring eyes following her.

"So can I expect we'll be having one of these for you in - oh about a month?" she jibed.

"Me? *Hah!* I'm the ultimate free agent," she said tossing her hair.

The Guardian

They continued on conversation as Takumi noticed Lind standing quietly at the back of the crowd.

He approached hesitantly. "Commander would you umm, care to dance?" he asked.

"No thank you," she replied coolly.

He nodded taking his leave.

"I've heard the one who betrayed you is no more - as is Abyss," she said staring in a way that did not ease his anxiety.

"Yes that's true. But how did you know?"

"It matters not. But I have something for you."

He stepped back as she reached to her tunic eventually drawing out a small ring. "I thought - you might like to have this," she said handing it to him.

"Sorano's?"

She nodded.

Takumi knew it was her way of trying to reconcile the past. He bowed. "Again, I am so sorry for your loss."

"I know that you are Sato. But you should enjoy this day. For it is days like this that stand to remind us who we are."

"I think so too."

"I have a request of my own," she added politely

"Yes?"

"I wonder, *if I might* -," she stretched out her hand placing it to his heart. Takumi did not understand but made no move to stop her. She stood silently, listening for several moments before stepping back.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"I believe so," she said quietly.

"Commander I wonder if -."

"-There will be other evenings to talk Sato. Go, enjoy your party," she nodded walking away into the night. Takumi felt the music become louder and more rhythmic as he turned his attention once more to the stage. Some of the guests were jumping into the air now as they moved their hands creating a luminous glow which dove and twisted. The effect was mesmerizing as each attempted to outdo the other with their grace and artistry.

"Wow, what a cool magic trick!" said the girl in glasses beside him.

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“Umm yeah . . . cool,” he murmured in agreement watching the scene. To his left he saw several had formed a kind of ribboned ball of light which they were now sweeping and directing at one another using their power. But within seconds the speed of their actions increased, rising to the point where it was hard to tell whether it was indeed a ball or streams of flowing light which now raced above, around and through the crowd. The human guests looked on in awe as they watched the wild nocturnal lightshow. Occasionally the high speed luminous paths would cross, creating strange and wondrous flowing interference effects in the light and space around them. As one young god now playfully swung the ball in Belldandy’s direction she quickly accelerated it to a complex pattern using her immense skill before redirecting it at Urd. As it raced toward her Urd swept back, hitting the ball at full speed causing it to accidentally explode into hundreds of brilliant fragments.

“*Aww URD!*” Skuld moaned coming to stand beside Takumi. But her sister merely shrugged returning to her socializing. “They called that the Valkyrie fire,” Skuld said as another stream zipped past them. He watched the game for perhaps another 10 minutes before he began to notice that a number of people seemed to be shouting in his general direction. “Why are they yelling?” he asked.

“*Oh it’s nothing to worry about -*,” Peorth purred coming behind him. “It’s just a little game we like to play at these events. Your beloved jumps in the air - and you have to catch her.”

“And that’s all there is to it?”

“Yep, that’s it.”

He turned to see Belldandy already springing into the air, as Keiichi swiftly moved in to catch her. *They’re good together*, he thought, though secretly he suspected Belldandy might be providing him with some form of assistance. However his viewing of them was cut short as he caught sight of Urd mischievously lining up ninety feet beyond him in one corner of the field. A sinking feeling began to take hold of him. “Umm, what if I *don’t* catch her?” he asked Peorth anxiously, starting to take several steps back.

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“*Nothing*. Oh, except that you’ll look like a *total loser to everyone!*” she howled.

“Somehow I was afraid you were going to - *dammit Urd!*” he shouted seeing her take off like a shot in front of him.

“*Okay mister I-like-to-give-impromptu-speeches!* Let’s see what you’ve really got!” she yelled alerting crowd. Though her zigzagging attempts to fool him on the ground failed miserably, as she leapt into the air Takumi quickly realized she would pass *slightly* beyond his grip. Attempting to reach her he backed up as fast as he could, jumping high and hard into the night sky trying to reach her. As their mutual arcs intersected the impact drove them into a nearby tree. Urd yelled happily as they fell through successive layers of the tree to the shouts of onlookers.

“*That was fun*. Let’s do it again,” she said lying sprawled on top of him.

“Thanks but I prefer to retire undefeated,” Takumi moaned getting up a bit more slowly than usual. He was still plucking out pine needles when Chrono came running up.

“*Urd*, the goddesses from the Earth Help Center are challenging us in song. They say the Yggdrasil admin group is *weak!*”

“Well you tell them that without Peorth -,” but then she stopped spotting something in the distance. “You tell them we’ll meet them on the stage soon enough, but right there is something else I need to attend to. *Now if you’ll excuse me,*” she said breaking away.

Takumi watched as she took off, landing on a far hill at the edge of the park. He could just make out the long-haired figure beside her.

“You know I’d speak to you but then you’d probably have to ‘*kill me*,’” said Mara waving her hands pretending to quiver with fear.

“I’m sure it won’t be the last time I need to utter a death threat in order to keep you out of harm’s way,” Urd replied. “So have they finished cleaning up Niflheim yet?”

“We call it redecorating and you’d be surprised how often it happens. So don’t look so impressed with yourself. Still, in a strange way I think the boss was proud of all the damage

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caused. Not that she'd ever show it. Oh and we were able to make a rather nice collage out of what was left of Mezzumura. I rather like the quotation Hild had placed beneath him . . .

don't let this happen to you."

"Given your sense of humor I'll assume you're kidding.

Besides, I had nothing to do with that."

"*Convenient*, since there are no witnesses to refute you."

"*Well . . . ?*"

"Well what?"

"Oh just come down to the party you old hag!" Urd said tugging her.

"Aren't you afraid I'll cause trouble?"

"Mara from this spot alone I see at least half a dozen Valkyries.

I don't think I've got much to worry about."

Mara smiled grimly pulling back her cloak. "In that case let's show them what *real* partying is all about."

"Hey I saw that catch of yours - *graceful*," Keiichi said tossing Takumi a beer on his approach.

"Yeah well yours wasn't hell-bent on destruction," he replied taking a swig. "I think she intends to make me old before my time."

Keiichi turned looking out over the early evening stars, "Well, here's to not getting old before our time," he muttered soberly.

"Amen," said Takumi, sitting down beside him on the low hill overlooking the stage.

"*Indeed*," echoed the figure which now approached them from the top of the hill.

"*Err*, hello," said Keiichi.

"*Hello -*," boomed the figure sitting beside them. They could see he was dressed in something resembling a priest's cassock cast in dark earthen green. In his hand he held a staff carved in a pattern of four interweaving vines. It looked as though it might have been made of wood, if not for the interior which seemed to flicker with a myriad of tiny diffracting points.

"Umm, what do you do exactly?" Keiichi asked as cordially as possible.

The man thought a moment. "I suppose you could say that I help keep things in order," he replied.

The Guardian

The two exchanged anxious looks, surmising him to be some level of senior god.

"Yes, it's been my pleasure to assist the upper council," he replied in answer to their unasked question. "But I sense there is something else you'd like to ask me," he said turning and eye to Takumi. He quickly looked away, watching the crowd below. "Well perhaps you could give us some advice," he said quietly. The man followed his gaze. "I think they will keep you busy. *Both of them*," he replied glancing at Keiichi. "But I sense this is not the question you truly wish to ask," he said eyeing him once more.

"Well I don't mean to sound ungrateful -," Takumi began.

"*Then don't*," Keiichi replied whispering.

"-It's just that it doesn't seem like we were provided with much help through all of this. Good people died - needlessly. If I had known then what I know now it could have been prevented," he said, bitterness beginning to creep into his voice. "*Takumi* -," Keiichi warned quietly.

The visitor looked them over thoughtfully. "I'm unsure of what you mean by *needlessly*, but in answer to your question -," he waved his hand as a section of ground instantly became as smooth as glass. Then taking up several stones he rubbed them together, casting them out as a group of perfectly smooth pebbles onto its surface. He considered the arrangement for a moment before throwing an additional stone onto the field. As it collided redirecting the others he asked, "Is that arrangement better?"

"I . . . don't know," said Takumi.

"Neither do I. That's sort of the problem."

"But you're a god. Don't you know everything?"

He smiled. "That all depends."

"On what?"

"Maybe that's what you're supposed to figure out."

"*Damn Gods*," Takumi muttered. "They always speak in riddles."

"Not riddles. But we can only speak in terms which the recipient can understand, of concepts your society has already discovered. The reasons for this are many-fold, but one way to

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think about it is that things which arise through a process of self-discovery tend to occur more . . . *predictably*.”

“Convenient,” replied Takumi. “So in other words you can tell me nothing.”

“Oh I think there are a few things I can explain regarding your inquiry. Imagine a time when everything was as one,” he said sweeping his hand over the pebbles causing them to coalesce. Taking up a stone he then threw it at the center, causing the mass to scatter in all directions. “You see?” he asked.

“No,” Takumi replied stubbornly.

“Everything which occurred came about as a result of that single initial action.”

“So you're saying gods are good at playing marbles?”

“*Takumi*,” Keiichi beseeched him.

“They’d have to be very good since everything which occurred after that point, *everything* you now know would develop as a consequence of that action.”

“-And after that you do nothing?”

“No we intervene all the time, every hour of every day as you have no doubt seen. But modify a *fundamental* aspect of the system? No, that of course we do not do.”

“You say of course, but why?”

“Such a change could alter basic interactions in the universe.”

“So?”

“That could have several consequences. But an important one may be to alter the nature of interactions defined in what you call physics. Any such change could therefore have dramatic and far-reaching consequences.

“Interesting but you haven’t answered my question. I assume it’s either because you can’t or because you don’t want to,” he said growing frustrated.

The man considered him calmly. “Perhaps I misunderstand your question - or you have misunderstood my answer.”

Takumi stepped back thinking of Sorano, of Sen, of those he’d killed in ignorance. He thought of all that had been lost, all that had been sacrificed; and in that moment bitterness got the better of him. This might be his one chance to understand it at some level, yet he had learned nothing from this man.

The Guardian

"Then let me restate my question-," he said facing him. "Show me one thing, *just one thing*, which tells me you really *care* about what happens to this world one way or another. That you have anything *personally* invested in it! Anything real, anything tangible. *ANYTHING AT ALL!*" he cried. "Show me something to demonstrate we're more than just a hobby or a plaything to you! *That's* what I really want to know. No more riddles, no more games!"

"*He's just -*," Keiichi began.

"You needn't apologize for me Keiichi," Takumi snapped.

"Very well," nodded the man. "*Look up.*"

He remained impassive.

"*Takumi!*" Keiichi breathed exasperated.

"I don't have to look up. I know what's up there."

"Then tell me," said the man.

"The sky. And then you'll say you helped make the sky or some other such thing. But it still won't answer my question."

"Hmm. *Perhaps you should look up.*"

Hesitantly Takumi looked to the sky. "It's just as I said," he replied. "I see the early evening sky - and stars."

"Ahh there are two stars, are there not?"

"Yes," he said patiently.

"What if I told you those stars are very different distances from us? How would you know what I'm telling you is the truth?"

"Light," he replied.

"Light?"

"Yes. We'd know by measuring the star's parallax shift in comparison to others at different times in our orbital cycle. For stars farther away than several hundred light years we'd use the Cepheid variable, which -."

"*Yes, yes*, but when you look at the light which comes from a star what is it you're actually *seeing*? For instance if you saw light coming from the farthest object in the universe?"

He looked at him blankly. "Something reeeeeeeally far away?"

The guardian seemed disappointed.

Suddenly Keiichi spoke. "You wouldn't just be seeing something in space; you'd also be looking back in *time*."

Takumi stared at him dumbfounded.

"*It saw it on TV the other night*," he said helpfully.

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“*There* I believe is the answer you seek. For in the instant of this universe’s creation we became bound to it . . . in both space *and* time.”

“Bound? But if that’s true you’re constrained by the same physical laws that everything else is.”

The man nodded.

“But why would you do that?”

He stood silent; for he could see Takumi was slowly beginning to understand. “*Can you think of no reason?*” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” replied Keiichi.

Takumi’s voice was barely above a whisper when at last he spoke. “*They did it so we could have our universe,*” he said somberly. “-*this* one, with *this* set of physical laws. Laws which allowed stable matter to form, initiating the eventual creation of planetary systems . . . and ultimately life itself. One which was ordered in both time and space. Doing so allowed the creation of an ordered existence, allowing us to learn from the past. Quite literally to *have* a past.” He looked past them, beyond the plains to the mountains in the distance. “Because of that we have all that we know, all our memories and all our experiences; not the least of which is love. *All those things necessary for beings to be truly free* . . . They must have constrained untold dimensions of their power so that we could have - *this*. This time, in this place.” Tears sprang to his eyes as the knowledge swept over him, seeing now the grace and beauty of all they had wrought. “*Thank you . . .*,” was all he could say.

The man planted his staff turning an ear to the hilltop. “You’re on the right road,” he smiled. “Unfortunately my time here is almost up. But I am glad we had this opportunity to speak. He started up the hill but stopped. “Remind me, what was it you wanted changed again?”

“I think we’ll just leave things the way they are for now,”

Keiichi encouraged shaking his head.

“Still, there are times when it seems like we don’t have much help,” Takumi said crossing his arms.

“Humanity has all the help it needs. For you have each other. Of course, what you choose to do with that gift is up to you,” he replied moving off.

The Guardian

"*It still doesn't explain demons!*" shouted Keiichi.

"That I *do* understand," replied Takumi coming alongside him.

"They say light cannot exist without darkness. Only by having a choice can we be truly free."

"Necessary variables in the system," the man agreed continuing up the hill.

"But doesn't explain Abyss," Takumi shouted behind him.

"*Oh?*" he replied climbing.

"You knew what it could do. Why wasn't it destroyed as soon as we recovered it?"

He turned smiling patiently, "Did it never occur to you that perhaps we thought another might need it - for their own journey?"

Takumi looked down embarrassed.

"Well what are we to do now?" asked Keiichi.

"*What you have been doing* - learn, strengthen your resolve. You may need it in the days ahead."

"Why do you say that?"

"*Just a feeling,*" he replied reaching the top of the hill.

"I don't suppose you'd like to tell us how it all turns out?"

Takumi shouted.

He smiled once more, "You still don't get it do you?"

"I suppose not. And I suppose a *hint* is out of the question!"

"That one I can tell you. Because you've already said it yourself. The answer you might say . . . *is in the stars.*"

"*Damn gods,*" Takumi muttered under his breath

"No, I think I know what he means," said Keiichi. "They are all bound by time. So they can know the past, maybe even return to it. But no one, *no one*, can know the future with certainty.

"Not even the Almighty one . . ."

"*Right.*"

They looked to the hill but the man was gone.

"I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse."

"Either way it sounds like they've done what they can do," said Keiichi.

Conclusion

“**T**here you are!” Urd shouted approaching them. Looking back to the field they could see the party was now in full swing, as groups of goddesses blaring out in songs both strange and familiar. The sky above was now dark and the rows of lanterns grew, augmented by what seemed to be floating fragments of light, hovering fireflies in the air above. “Looks like this will go on for a while,” Urd said following their gaze. “Bell thinks we should consider how to begin to accommodate our earth-bound guests.

“Accommodate?”

“She thinks by the time the party is over they won’t be in any condition to make it home – and shouldn’t try.”

“I’ll go up to the temple and get things started,” replied Keiichi.

“It’s been a long day for me as well. I’ll go with you Keiichi.”

Takumi said passing his hands warmly over Urd.

“Were you playing a game up here?” Urd asked eyeing the glassy surface to their right.

“No we were just . . . we were just talking to . . . Who were we talking to?” asked Keiichi.

“One of your priests,” said Takumi.

“She looked to him puzzled. “Tai we don’t *have* priests.”

The two looked at each other; then back up the hill.

“In that case we were just up here drinking,” he muttered scratching his head. As the three made their way through the crowd to the temple, Takumi caught sight of the strangely dressed blond who sat arm wrestling with a group of Valkyrie. He was about to turn away when the woman flashed him a menacing smile tossing her current opponent into their path. She looked back taking a long draft of her beer nodding to Urd before facing her next challenger. “I hear you have *an appetite for nightlife*,” she murmured sarcastically as they passed.

Conclusion

"Friend of yours?" muttered Takumi.

"We cross paths from time to time," Urd murmured dismissively stepping over the Valkyrie in their path.

A few hours later things were as ready as they could be in the Morisato household as guests began to arrive. From under the covers in Urd's room Takumi heard much continued partying out in the courtyard and beyond into the early morning hours.

"I'm getting too old for this," he muttered drifting off to sleep.

The next morning he rolled over to find himself alone in Urd's small room. Gathering a sheet around him he peeked out into the hallway to find the scattered bodies of several whom had spent the night. "*Hey you,*" came the whisper behind him.

"*There you are,*" he replied turning to see Urd leaning out of an upper hallway closet.

"*Come on -*," she motioned, leading him down the hallway to Keiichi's room, a camera in one hand.

"What are we doing?"

"*Shhh.*" Carefully she stepped between the sleeping bodies to reach Keiichi's door. Gently sliding it back Takumi saw Belldandy nestled comfortably in Keiichi's arms, still dressed in the gown she had worn last night. She shuffled pressing her head to his shoulder, fingers intertwined asleep in blissful happiness.

"Look how peaceful they are. Doesn't she look like an angel?" Urd said happily.

"She does," he replied as Urd leaned down taking several pictures in rapid succession. "Of course the fact she *is* part angel probably helps. Now can we go back to bed?"

"This isn't what I got the camera for. *Come on,*" she said moving stealthily toward the front door.

Takumi followed but then stopped, looking to his right.

"*Hey Urd,* get a picture of this," he said spotting Peorth sprawled in the center of Belldandy's room on her back, arms extended over two young gods asleep on either side of her. In the far corner he spied the three goddesses who had jumped on stage with her last night asleep in a pile.

"Yeah that should satisfy her ego -," Urd said snapping a photograph from above. "*Now come on.*"

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Exiting the house, Takumi looked up at the threatening morning skies. "Looks as though it might rain; yet still it is warm out here," he said, discovering the sleeping members of the Nekomi Tech auto club scattered across the veranda. "Why do you think Belldandy's asleep? She's been overusing her powers."

"To keep the grounds warm?"

Urd nodded. Stepping over Otaki and Tamiya she quietly slid open the outer door to Skuld's room. "*Look at this,*" she whispered pointing inside.

Looking past her Takumi could now see Skuld asleep on her side, hands closed as if in silent prayer. She was facing another he now recognized to be the boy who'd spoken out at the party. "Now that is cute," he said observing Skuld's expression as Sentaro's mouth hung open absently.

"Yes," agreed Urd continuing to click away. "And may come in handy someday as blackmail."

At the back of the room Takumi saw the bodies of Keiichi's sister and the girl with glasses he'd spoken to yesterday. Sleepily Skuld suddenly opened her eyes, "*Urd?*" she muttered just as her sister leaned in to take an even more incriminating shot.

"Yes?" she replied sweetly throwing the camera over her head to Takumi behind her

"Are they going to make breakfast?" she yawned.

Of course they are. What would you like dear?" her sister smiled agreeably.

"Well I was thinking -," Skuld rolled over, only now noticing the sleeping form beside her. Her eyes darted back to Urd's.

"*I don't care.* Get out of here!" she snapped blushing.

"Well if that's what you really want dear," she replied innocently shutting the door.

"I think we're all going to want and need copies of those," Takumi observed. "By the way does that kid *have* a home?"

"We promised we'd take care of him and bring him back today."

"I see. And who's we exactly?"

"Belldandy and Keiichi."

Conclusion

“Thank goodness for responsible adults. Well if you’re quite done I think I’ll go back -.”

“*I’m not.* We have one more picture to take.”

“*Oh very well -*,” he replied posing against the pillar.

“Not you – *that*,” she said pointing to the courtyard.

Turning, he saw that indeed something did seem to be lying in the middle of Belldandy’s garden patch. He looked at her questioningly.

“*You’ll see.* This is the picture I *really* need.”

Quietly approaching, Urd signaled for him to ready the camera.

“Now! *Seal her!*” she shouted.

“*AUGH!*” yelled the mass of blond hair jerking up. The picture he caught of their respective expressions was something each would remember for some time to come.

“Yeah real funny Urd!” cried the blond.

“You again!” said Takumi.

“Ahh so you remember me. I’m not surprised,” said blond throwing back her hair.

“Who is she?”

“*Mara,*” replied Urd.

The toothy blond continued to collect herself. “Yes, and you would do well to remember my name; since it’s likely *me* you’ll be negotiating with someday to get Urd un-*sealed*.”

He was about to respond when his attention was drawn to the trees. For their shouts had awakened something in them. He saw now on the limbs of several larger branches the watchful eyes of goddesses, their matching blue and white robes wafting gently in the breeze. Recognizing there was no real threat they quickly settled back to their respective positions.

“They’re all dressed the same,” he said watching them.

“Yeah, and they like to be up high not close to the ground.

You see?” she said pointing out several more higher in the trees.

“Valkyries?” he asked.

She nodded. “But we don’t have time for their like right now, you need to get busy,” she said pushing him.

“Busy? For what?”

“Oh, it’s just a little custom we have -.”

“*I’m beginning to hate those words.*”

“The presented prepare breakfast for -,”

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“Urd now I *know* you’re making this up. There have to be at least twenty people here!”

“True, but most of them are still asleep. So as long as you get busy now you’ll be fine. Besides, Keiichi has to help you.”

“Oh no. They’re sleeping peacefully and I don’t intend to wake them. *You* will help me.”

“I’ll tell you what, you can have her,” she said shoving Mara in his general direction.

“Are you volunteering *me* for this detail Urd?” Mara fumed brushing off the last of her leaves.

“Of course. I mean I don’t want to leave you out there with *them* after all,” she said motioning to the trees. “Because we both know what *they* would love to have for breakfast,” she grinned.

Mara laughed waving her arms. “You know you goddesses really need to get over yourselves,” she said heading inside.

By the time Belldandy and Keiichi awoke operations in the kitchen seemed well underway . . . judging from the clatter and occasional crash of dishes.

“*Oh Keiichi!* There’s something I forgot to tell you last night,” Belldandy gasped as they tucked their heads into the hallway. He prepared himself for the worst when Megumi emerged in the doorway sipping happily from her cup.

“Hey Megumi, can I get some of that?”

“Sure big brother, go right ahead,” she said passing him the cup. He took a swig before gagging. “*BLEAAH!* Is this what I think it is?!”

“Yep.”

“Sake for breakfast?!”

Urd’s head now appeared from the kitchen. “We ran out of tea some time ago so we’re using that.”

“I can only imagine what you’re using for food,” he said somberly.

Yeah . . . *what is it we’re making again?*” she shouted into the kitchen.

Keiichi heard Takumi’s aggrieved reply, “*Urd for the third time they’re pancakes!*”

“Are they supposed to look like that?” she asked.

Conclusion

“They’re just . . . *well-cooked*. Aren’t you supposed to be looking for something?”

“Well we never did find baking soda, instead we just used -.”

“Urd, didn’t we agree that would be our *little cooking secret*?”

“Don’t worry, you drink enough of this you hardly notice it,” said Mara suddenly appearing in the hallway.

“*Augh! Mara!*” Keiichi shouted jumping back.

“*Augh yourself* sweetness. You think *you* look so great the first thing in the morning?”

When he finally ventured to the kitchen, Keiichi saw that Urd, Mara and Takumi were all well on their way to making the room a complete catastrophe.

“*How could you guys make such a big mess so quickly?!*” he demanded.

The three shrugged looking to one another. “We did have kind of a batter fight a little while ago,” admitted Takumi. “That probably explains most of the *wall-effect* you see around here. But the important thing is that everyone will receive a hearty breakfast,” he said holding up a batch of less than ideal pancakes.

He shook his head rolling up his sleeves. “*Move over.*”

Mara clamped her hands around Urd. So you’re presented now Urd, at least the *first time* anyway,” she snickered. “So do you feel old now? Or should I say – *older!*”

“Look who’s talking, wasn’t Genghis Khan your prom date?”

“Eh don’t remind me, that guy was all about the yak’s milk -.”

“And I’d think you’d be better at this, given all of your relevant work experience at the Quickie mart.”

“*What?* I’m performing magnificently. This is exactly the way it’s done,” Mara replied cracking the eggs only to toss their contents, eggshell and all into the bowl.

“*Hey what are you doing!*” yelled Keiichi.

“See? The human knows -.”

“Well come to think of it we do handle mostly pre-packaged food,” Mara said thoughtfully.

Over the next hour as guests awoke everyone was eventually fed . . . *something*. As groups gathered reminiscing about the previous evening’s events several Valkyrie came down from their arboreal perches sniffing if not actually tasting the

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available food. Some time later Peorth poked her head out from Belldandy's room just long enough to relay several less than glowing comments about the days' breakfast. Whether due Urd and Mara's look or reply or the quality of her in-room companionship, Peorth quickly retreated back into the room for the rest of the morning.

By the time Belldandy dressed and went to check on the kitchen things were beginning to returning to normal.

"Bell you look tired," said Urd noticing her. "Was it that Keiichi? Did he tire you out?" she asked innocently over Mara's snickering.

She ignored them. "Has anyone seen Keiichi?"

"Going to take the boy home -," Takumi said from outside.

Quickly Belldandy ducked into Keiichi's room before rushing outside to meet him behind the shed as he readied the bike.

"*Keiichi*," she called awkwardly walking to hand him the sweater.

"*Bell*," he replied smiling at her tired but happy face. The two moved close touching noses.

"It's kind of like Eskimo porn," observed Mara.

"Yeah, kind of sometimes," muttered Urd.

"*Hey do I have to turn a hose on you guys!*" called the mysterious voice above them. They looked up to see Skuld sitting on the corner of the roof peering down at them.

"Skuld get off of there!" shouted Takumi hoping to give the two a moment's privacy.

"*No!*" she said stubbornly.

Suspecting Skuld's real reason for climbing onto the roof in the first place he tried another approach. "Why are you up there Skuld? It's not to catch sight of someone *special* is it?"

"WHAT?! *No . . .* I'm just -," she jumped down immediately sufficiently embarrassed by his comment.

"Don't you know you're supposed to be good this time of year?" he continued.

"Oh are you talking about Christmas? Because I know what I want already!" she said naming off an increasingly complex list of items.

Conclusion

Takumi nodded feigning interest leaning against the post as he listened to Belldandy and Keiichi behind the shed.

"You spoke your heart last night Keiichi. But with everything that was going on I never got a chance to say something to you," she said leaning in.

He could not catch their whispered conversation above Skuld's continued list of potential Christmas gifts. And so he never heard Belldandy's final question to Keiichi. But he heard his response clearly. "Always Bell . . . *always*," he replied hugging her tightly. "*C'mon Sentaro*, let's go!" he shouted pushing the bike to the alley.

"*Goodbye wobbly!*" Sentaro yelled at Skuld walking away.

"*Goodbye smelly,*" she replied running after them as quickly as she dared. As the bike disappeared down the alleyway Skuld turned to her sister following her inside. "Do *you* have special in mind for Christmas Onee-san?"

"As a matter of fact I do," she said tucking her arms around her.

"Good! Because I really need -."

"No I meant for Keiichi. I have something special in mind for Keiichi."

"*Oh*. Well what about you Takumi?" she asked as he stepped off the veranda.

"Yeah, there you go Skuld," he replied lost in his own thoughts.

"*Huh?! Are you even listening to me?*"

"-It sure is Skuld, it sure is . . .," he replied walking away.

"Ugh . . . *adults!*"

By noon the skies were still gray but most of the guests had managed to pack up and head for home. Slowly Belldandy, Megumi and Urd worked to return the temple to something resembling its normal appearance. Pushing the blankets into the closet Urd looked out on the courtyard only to see Takumi standing alone, watching her quietly from beneath the great oak. "What is it?" she asked.

"Can I talk to you?" he asked motioning to her.

Belldandy watched as the two walk for some time together under the trees of the Western wall. When Urd at last returned she seemed quiet.

"Did you get to tell him what you want for Christmas?" Skuld demanded. "Because it's not far away you know."

The Twilight Hour

"Enough about Christmas Skuld!" cried Megumi.
Urd said nothing, her eyes following Takumi as he turned to leave.
"Are you alright?" asked Belldandy coming to her side.
"Yeah. He suggested we go away somewhere, just the two of us, after the New Year."
"Hmm, sounds nice," chortled Megumi flopping down atop the pile of blankets.
"Knowing him it will probably be somewhere near the sea," Belldandy said putting her arm around Urd.
"I don't think so. There's a place in the mountains. *The snow is deep there - but the horses should be able to make it through,*" she said speaking as though in a dream.
"Horses? *Horses?! You know there's a faster way to travel right?*" demanded Skuld.
"That's not always the point -," Megumi reminded her.
"Have you - been there Urd?" asked Belldandy cautiously watching her sister's eyes.
"No. It's just - *a feeling I have.* Yet for the life of me I can't place where that white coat is from," she muttered shaking her head.
"*White coat?*"
"Not really a coat. More like a long thick cloak. Beautiful protection against the cold," Urd said coming out of her trance.
"Maybe it's a Christmas present!" suggested Skuld.
"It sounds a kind of like a cloak Peorth wore for -."
"PEORTH!" Urd shrieked. "Of course! *That's* where I've seen it before!"
"Urd are you alright?"
"I am Bell," she said wiping her cheek. "This time, I really am."

Shortly after New Years Urd and Takumi were indeed to be found on horseback, deep in the mountains east of Kakunodake. The path was longer than he had anticipated and it was late afternoon by the time he broke into the snow laden meadow. "*Okay this time I'm sure!*" he said charging ahead down the slope. "This *has* to be the right place. Will you come on already?"

Conclusion

“My horse and I are just taking our time,” she replied emerging slowly from the forest behind. “*Because this time*, I want to enjoy every moment.”

He looked back at her puzzled moving on. “Well what do you think?”

She reached the top of the hill looking down at the small cabin. “Tai I can honestly say it’s *exactly* what I imagined.” She smiled buffeted by the blustery winds as she made her way down the slope beside him.

“Might snow again tonight. I should probably put the horses up in the woods and get you inside - *come here you*,” he said hopping down to take her in his arms. Opening the door he carried her inside, tumbling into their cozy accommodations. Before long the cabin fire was aglow as they attempted to cook using only their earthly skills.

“So this is camping?” Urd asked biting down on a biscuit.

“Well - *it’s a start*,” he mused opening the sleeping bags to toss them on the floor. As twilight fell slowly to evening the two quietly watched the stars gather in the night sky while Urd described her next great plan for advancing Keiichi and Belldandy’s relationship. The third time her head fell upon his shoulder as she pressed against him for warmth he drew the cloak around her taking her inside. Under the lingering glow of the fires’ embers they closed the shades to curl up in the small cabin. Moments later the tiny figure who’d been hovering unseen at the edge of the tree line zipped forward, eagerly dashing from one window to another for any possible view. After several minutes of fruitless searching she plopped down at the edge of the window sill. “Ahh shimata!” she cried scowling at the heavens, moonlight illuminating the six pointed star on her forehead before streaking away into the darkness.

End

The OMG terran arc continues in Book 2: *Mortality*