

It was a tranquil moonlit night that found the couple strolling barefoot at the shores of a nearby beach. Himura Shinju rested her head on her husband's shoulder and entwined firmly her arm around his. Her grip was returned by Himura Atsushi, his pondering and calculations over the maintenance of his holdings and investments throw aside in favor of alone time with her.

The Himura family was by no means a great and wealthy noble house nor did it deal much in the political stage. But, despite their modest leanings and humble mercantile background, their worth was far more than meets the eye. Atsushi, from the moment he acquired the family ledgers, worked to ensure that the Himura would never be in want of coin for any of their practical needs. His efforts had certainly paid off and sometimes in unexpected ways.

A scant few years after a pleasurable courtship with a certain Hisakawa Shinju, Atsushi had found himself owner of what was effectively a foster home. Shinju had decided after the birth of their children, Masumi and Kenshin, that the Himura's notable discrepancy between their actual estate and reserved wealth could be put to more charitable means. She had observed a great deal of youth who, through no fault but circumstance, were afforded much less than their own children. She wished to provide for all of them.

Atsushi had initially argued against it. Such an undertaking was not sustainable, financial or otherwise, and the potential burdens would interfere with their own responsibilities. It was only after more thinking on his part and more persuasive arguments on hers that he warmed up to the idea. The actual expenses were minimal at best and there was little financial risk considering their penchant for frugal spending as well as a sizable stream of steady income.

And perhaps, it would provide more fulfillment to his life than business deals and investments. Atsushi finally conceded to his wife's desire with a stipulation that Shinju herself had already acknowledged: they would only save the children within their view.

The clouds passed over the bright moon. Atsushi and Shinju shared a kiss and tender embrace in the privacy of darkness. A moment interrupted as the clouds continued on their way and they beheld what was revealed by the moon's light.

The Genesis

The child stood on the beach face as the tides ebbed and flowed over her bare feet. Her silver-white hair seemed to radiate the cold light of the moon and lent an unearthly feel to her being. She turned her head to regard her visitors for a moment and resumed gazing at the dark beyond the sea.

Husband and wife regarded the lone child with surprise and then curiosity. She was clothed in a fine white kimono which spoke of some wealth but she appeared have little qualms about letting the sea thoroughly soak the garment.

The couple approached closer but it was Atsushi who halted when they were a few steps away. He had long developed and refined his skills for reading body language in his years of negotiation. His trained perception noted an uncomfortable shift in the atmosphere and identified himself as the cause. Putting theory into practice, Atushi took a careful step forward and observed a tensing in the child's posture when he did so. It would not do for her to bolt into the night or cause a disturbance that would surely have its own share of avoidable consequences. He visibly backed off and gestured to Shinju to handle

the situation.

Atsushi watched as his wife closed the remaining distance. Shinju bent down on her knees next to the child and followed her gaze to the sea. He imagined they exchanged some words; quiet banter along with the customary probing questions but nothing he could hear over the steady surf.

In the end, Shingu extended her hand out and the child was led back to him. He chuckled to himself, it would seem like their family had acquired a new member. Atsushi offered his hand and though there was noticeable hesitation, the child placed her small hand into it. Husband and wife would continue their stroll on the beach with child between them for a bit longer before taking the journey home.

New Days

The child had no name, no living relations, and as far as the Himura family could find, no concrete origin. They named her “Tsukino Shiomi”, a reference to her apparent manifestation on the beach like the tide and bathed in the full splendor of the moon.

The enigma of Shiomi's origin was only matched by her behavior. Atsushi would find it was not only him but all males provoked a nervous reaction from her. Though this seemed to improve with time and familiarity, she still had trouble dealing with males outside family.

In her periods of rest she was often found staring far off into the distance, similar to how she was when first encountered. Kenshin had joked that she was simply seeing things only her eyes could perceive after watching her wander around the house, intently following something along with the family cat.

The Himura household also learned early on that startling Shiomi was somewhat ill-advised, the squeak and flustered reaction was adorable enough but objects in the vicinity tended to fall to pieces in the same instance. However, Shiomi proved to be a very deep sleeper and often rose only after much prompting and coaxing. Despite her eccentricities, she was a quiet and well-mannered child who caused little in the way of trouble.

Shiomi grew up healthy and happy even if it did not show in her daily visage or behavior. While not exceptionally pretty, Shiomi was developing into a slender, pale beauty known around town for her polite demeanor and small smile which always seemed wistful and a tad sad. It was not difficult to pick her out in the crowd, the combination of silver hair and pale violet eyes was quite noticeable and lent her an ethereal air.

The Himura family made sure all their children under were well-educated in practical affairs and general knowledge. Much to the amusement of Shinju, Atsushi took this a step further than her initial wishes but that was simply the kind of man she married.

Using his various connections, he had individuals of specialized trades visit the household to demonstrate the nature of their work and host mentoring sessions. He wanted to expose his children to greater knowledge of the world so they may then pursue their own avenues within it once they were out of his care. Not every child of the Himura family was found very young, sometimes they were teenagers who for one reason or other had little else to do and little where to go. They had benefited most from this arrangement, having found steady employment or apprenticeship after the Himura helped them back onto their feet. It had paid off handsomely as Atsushi gained new insights into

different fields and extended his business connections considerably. But, it paled in comparison to the accomplishment and satisfaction he felt in making a such concrete differences in the lives of every child who passed through his home.

Shiomi remained the odd case. She was known to be inquisitive and observant but those traits were expressed in full as she quickly acquired the offered knowledge with a voraciousness that surprised even the various mentors. By her early teens, there was very little that Shiomi did not know the basics of and her well-rounded skill-set was welcomed by everyone when small issues cropped up from time to time. She never seemed to advance too far in any skill she put a mind to, for the initial fervor of learning consistently faded after a period. It was only after her time with the blacksmith that she was left with something much more than contentment at a new experience.

The Weapon of a Meister

It had been an interesting few weeks for Berg. Of all the new kids Atsushi had brought with him, the small girl with white hair was only one who showed any interest in forging. He had a laugh about it but several teaching sessions later gave him a different perspective. She was a very good pupil but he could tell she would not seek an apprenticeship with him and it was damn shame.

He caught her still in his shop intently gazing at something on the wall while he made his closing rounds. Having been warned and paid with the sudden crumbling of one of his forging hammers at her first lesson, he carefully made his presence known before approaching.

“It's long past time to go home, Shiomi,” he said. Berg followed her line of sight to a scythe mounted on the wall. The agricultural tool was nothing special. It was repair job for which he had seen neither payment or farmer since, so he mounted it to the wall as a display. “Though I be interested to hear why this tool holds your attention.”

Shiomi was unsure herself. “I feel a connection to the scythe,” she said and continued to study its curved haft and blade. Some quality about the item called to her being but she could not fathom what it was exactly. There was merely something different about seeing the real metal and wood item rather than in the ink of a diagram.

“A connection? You talk as if it's some sacred artifact made for your hand,” Berg said. He stroked the stubble of his beard thoughtfully, “I see no harm in humoring you, however”. He reached upward to remove the scythe from its mountings and tested the weight of it in his hands. No doubt Shiomi would be able to lift it, having gained a bit of arm strength from forging metal under his tutelage. Swinging the tool was a different story but she was always careful in her motions at the forge and there was ample enough space that she would not threaten anyone or anything in her immediate area.

Her muscles tensed as Berg let go of the scythe into her hands. Shiomi strained to lift it to a proper position and awkwardly gave it several test swings. Her grip was not optimal as she wielded it by the shaft instead of the handles. Its size threw her off-balance and she was quickly tiring. The cresting of its blade through the still air and the threatening area created by its rotation in her hands was captivating. It would require several modifications for ease of use but there was no doubt that this item, or the idea of it, resonated with her soul.

Shiomi's clumsy efforts to handle the scythe reminded Berg much of an immature bird learning to use

its wings. Her form, her stance, her motions were all horrendous, if she were using the scythe for its intended purpose of mowing grass and harvesting crops; as a tool. As a weapon of war, she seemed to have an intuitive grasp. It may have amounted to graceful flailing in the present but in his mind's eye he envisioned the silhouette of an older Shiomi whirling through the battlefield with a serene and deadly grace. The image seemed right to him. But it was only a possible future and his musing was interrupted by the warm plunk of wood on the stone floor.

Shiomi let the back of the scythe rest on the floor and waited patiently for his input while she recovered from her exertions.

“I have to admit, it fits you. Though, at the moment it’s a poor but cute fit,” he said with a grin. “What's your plan though? The scythe isn't a good weapon all things considering. You would be better off with a glaive or any number of polearms.”

“No,” said Shiomi as she clutched it possessively. “I definitely want this one.” One way or another this item was leaving with her. “If it is not suitable as a weapon then it is clear I must alter it until you deem it fit.” She began rapidly gesturing to parts of the scythe, “Firstly, the blade will need to be forged anew for strength as well as resilience. Then it should be mounted on a pole that is more suitable to my build and that would also do away with these cumbersome handles. Not to mention that the blade itself would also require-” She stopped as Berg raised his hand.

“It's late enough as is, so hold those thoughts for now,” it was truly a shame that she would not advance her craft further, such potential. “I was looking for an excuse to keep you around longer anyhow so this works out nicely. So you pay me what I was owed and we talk about this tomorrow.” Berg blinked as his hand was practically forced open and filled with as much coin as could fit. “That's a little much. I'll just put the rest toward any other expenses you have with this project.” Berg properly closed up shop and led her outside. “If you don't mind I'll escort you home little lady. Need to explain things to your dad and mum anyhow and so you don't give some old timer a heart attack on the way.”

It was an interesting scene to be sure when they reached the Himura household but considering some of the children joined the military or trained in the martial arts, they were not wholly unprepared for Shiomi's new acquisition. She cared for it lovingly as one of her few, real possessions and her built-up allowance finally found an outlet. Most was spent on materials and supervision from Berg for revising her scythe into a proper weapon. Atushi was also approached with the request to procure some manuals on combat training with it. Though difficult, he surprised her with some old manuals by a Paulus Hector Mair and then spent the days after dealing with her gratitude.

Shiomi had the brightest smile for the longest time and it was something he wanted to encourage again.

She devoted herself mostly to the sections on the scythe but considering the manual was fairly extensive on other weapons, also took cues from it as a whole. The sight of Shiomi running around town with a scythe on her back or training outside with it around the Himura compound became a common sight.

It was this period of time that she was at her most happiest and the same joy was shared by those closest to her. She had something to work toward and people who cared for her. Shiomi thought she could safely disregard her unusual appearance, her origin, and the general mystery that surrounded her being in favor of living in the present. She did not yet know that the providence of malice existed in this world.

Awakening

Brushing the sleep out of her eyes, Shiomi tread lightly through the dark compound looking for Masumi. Shiomi had nodded off while waiting for her and was startled to note that she never came. When she was a child, Shiomi became particularly restless on moonlit nights and it was the older girl's singing voice that lulled her to sleep. Something no longer needed but something still enjoyed nonetheless.

The compound was oddly quiet at this hour and a sinking sense of dread grew within as she went through the various rooms and found them empty. She swiftly hurried to the front of the compound and the sight beyond the open doors made her withdraw into the shadows. Shiomi cautiously peeked out and observed the confrontation before her.

Atsushi, Shinju, Kenshin, Masumi and the older children encircled the young ones protectively from the armed men before them. The protecting group were covered in numerous injuries. One man stood apart from the rest and he was uttering tense words and thinly-veiled threats to Atsushi. From what Shiomi could gather, Atsushi was being coerced into backing down from a lucrative deal on the condition that no harm befall his family. She stopped paying attention after that point and fled to execute the only reasonable course of action.

“It's shame you think so little about your family, Atsushi. I suppose money is all you care about after all,” said Yagi as his men moved closer. The man and his family had some spine but it didn't matter. Taka's employer would have one less competitor to deal with in the morning.

He raised his sword and sent himself forward into a thrust as his men charged in support. The clouds passed over the moon and when the area was lit once more, Yagi instinctively raised his sword to parry the weapon descending from above. Had it been anything else, his defense would have been successful. But the scythe is a different beast and blocking its shaft does not keep one safe from its blade. There was a biting pain as it sunk deep behind his clavicle and a greater pain when it was forcefully reaped through. His last sight before falling onto the ground was that of white-clad death goddess.

Shiomi internally winced. Leaping off the rooftop allowed her to put lethal force in her attack but the landing to the rest of her body. Still, she made her choice.

Atsushi had done everything he could to give her opportunities. Shinju was nothing but warmth and a hidden iron core that Shiomi admired and tried to emulate. Kenshin always strove to better himself and others. Masumi had a soothing presence that could chase away all the evils of the world. And there were the other siblings, past and present, all varied personalities but accepted her all the same. For the family she loved and the household she treasured, she will defend them even if they never looked at her with the same eyes afterward.

Stance low and scythe winded back, her area of jurisdiction was declared between the armed men and her family. She was outnumbered but she could cut down those who approached directly. She was weak and thus could not afford to hold back. Shiomi did not approach her enemies, her main priority was guarding her family. The armed men shifted closer and Shiomi did what felt natural. With an incantation on her lips, she brandished her scythe like a conduit.

“Dead Scream.”

For a brief instant, a fragment of the void was brought into being and several men folded to the ground as their oxygen and vital energies were abruptly depleted. Yet the rest continued to advance, crossbows starting to appear in a few hands. She lacked the skill and dexterity to avoid such projectiles and even then, moving out of their path would only bring harm to her family.

From the very beginning she was powerless to protect them. The thought sparked a growing fury within her, a hate for the forces that conspired against those she deemed precious and a hate for her own helplessness. Shiomi braced herself for the inevitable, if only she had more power...

Her soul shouted to the night sky that it needed strength beyond itself and something in the world answered. Her perception sharpened and her arms steadied as she felt an invisible force support her motions. Shiomi noted that the armed men had hesitated in their advance and saw that the shadow she cast was no longer truly hers.

It was another entity all together, something of terrible pride and inhuman skill, someone who made an indelible mark on existence. Her confidence and abilities augmented, she flew forward with a speed she had not possessed before and prepared to cleave all before her, only for pain to blossom from within her body and spill out of her mouth in a violent spray of red. The mantle of power she was clad in forcefully rejected by her being.

Shiomi felt her body becoming numb but was acutely aware of a gathering chill as she faded out of consciousness.

It was much later that she awoke in the comfort of her bed and surrounded by the relieved and happy faces of all her family. They regaled her with tales about the sudden manifestation of a beautiful ice queen who protected her fallen form and mercilessly impaled the assailants with wave after wave of needle-sharp icicles until nothing of their bodies remained but frozen crimson.

A cold sensation at her side caught Shiomi's attention and she lifted the blanket only to see a very small form embracing her tightly. The diminutive girl wore a simple blue dress trimmed in white and in all appearances normal if one could disregard her vividly blue hair and the six ice crystals suspended curiously away from her body as to resemble wings.

That was how Shiomi met Miyuki. The Coral Sheele was only the first snowflake in the avalanche of changes to come.

A New World Fool

Owing to an excitable personality and exuberant nature, the ice elemental brightened up Shiomi's days immensely. There was never a dull moment with Miyuki around and when Shiomi threw herself into the study of magic to better understand what occurred on that night, her new friend was a primary source of insight.

It seemed that Shiomi, for reasons unknownst to her, had a strong inclination to light magic but possessed an overwhelming penchant for destruction magic with void lacing through it. This discovery did much to explain the crumbling of objects in her childhood as well as the origin of the small spell she intuitively used against the bandits. Her mana reserves were enormous for one so young and untrained. The replenishment of it was more impressive still. It was a most advantageous trait, given

the extent of her exploration and experimentation with the power and the concepts she now had a name for. Even armed with the proper knowledge, Shiomi did little to advance further in casting ability and study. It was useful, that much was clear, but she had no love for the destruction she could wrought nor the void she called upon as naturally as her own breathing.

There was another power she could do without considering it turned out to be what almost killed her. Summoning, or more specifically, the invocation of greater existences for aid was clarified as an innate talent. She had even more reservations about its usage than her normal magic considering the risk it posed to her being but there was a greater danger to remaining ignorant. Time and coin were used in equal measure and she gained a comprehensive if narrow understanding of the forces in the world. It was only then that she turned theory into practice.

The Pure Arcana were not troublesome to invoke. Shiomi made a simple pact with The Fool. It would compensate for her shortcomings nicely. She eventually acquired The Wheel of Fortune after several attempts, luck it seemed was not in her favor. Of the other Arcana, she could not invoke as their pacts were much too involved and the cost beyond her current limits.

The Great Beasts were not too costly to invoke but a majority of their pacts were too disagreeable for her taste. Thus, Galgaliel was the only Aeon she contracted with the promise that good would always be done. Not difficult, Shiomi had always considered herself to be a good person though she wondered how much lenient the Aeon's perception on good would be and what it exactly constituted.

The Incarnations were the most fascinating to her; the concept being of mortals whose deeds and history in life were so great that their passing only enhanced their existence further. The world remembered them. The people immortalized them. Thus, an Incarnation was created with abilities reflective of their idealized natures even beyond their origins. These eternal remnants could be brought back into the world briefly, the work of a summoner who needed their strength and was willing to take their awesome force within herself to fight as a composite entity.

She knew not whose strength she drew upon the night she defended her family but the consequence was the same: Shiomi walked the path of death each time she attempted to synchronize with an Incarnation. Regardless of what she thought or intended, some part of her found the other presence disagreeable and violently purged them as if they were contaminants. It was through borderline-reckless experimentation that she gained a semblance of an answer as to why.

Her core and soul were deeply distorted and stubbornly reticent. And yet, while her distortion rejected the entities she invited in her body, it also seemed yearned for them. It was all conjecture of course, based on drawing the merest fragments of various Incarnations and finding some feeling less "wrong" than others. She would not truly know until she could fully manifest them but it seemed that her distortion sought a specific one.

It was after the occasion that she forged a minor connection to Arthuria that she received an unexpected visitor. The Death appeared of its own will and greeted her fallen form. The entity sealed a pact with her, citing an affinity and obligation before it left Shiomi to recover. The incident only brought more questions, none easily answered in the waking world.

Brink of Memories

As if in response to the growing awareness of her nature and awakening of her power, dreams assailed

Shiomi in the twilight hours. They were incredibly vivid, skirting the border of memory. Their contents were disjointed but they had a strange consistency to them.

In the beginning, there was a man and woman whose features were strikingly similar. Shiomi could not identify who the man was but the woman looked very much like herself in basic appearance. The woman was far greater in all other attributes. Her beauty was the calm winter, her intellect; the fertile earth, her charisma; the smoldering inferno, and her battle prowess; the raging storm. The man beside her was equal in all respects and rarely were the pair separate for any long periods of time. They were partners, friends, lovers and together they created a world for themselves.

There was no doubt that these two would have been heroic spirits had they existed. Their spirit and technique were flawless and firm. Their strength pierced the mountain. Their swords split the water. Their names reached the imperial villa. They stood unparalleled under heaven.

But with great power, comes great envy. For as many hearts that held nothing but admiration, a minority held naught but ill-will. Unknown as to where its origin lies, but something or someone was moved to beset the pair with a great calamity. The target was the woman in hopes that her brutal demise would unbalance the man and make him easy prey as he struggled in the throes of despair.

A great curse was cast. It took form of an eternal black flame that would sear the spirit even as it devoured the body. It was seeded deep within her being to render it undetectable and intangible to outside influences. She kept its eldritch hunger to herself with an inhuman composure for seven days and seven nights before she was finally overwhelmed.

The man could only watch helplessly as the curse violently seethed out her body and ravaged her in a sudden and ugly death. There was now nothing of her in the world, only the black flame which proceeded to envelop the man of its own ravenous will.

The man burned but not from the curse. Horrific screeching filled the air as the sentient flame struggled in vain to consume one whose fury burned with an even greater force such that his fire seethed into an absolute cold. The man tore the curse off him like a stubborn cloak and continued on his way.

History will remember the time when an angry god carved a bloody swathe through the land to reach the true perpetrators. He descended upon his foes. He overwhelmed them and left none alive. They were eradicated thoroughly until not even a memory remained. The man turned his attention to the underworld and began the descent to find her.

The woman was not idle either. The curse had scarred her body as well as her spirit and while she was most certainly dead, it seemed she was too damaged to truly pass on. She used the opportunity to explore methods to anchor and sustain her phantasmal existence. She did not merely adopt the chthonian energies pervading the netherworld, she was reborn in it, molded by it, and would not see the light until he burst into this realm to retrieve her. She had no doubt that he would.

Ghosts, spirits, youkai, wraiths, Shinigami, the dead, and the other denizens of the underworld were nothing to him. He was here for only one reason and everything else could either fight at his side or get crushed under his heel but they would not stand in his way.

He spotted her cloaked in shadow and reached his hand out so she may grasp his. Her voice stopped him. Assured him that she would follow of her own power. She told him to promise her not to look

back, not until both were at the surface of the world once more. It was an odd request and he complied for a few steps. It was the strange emanations he felt from behind that caused him to whirl around. The sight made his resolve falter.

There was a singular heavy scar concentrated on her front and wrapping around her body where the curse initially erupted. It writhed disturbingly as if it were the original flame still ravenous. It was not only aspect about her that disturbed him. Clearly her time in the underworld had changed her, in more ways than one. She was still beautiful physically but it was an uncanny and ephemeral beauty; one of death. It hurt him but if she now belonged to this place, he could not take her away from it.

She was a little hurt by his lack of trust but he had cause to be wary. It was the doubt she saw forming in his heart that she took offense to. Her appearance and presence was altered, that was certainly true and the scar enveloping her body did not help matters. But she worked hard to wait for him and her understanding of the world as well as the matters of death expanded considerably in the process. She was very careful to not allow the energies of the underworld to wholly take her. She was dead anyway but she found a method to walk among the living once she was out on the surface. All she needed was to be away from the direct reach of the underworld. Only then would he get the reward he fought so hard for.

They had expended much effort on their individual trials and while their struggles did make them stronger, it also weakened them. This would be the first time they found the other wanting and the foreign emotion would set off a chain of reactions that would see both to an undeserved end.

He told her that he would not remove her from this place, that he was a fool for thinking he could cross the boundaries of life and death so callously with his actions. He forced himself to look into her eyes and only saw absolute despair. It took all of his power to start walking away. This was the right thing to do even if his heart disagreed vehemently.

She had never felt so betrayed in her life. The emotion rippled through her being and amplified by the underworld, transmuted to a dark rage. The surroundings broke away as fell energies coalesced around her form and she emerged as a truly monstrous death. Her eerie wailing froze him in his tracks and they even moved the dead. She would not be stopped in her vengeance. Death was not the only concept she came to understand in this place. With her immense power, she pulled dark energies from the fabric of the underworld and weaved them into curses. She cursed his name, cursed his actions, cursed his death, and cursed him most of all. A thousand curses descend upon him and nothing but black mud was left of his location. She screamed his name into the underworld but there was no triumph in her voice, only heart-break.

Shiomi woke up with a start, tears streaming down her face. She clutched her hands tightly to her chest but the sobbing would not stop. The pain in her heart was too great to bear. A soft touch on her shoulder directed her attention to the worried eyes of Miyuki. Her immediate reaction was to grasp the Sheele into a crushing embrace. Miyuki stroked her Master's hair until the girl finally fell asleep once more. It was fitful and her body was still wracked with wet sobs but it was better than nothing.

Over the next couple of days, Shiomi rarely left her room but for meals and other necessities. She assured her family that, while something was of the matter, it was nothing that alone time could not fix. They respected her decision, bless them, and made no further inquiries.

It seemed that Shiomi could not continue without knowing the mystery of her origin. It was not simply

forbidden. The day after the final dream, she nervously disrobed in front of a mirror and saw the marring conflagration on her body. It was no longer a scar in a truly physical sense but its black-purple color was a marked contrast to her pale skin and the its edges wavered like the flame used to sear it. It was an extensive brand that covered a majority of her chest as well as portions of her back, arms, and legs but fortunately her normal attire would hide it from view. There was no doubt in her mind that the woman she dreamed of was once her.

Shiomi attempted to call that woman to her, not knowing if she became an Incarnation or if it was even possible. All attempts ended in failure but compared to her normal invocations, they carried none of the repercussions she was used to. She reasoned that she was simply not equal to...herself at her current level. It was all terribly confusing. If the woman did become an Incarnation then why would no one know of her or be able to invoke her? Shiomi rationalized that it was because while the woman died and left a mark on existence, it was not a proper death. That much could be certain considering Shiomi herself existed. Therefore, only she could call herself; being the absolute strongest connection in the material plane and that no invoker could summon and merge with someone that was still technically material.

What was more concrete was that other man. Shiomi had no basis but she knew in her heart that he was certainly alive again and somewhere in this world. She was here and he would be no different. He too must be within the throes of his own conflict at his awakening. "Izanagi," she said quietly and winced. Even muttering the man's name sent a lancing pain through her heart. It was no use sitting at home and continue on to feign ignorance. Shiomi knew what she must do. She needed to go out into the world and find her counterpart. Only then will she know the truth about everything but must importantly, the truth about herself.

Pursuing My True Self

Atsushi and Shinju knew that the little child they found by the seashore would have her own share of baggage to deal with. Thus it was no surprise to them after that night Shiomi changed, gradually becoming an almost different person entirely. At her base, she was still the kind and gentle girl they knew but she carried herself with a more regal bearing and no longer as quiet. Shiomi engaged with people more often, made her opinions known, and became involved in arguments.

She was simply more lively and expressive. Although, she was more broody at times, her intolerance for unfamiliar men was back in some force, and when she thought no one was looking, heart-ache was apparent on her visage. Still, there was little the Himura family could do but support her as they always have to the best of their ability.

After a period of restlessness, Shiomi asked her family if it was possible that they would allow her to travel the world. She had questions whose answers could not be found in books. She was pleasantly shocked when Atsushi had already made accommodations for travel and Shinju already prepared a pack for the journey. Shiomi thanked them profusely for this and for everything. Before leaving she bade every member of the Himura family, old and new, a very warm farewell.

Days later, Shiomi found herself at a recruitment gathering for the Badlands Crusade but not to participate only to scout. She reasoned that the man she sought would be attracted to events such as this. In her dreams, he was certainly a warrior of unequalled skill and seemed to fight for what he believed was right. There was a hitch in her plan, however. She did not know his appearance or how to divine his identity if she actually encountered him. There was also a question of what she would do

once they met. But these were all trifling matters, the bridges will be crossed when the time came. At the present, she only needed to find him for certain.

The task was somewhat simple since everyone seemed to give her wide berth. She and Miyuki gave every man they saw a brief, discrete assessment and determined that none at this recruitment drive was the one she sought. Undeterred, she would simply continue to attend these events and similar until she found him. Following up on rumors and information on recent notable youth would also be a profitable venture. Alas, today would not bear fruit and so she must head home to rest.

That was her plan. But she was suddenly pulled into the crowd as she began to leave. Shiomi ended up face-to-face with a black-haired youth who seemed terrified out of his mind, begging her to play along. And so she did. It was inconsequential really. A simple matter to deal with and then she would be on her way home.

Or so she thought.