

One Thousand Every Day

Yasuhiro Blackmore was plagued by unusual dreams of late. Vivid dreams of meaningless death, meaningless suffering, and meaningless happiness forced their way into his mind's eye in the twilight hours.

What stood out most was how the dreams always ended. He was always face to face with a girl who strongly resembled him in physical appearance but he could feel in every cell of his body that she was another force of existence all together, perhaps even on the level of a god. She always spoke the same lines and he always the same replies though he could never recall the specifics.

When he first approached, her face lit up radiantly as if she was overjoyed about finally being saved. However, her expression changed as the conversation developed. First, it was utter disbelief as if she was shown the primordial truth of the world; that inherent, repressed, genetic memory in all organisms of that hellish time when the heaven and earth had not yet split and when organic existence was deemed impossible. This disbelief would turn into a dark sadness from which no light could escape. The sadness then shifted into a painful hope and the look of pleading in her eyes caused deep aches within his very soul. No matter how much it hurt, his dream self was resolute and it was with his answer that the true nightmare emerged.

The world stood very still as he sundered her hope into nothingness and her face contorted in pure, unbridled fury. Her eyes become hollow, black sockets and her skin strained tightly against the contours of her face even as she screamed hatred at him. Her appearance was no longer human or beautiful and became even more of an abomination as a layer of skeletal arms burst from her form and ascended her above his height as more of the macabre skeleton manifested into the world. It was maddening to look upon and completely alien to all that he knew. He was left to stare far above at a human torso out-shadowed in scope by the massive wheel of skeletal arms below all attempting to grasp him with palatable malice, supported only by a thick spinal column that seemed to belong to the giants themselves and terminated into skeletal legs.

Yasuhiro was deeply aware of the exposed bones, blood red and black suffused their surface with only horrific tatters of musculature draped across them. She had leaned downward to grasp him none to gently in her relatively human arms. The pain of her talons sinking into his body did nothing to distract from the endlessly fanged maw surrounding the void that was now a part of her unearthly countenance. He had noticed her hair was still the same luxuriant silver with elegant braiding which only provided terrible contrast of her now eldritch characteristics. It was then that he was permeated with a deep dread as the darkness in their surroundings took a tangible and sinister form. One thousand slender arms of shadow, each a representation of one curse, swiftly latched onto his body in a black wave and started to drag him into the ground. He fought against them with all his strength but that power was only illusion as the weight of one thousand curses overwhelmed him completely.

It was in the all-encompassing black mud of those curses that he heard her voice clearly for the first time as it assaulted his very being and ground at his existence. “**死ね死ね死ね死ね**” repeated unending.

The Black Mud of the Grail

The Blackmore family is known in the present time as a noble house whose renown stems from its rumored reputation as “Merchants of Death” and the exploits of Weylin Blackmore, specifically, his tremendous efforts to once again make his lineage relevant after terrible political machinations nearly exterminated the former Blackmore line. Following their establishment once more into nobility, the family is fairly prolific with eight children carrying on the line and carving their own paths in the world.

While all sons and daughters of Blackmore are as diverse as the contents of their family armory, they all share the same stubborn drive and affinity for combat as their father. Yasuhiro Blackmore for good or ill, inherited a bit more than what was purely in the blood.

The Second Youngest seemed to have been born into misfortune contrary to actual circumstances. It was not the ill fate that sought his death at every opportunity nor was it the omnipresent hand of base bad luck but something much more subtle and acutely sinister. Yasuhiro discovered early on that no matter his efforts or his skill, he was not allowed the small shortcuts or sudden insights that seemed to grace everyone else at times. His luck was no worse for it but the variables for the circumstantial amplification of his abilities were never so favorably present unless he contrived to form them. He could only truly rely on the experience borne from countless hours of training that anyone could reach; the skill of the hopelessly average person as opposed to the skill of the genius.

Though there were some skills that required more effort than need be. While Yasuhiro would have enjoyed becoming proficient wielding the various weapons found in the family armory, it was something he could not do. Not that it was beyond his capabilities or means, it was that simple contact with metal crippled him for a time unless he devoted the spiritual will to fight against it. The reaction was something more than an autoimmune response of his body, it was something inherent to his being.

Weylin theorized that it may be a rejection of his personal Origin of “Sword”; Origin referring to the magecraft term for the starting point that defines one's existence and directs one's actions throughout life, the absolute orders of impulsive behavioral patterns on an existential level. Though the situation was beyond abnormal.

Origins are exceedingly rare, never inherited much less through family, and it was not something an individual could intentionally awaken. For the Second Youngest to possess an Origin that was the antithesis of his father's “Sword” in a family whose power was the force of war itself, several unlikely events would have needed to occur. Calling the result a curse was putting it lightly as it more aligned with a working of True Magic or a miracle than anything else. But the nature of the beast was a secondary concern. The real questions pertained to the originator of the curse and the grievance suffered to cause its casting on his son. His Second Youngest son was too specific a target and the Blackmore patriarch had made sure that no true enemy had survived before he settled down.

Unlimited Blade Works

Yasuhiro Blackmore differed from his siblings in yet another way. While they held their father in varying degrees of admiration, from Shinji's efforts to create the Waltz of Blades mystic code as tribute to the man he would surpass as a magus to Marisa's stubborn determination to acquire her father's

unique brand of magecraft, Yasuhiro's feelings for his father was marred heavily by a deep-seated fear of him that was only just beginning to be tempered by time and mediation. It stemmed from an incident in early childhood in which he witnessed in graphic detail the truth behind his father's Origin.

Speeding death in the form of metal projectiles was all he saw before his father exerted inhuman agility to knock him aside. Yasuhiro could only watch helplessly as they collided with his father's body, the man himself did not clear their flight path entirely. But instead of the wet punching of flesh as expected, there was a ringing metallic grind with each impact. At its conclusion, his father still stood with his arms crossed protectively. Blunted metal littered the area around him and his clothing was in tatters. He slightly lowered his arms and began to visually sweep the area for more threats. The action caught Yasuhiro's eye and what he saw after would be forever engraved in his memory.

Where the projectiles hit, there was no cut flesh. Only layers upon layers of blades weaving the wounds together. They had seemingly replaced his father's skin, his muscles, and no doubt, his bones. There was something disturbingly natural about the blades, appearing as if they had grown there or always were there and merely waiting to be drawn when necessary. It was a macabre sight only complimented by splashes of crimson about their steely surface, the only sign that his father was injured at all.

There was a movement at Yasuhiro's side and he was greeted by an arcing silver blur. Not that he could dodge but he never needed to as Weylin was suddenly in the path of the weapon. The Blackmore Patriarch stepped into the blow and presented his outside forearm and bicep to the blade. There was the screaming screech of steel upon steel as his limb halted the blade rather than being severed. At the same time he braced against the force of the swing, his other hand wrapped on the blocked blade and tightened. His fingers imprinted into the forged weapon and it warped under his Reinforced strength. The assailant pulled back to retrieve his weapon and Weylin made sure to let him at a cost. The weapon rasped horribly as it dragged across his palm. The blade was free but its edge was dulled and its structure integrity was ruined; crippled beyond use.

It was a dirty tactic that Weylin gleaned long ago as something specially permitted for his use. Weapons were far from indestructible but swords had a special vulnerability to them. Any ding or bend added to the weapon affected multiple variables such as the weight or the arc of the swing. All unwelcome changes to wielders who prided themselves on knowing the exact details of their weapon and whose long use left their movements in dissonance. A small advantage but Weylin leveraged all that he could in battle. It would more than carry him through this encounter.

The unknown man stared dumbly at his ruined weapon and was run through with an identical one but in its formerly whole state. An imitation so close to the original that only the world itself could discern the contradictions. Weylin observed the man slump over lifelessly on the ground. The man clearly did not know all of what he faced and it cost him his life. But the Blackmore Patriarch would know everything about the assailant in time. The Blackmore family was not to be trifled with, to attack them was to engage the force of war in all of its facets.

However, that was a latter task. Weylin examined his surroundings with Reinforced senses and found no further threats. He dismissed his copied weapon and motioned for his son to follow him carefully.

Yasuhiro stood unresponsive, unable to fully comprehend what was shown to him. It was unnatural, something a human should not possess. He flinched backward when his father stepped forward with a reassuring hand. A reaction that was part metal aversion but mostly seeing his father in a new light. They made the path home with Yasuhiro at a wary distance.

Weylin sat on the veranda overlooking the courtyard of his estate. While his overall activity had diminished since he succeeded in reviving the Blackmore name, he still kept his daily routine of exercise and conditioning to keep his mind and body as keen as the weapons he preferred to wield. Those efforts were useful today and he had little in the way of regrets. Still the reaction and fear he saw in his son's eyes cut him deeper than most weapons could. His abilities were something that he knew well only through experience, study, and a foreign brand of knowledge. How they were regarded by strangers was something he paid little mind, considering that ones who saw did not understand nor were in no condition to tell.

His family was a different matter. Kurokawa Amaya knew all there was to know about him, not surprising considering she was his wife. He also knew everything about her as no secrets were kept between though Weylin had always considered the exchange to be unfair in his favor.

For his children, he offered the benefit of a wholly different perspective. They learned many terms and concepts unheard of elsewhere. And though he was glad to share his knowledge, he kept his silence on his magecraft. It was nothing spectacular; an overdeveloped cantrip at best. His children would not inherit it through blood and there was no need to for them to even walk down the path of the magus.

Better they learn the magic of the land they were born in. The possibilities were somewhat diminished but it was undoubtedly safer and did not require as much sacrifice.

Weylin Blackmore knew he was an anomaly simply through his very existence but never did he think any of his children would react so strongly toward him. In the others, he saw acceptance, indifference, and disturbing enthusiasm but not utter revulsion.

The contemplation of his navel was interrupted by a sudden hand on his shoulder. It was very rare that anyone could sneak up on him as his brutal training had long desensitized him to friendly presences and the hand belonged to his wife, it was expected. Not that Kurokawa Amaya was a slouch in the stealth department, it was second nature to her. She settled down at his side and patiently waited with a knowing smile.

It was an old habit, taking every burden upon himself. He was not alone anymore. Weylin gently wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she swiftly fitted her body against his. They spent the night in comfortable silence.

Yasuhiro was in the throes of his own contemplation and his sleep was no better for it. His mind churned like a factory whose only purpose was to manufacture swords without end. He imagined blades sitting just beneath the surface of his body, an infinite number waiting to be drawn at the slightest provocation. The frantic mindless need of replacing his deteriorating body with swords in order to keep him alive. An inescapable death by internal skewering should he lose control and the swords instantly piercing him in every location. A horrific life as one who is slowly becoming a sword. And even in the end when the body is stiff, the mind ravaged to a sole purpose, and movement accompanied by a metallic grating, all that is left are his senses and even those will turn to steel before his body finally gives out.

A body composed of swords. Blood of iron and heart of glass. Survivor of countless battles. Not even once retreating, not even once being understood. Forging iron in isolation, the bearer lies amongst a hill of swords. There is little regret in walking the meaningless path, through a field of infinite blades.

Thus, the child who distanced himself from his father the most was also the child who was closest to understanding him.

Fear and Origin aside, Yasuhiro made efforts to improve relations with his father, however gradual that was. He started with minor improvements, such as not losing his composure while being in the same room. Weylin was very accommodating and allowed his son to move at his own pace while also readily answering any questions or freely sharing any stories that came to mind. The fear had yet to leave but it certainly diminished with understanding. To strangers, Yasuhiro's behavior around his father would always resemble formal piety. However, it was an unbreakable bond forged with pride between them. A certain pride that arose from not only the internal acceptance of one's limitations and flaws but also the willingness and action to work through them. After all, self-improvement and the following of an ideal were not so different. And both Yasuhiro and Weylin knew the worth of a relentless pursuit that started with a single step. The journey was far more beautiful than the destination that could seem like a distant utopia.

As much time as Yasuhiro spent on building a relationship with his father, a great deal more was spent with Amaya. This was not surprising as she was the sole person he sought in his younger days after sessions with his father. He often followed her around and helped out while she went about her daily routine of maintaining the household. There was a subtle air of power ever-present around her. He could not help but notice its constant state regardless of her actions or conduct. When he brought it to her attention, she dismissed it as something that had long become second nature. When he inquired about the source, she asked him if he wished to learn. Thus Yasuhiro was introduced to the martial art known as Taijiquan and under her tutelage, became proficient in time.

Yasuhiro took to Taijiquan with great ease. As a combat art, it more suitable than the weapons he could not lay bare hands on. His physical prowess was notable but it paled in comparison to his spiritual will and he made full utilization of it. In Taijiquan, Yasuhiro became almost as formidable as his siblings. Marisa laughed at him when she encountered him in practice, great effort exerted over such boring and slow motions. But while Taijiquan was often slow in practice, it was quick in execution and even with weapons in hand, she could not best the Second Youngest in martial conflict. She was used to meeting violent force with its like after all and Taijiquan enacted on a different approach entirely. Defensively, he controlled her strikes, yielding to them while remaining in contact until such force was exhausted or redirected safely. She could not disturb his center and her attacks were neutralized. Offensively, what seemed like a simple palm strike could become much more due Yasuhiro's growing skill at manipulating his body's internal energy. Marisa had found herself pushed backward, lifted off her feet, stance broken, and even suffered internal damage when the force of the strike was terminated within her body depending on what Yasuhiro deemed strategically efficient for the battle.

It was an occurrence that repeated itself many times in the household. Marisa was not one to give up in general and Yasuhiro was always eager to help her improve in anyway he could. It was good for them in many ways, a method of learning and one of bonding.

Through Marisa, Yasuhiro could enable himself against many weapons and potential capabilities of their users. He would become thoroughly familiar with armaments, if only for the purpose of reducing his disadvantages on the battlefield.

Through Yasuhiro, Marisa's enthusiasm would become tempered with experience against an opponent who continuously adapted his tactics. She would further refine her skill as a generalist weapon-user and

better read the flow of combat. And even beyond training, Marisa sought to spend as much time with her favorite brother as she could because honestly, he could probably use the reprieve from everyone else.

The Sole Defensive Phantasm

Yet, in spite of or because of the nature of his supernatural afflictions, Yasuhiro Blackmore was developing into quite the man; fair, straight, and tall. There were few females who did not entertain thoughts about running their fingers through his silvered hair or spying on his training regime to watch his fit body in motion. Many did get a chance to act out some of their fantasies as Yasuhiro had a propensity to invite them to the manor or accompany them for various events, though not for any intimate purpose to the disappointment of some.

It was part circumstance and part Yasuhiro's force of personality. He grew up in a time when a majority of his siblings were not present; most having ventured out into the world for various reasons and only returning home occasionally. It left the Second Youngest with a smattering of consistent presences at the estate to interact with. And so, he reached out toward others and they in turn, reached out to him.

Among all the Blackmore, Yasuhiro was by far the most approachable by all manner of people with little regard to their gender, age, social status, or race.

Weylin himself cut an austere and intimidating figure which was only reinforced by his now legendary exploits to revive the Blackmore name from nothingness. He was not an easy man to remain in the presence of and not one to cross. Doubly so for Amaya whose homely appearance belied something much deeper than could be perceived. Things she approved of seemed to always be accomplished and things she disapproved of seemed to never come to fruition. Both results manifested with little fanfare and no one could decisively say her hand was in them but people did much to avoid her disfavor. No matter how polite and demure she was in manner and bearing, a woman who could attract Weylin's attention and keep it had to be formidable indeed. There were few souls who had enough cause to approach the couple out of their own volition and what a rare sight it was to even see one without the other in close proximity. The Blackmore heads were people to tread lightly around.

Taizen was not even considered when he deigned to make an appearance. He seemed concerned about little and did what he pleased as he traveled and peddled his wares as a self-described simple merchant. A good conversationalist but otherwise a dull character despite his trappings as the Eldest son of the Blackmore family.

The Eldest daughter was another enigma in her own way. Rosalind was rarely present but her haughty attitude and single-minded drive toward her unnamed goal with no regard for her position did her no favor in the eyes of the other nobles or general populace. It was quite the worry that the oldest children seemed to have no desire to support their family in the future; only a selfish focus for their own affairs.

The Second Eldest daughter was a sharp contrast to either of her eldest siblings. Githa bore the Blackmore name proudly as a title in the court and a badge of command in the field. Every action she took and every word she spoke reflected her drive to make the power and influence of her family known to all. Her prowess with weaponry was not to be trifled with and neither was her tongue in more social settings. There was an imperceptible distance ever-present between herself and others due to her ambition; a distance known well to any suitors who attempted to vie for her hand. She, herself was a much greater obstacle than any competition generated among themselves. And yet, her stern visage and

serious personality did little to diminish her attractiveness. Githa was a striking figure on the battlefield, weapons in hand and silver-white hair tied in a bun. Even clad in full armor and striking with such force as to tear apart an opponent's defenses, her movements carried a beautiful elegance and grace despite the violence. However, when she let her hair down and put on a dress, one could almost forget that the stunning beauty they beheld was a sword in its sheath. From the beginning, she put herself on a pedestal and strove to meet all expectations.

The less said about Kirei the better. Even among his own family he was considered a black sheep. He was an abhorrent man who enjoyed the suffering of others and was physically incapable of interaction without mind games, exposition, or philosophical contemplation. His words always seemed to strike true and those on receiving end could do little to deny them entirely. No one knew just how many machinations the man held close at all times but none of them bode well. The Second Eldest son was someone to actively be avoided even if he could take that option out of play with trivial effort.

People did not seem to know what to think of Verina but bore her no ill-will. With long, white hair and ruby-red eyes, she was hard to miss in a crowd. While she did not often attend social functions, her social skills were no less hindered for it and people were always interested to see her. The Second Youngest daughter seemed content to be among her books rather than others.

The Youngest daughter and Youngest son of Blackmore were as different as night and day. Marisa was difficult to deal with; her personality always glaringly bright and shining exuberant. It was made only more overbearing by a natural curiosity toward things that were not strictly her affairs and tendency to see everything as a challenge she must overcome. Shinji was painfully shy and timid in contrast. If it were not for his family, he could easily have become a target for easy harassment. But the Youngest son was not without merit. There was a core of steel in Shinji, one that only manifested in adversity. In the present, he was a socially awkward child but there were many who could see the man he could develop into. But until that time arrives, they would have to make due. At least Shinji was quiet and polite.

Yasuhiro Blackmore was all that his siblings were not and people seemed to think all the better of him for it. He was well-received by all those who had met him, an impression that only reinforced itself with time and further interactions. Even those who were dead-set on seeing the Second Youngest in an ill light would grudgingly admit that he knew how to properly conduct himself no matter the situation and was unfailingly diplomatic. For lack of better words, Yasuhiro was refreshingly sincere and people were somewhat inclined to respond in kind. When he talked to people, he carried little with him into the conversation unless it was brought up. Yet, despite presenting the same base personality toward all he met, Yasuhiro seemed to adapt depending on the people he was with and so everyone perceived him slightly differently.

To those younger, he was the big brother they desired and someone to aspire to. They sought his attention and approval. To his peers, he was someone they could rely upon and an ear they would never have otherwise. They sought his advice and helping hand. To those older, he was a proper young man and an understanding soul. They sought his view on affairs and to see him added to their social network if not family.

For the wealthy, he was counted as the best among them. His demeanor and worldly nature were highly regarded. For the less wealthy, his background was irrelevant as he himself did not speak much of it, much less hold it over their heads. He was humble and spent time with them without ulterior motive.

On the topic of time, it was fascinating how Yasuhiro invested his. Very little of it seemed to be for

himself and he was oft found in the company of others. To unfamiliar eyes, it was very odd to find a person of his standing working in the fields or helping servants with errands as opposed to hunting for sport or attending social functions and yet he was equally likely to be present in all scenarios. There was still novelty in it if only to see what he would be involved in but people had become accustomed to his appearance; whether swarmed with children, fishing with a few companions, listening to the head of a manor recounting stories of his youth, and everything in-between. His capability to balance his personal affairs and development in addition to concerning himself with others was astonishing. Of course, the exchange was not one-sided and certainly not without benefit. Yasuhiro had a genuine interest in others and even as he aided them, he improved himself by proxy. His welcome involvement in the lives of others refined his already formidable sociability, expanded his breadth of knowledge, and garnered him proficiency in a diverse set of skills. It also left him with a vast network of connections that he managed to keep relevant and even those who did not pay it mind, noticed its odd quality.

It is to be mentioned that Yasuhiro had more than a few male friends and acquaintances, he was fair to all regardless of their innate traits. These were people who had come to trust him and if he ever asked for them, there would be little in the way of hesitation before they stood as his side.

It is also be mentioned that this portion of his connections was grossly overwhelmed in by its fairer counterpart. There was a certain charm to Yasuhiro that draw female attention like moth to flame and it was made all the more potent by his kind and considerate nature. They were eager to be with him, the exact reason varying among individual, and he was very receptive to them. Rare it was to find Yasuhiro without the company of a woman during his waking hours and if rumors were to be trusted, in the night as well. Those who paid thorough attention to these affairs and Yasuhiro's male friends could only scratch their heads in wonderment. Despite the intimacy of the interactions, the clear attraction, and the efforts of some of the women themselves, overall his relationships seemed to be strictly platonic if not, only skirt the boundary of romantic love. A strange sort of equilibrium and it was anyone's guess as to whether it was purposely enforced. It made for tantalizing speculation and talk but ultimately groundless. He was simply not that sort of person to so lightly play with hearts even if he could be lumped in with other ladykillers and flirts. Besides, it was not as if the situation was detrimental to the woman involved, quite the opposite. Yasuhiro was a definite, positive influence in many respects and so long as no party was harmed, there was not a need to delve further into the matter.

The Male Who Invites

“Mr. Blackmore? A moment of your time when the opportunity presents itself,” said Raze El-Harkim as he approached Yasuhiro. The elderly gentleman was in no particular hurry. He stood unmoving with both hands clasped on his cane. As Yasuhiro began to extract himself from the children around him, Raze patiently observed and briefly glanced at the large, cabochon-cut gem radiating a soft, azure light set into his right gauntlet. The light grew in slight intensity for a brief moment before dimming once more. All systems were operational.

Even as he bade farewell to the kids around him and reassured a particularly persistent little girl that he would meet her again at the designated place, Yasuhiro did not take his eyes off the man before him. The little girl with long, white hair, who was more like a snow fairy, turned her pout into a brilliant smile before waving at him excitedly as she ran off. Still, Yasuhiro carefully observed Raze even as he responded to her in kind.

Rock salt and pepper hair slicked back formally. A leaned, weathered face that spoke of much travel and experience. Clothes tailored to be functional yet stylish. A single gauntlet of brushed metal

delicately crafted to provide full protection with no loss to fine dexterity. Eyes that peered over small, circular spectacles, taking full measure of him in turn. Azure eyes that seemed no less dulled with age, only refined. Raze El-Harkim: The Man Who Needs No Map. The man whose family founded the Prodigal Explorer Company, famed for the providing the most accurate maps of the Southern Continent and top-quality adventuring gear. A legacy that flourishes even into the present. For such a man to approach Yasuhiro, the matter was certainly of importance.

Raze turned his attention from the second youngest Blackmore son to the little girl retreating into the distance. “The Kryeziu girl. She seems...happy.” He watched her wistfully and nodded to himself in approval as she vanished from view. “I am hardly opposed to standing but perhaps we should sit down for this discussion, Mr. Blackmore,” said Raze as he gestured to a nearby bench which both men moved toward. It was clear from his movements that Raze's cane was more an accessory than a walking aid. Seated, the elder man laid the item across his lap. “I trust introductions are not necessary?”

“And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” said Yasuhiro. He only knew Raze through secondhand talk and from the products of his company. And while he saw the man during social gatherings on several occasions, he never had cause to approach him.

There was a slight clink as Raze pushed his spectacles up by the bridge with two fingers of his gauntlet hand. “I am in need of your talents, Mr. Blackmore. To be more specific, your charisma.” Seeing nothing but an inquiring look from Yasuhiro, he elaborated, “You have a way with people and I intend to use it to personal effect.” Raze leaned back on the bench, a slight grimace on his face. “But you will need proper context,” he said. “My granddaughter, Blythe. Have you met her?”

Yasuhiro mentally sorted through the names and faces of females around his age. Out of their number, he could not recall a Blythe El-Harkim nor could he determine a semblance of her from those he only knew by appearance. “I do not believe-,” is what he started to say but a memory came unbidden moments before he could utter his answer. A familiar chill caressed his spine.

Lovely blonde hair that fell past her hips and oddly, terminated in an upward curve for some of their length. Even from across the banquet hall, she had captured his curiosity during his initial survey of the people present. Examining her a tad more closely, she now had his full attention. It was not entirely due to her physical attractiveness though it was a formidable contribution. Her red evening gown was a fine compliment to her slender but developed build. She was most likely of high social standing based on physical features alone but he could discern little else given that her back was turned. Yasuhiro's interest originated in the observation that such an attractive girl had a dearth of people around her despite the large gathering.

While engaging in conversation and greeting familiar faces, he kept a discreet eye on the blonde girl and arrived at an odd conclusion as he maneuvered his way through the festivities. It seemed that for one reason or another, people were actively avoiding interaction with her or even being within a few paces, so much as the hall allowed. His musing on the matter was interrupted when she turned her head to regard something at her side and, perhaps knowingly, completed the motion to meet his gaze directly. Golden eyes. Enchanting eyes with slitted pupils that did not belong on a human. A sense of discontent developed within him. Something innate to his very being marked her as “off”; a dangerous existence. Base instinct willed him to remove himself from the situation; by fight or flight, it mattered not. And yet, he found himself unable to even look away. Though it was not due to any sort of compulsion cast by her eyes that weakened his ability to do so. On the contrary, he was making a deliberate effort to focus on her through the adverse reaction her presence was causing even if he knew not why. He

simply felt it was something that he must maintain because he would rather not face the consequences of averting his eyes from her.

There was a long pause between them before she gave him a smile. Small and demure but just enough to display her pronounced canine teeth. She gave him a polite nod before turning to leave. Yasuhiro was left only with his thoughts at the exchanged as he watched people seemingly, eagerly parting for her as she exited.

“Hm. I cannot say for certain. Perhaps I have but only in passing.” Yasuhiro said as he mulled over the memory. “Does she possess any distinctive characteristics?”

“I would think my granddaughter quite noticeable given her golden irises and passive ability to clear even the most festive of gatherings with her mere presence,” said Raze El-Harkim.

“Then I may say for certain that we have met in passing.” The timely recollection of that meeting was justified now but there were questions yet on his mind. Blythe seemed veiled in mystery and he was curious as to how it seemed to thin her familial connection to the man sitting beside him. Before this day, he had no knowledge of an El-Harkim beyond Raze nor would he have made the connection of Blythe to his person without his prompting.

It was likely to be a sensitive subject and though the man may be willing to indulge him, Yasuhiro wanted to phrase his inquiry as delicately as possible. “Is there cause as to why Blythe is so beautifully terrifying?” Or for that matter, terrifyingly beautiful. Either was apt.

The lines at the corners of Raze's eyes creased as he chuckled before responding, “She left quite the impression then.” His mirth only increased as Yasuhiro nodded rather decisively in affirmation and the elderly man began to weave a tale that happened long ago.

Genmonogatari

Back then the future of the Prodigal Explorer Company was uncharted but in good hands. His son had proven more than able of the responsibility and with his marriage to a sometimes, literally brilliant young woman who merely described herself as an “ordinary magician”, times were interesting and hopeful. Raze El-Harkim earned the inheritance of the company through his father and continued to administrate and develop it even through the passing of his own wife. Understandably, he looked forward to the near future where his son will bear the mantle of El-Harkim and Raze would be relieved of decades of duty. But it was not peaceful retirement he sought, no. Raze longed to venture into the unknown once more and explore as freely as he did in youth.

The wanderlust of the El-Harkim was a strong compulsion. As such, even the birth of Blythe gave his son little pause and though Raze advised otherwise, he accepted it as a matter of course. He himself first learned the knowledge of braving Nusquam Esse on the road with his parents. And it was this knowledge, refined by his own experience, that was passed to his son under much the same conditions. There were still final preparations to be made in terms of transferring ownership of the company but it was little concern. When the time approaches, his son would be ready and not before.

It was not to be.

Through the manipulations granted to him by his arcane gauntlet and his calculations, Raze El-Harkim

safely navigated through the chaotic weave of the energies ever-present in the Southern Continent to arrive unscathed and swiftly at his destination.

The settlement was eerily quiet. There was no motion and no noise but there were clear signs of recent conflict. Mortal bodies were scattered about as if rent by great physical force; the wounds on them, mundane. He carefully examined his surroundings and still perceived no signs of life, unlife, or constructs that were semblances of life. But, there was large quantities of ash gathered in various places and rather focused scorch marks on every available surface. Whether or not the adversaries were still present was unclear but this was the handiwork of his son's wife to be sure. It was the only lead he could discern and better than speculation. With quiet steps and the steady, thrumming of his gauntlet, Raze El-Harkim began his investigation. A thorough mapping and catalog of the settlement and items formed in his mind as he tread deeper into the scene of ruin.

The frequency and intensity of the destruction increased as he drew near the center. Buildings were in shambles and the ground was heavily carved out. However, there was an unsettling lack of bodies until he came across a small, ash-covered form hugging its knees to their chest. Closer observation revealed it to be a child, a young girl to be precise. He approached and her head perked up immediately at the sound of his footsteps. Raze had nary the moment to catch the flash of her golden irises before she was upon him.

At the start of her leap, a spear formed wholly of arcane energy was fully realized from his gauntlet. In the brief moment of her flight, its point was poised for an accurate and precise strike no matter her trajectory. Kiss-shot: Heart under Blade, an old initiation offensive from his youth but the combination of fatal force and overwhelming stopping power had yet to be rendered obsolete. It was only due to years of experience and honed intuition that he could direct the working away from her and flux it into inert energy mere instants before she made impact. His initial stance of striking down a threat as swiftly as possible changed to that receiving her embrace.

It would not due to slay his granddaughter even if base human instinct vehemently stated otherwise. She wept openly and without reserve. Raze found that he had to brace himself against her surprisingly strong grip as he comforted her. As he was the only familiarity that remained, she had all but buried herself into him and showed little signs in relinquishing him in the present. He comforted his granddaughter to the best of his ability and took careful note of several peculiarities about her physical state. Changed as she was, Blythe was still Blythe. There were questions to be sure but better asked later. For now, all that was needed was for him to be there for her. Everything else was of secondary concern.

He pressed her head into his shoulder even as he raised his gauntlet into the air. It was time they left. Raze bade her to close her eyes for she had seen more than enough this day. Told her to shut out the world. To ignore the snarling entities that were steadily amassing and focus only on his breathing. As she relaxed, he focused on the task of extraction. But first, he would dispense retribution.

He did not care what these beings were. He did not commit them to memory and he would not investigate them at a later time. All Raze knew, is that they destroyed this settlement, killed his son and daughter-in-law, and most assuredly played a role in irrevocably altering his granddaughter. It was more than enough to ensure that not even their atoms would remain.

Azure flares of arcane energy writhed furiously in pseudo-sentience around his gauntlet as it accumulated. The sight itself slowed the movement of the encroaching horde. An ominous red spear

serrated in reminisce of lightning and stained purple by azure energies, shaped itself from the gauntlet. Raze released the weapon into flight and it was nothing but a red streak as it soared upward.

There was a clear hesitation and then the mass descended up Raze and Blythe. Though they never reached the pair as it began to rain. Countless spears poured down onto area, each one detonating with enough power to blow away a multitude of enemies. The bombardment was brief but massively devastating. All opposition as well as the settlement were eliminated. From within the barren crater, Raze initiated the weave. To Gekkou Karei and to the only person who could make sense of this mess.

Weylin had a clear perspective of what transpired with Blythe. The cause he was uncertain of but the result was apparent to him. Raze on the other hand was skeptical. Never from personal experience or otherwise had he surmised that there was ever a distinction between vampires on the basis of their origin. "True Ancestor", vampiric creatures from birth that were incarnated nature spirits comparable to the more powerful of the Faery. Planet-class spirits whose need for blood was psychological rather than physiological. "Dead Apostle", mortals who became vampires due to the utilization of thaumaturgy or by the actions of another vampire. The most numerous of the blood-sucking species who required blood to maintain their bodies and sustain their power. The Blackmore Patriarch assured him that Blythe fortunately fell into the former category. Raze could do little but agree based on the information presented and what he himself observed.

While Blythe possessed the physicalities and inspiration of dread one would associated with a vampire, she was by no means undead. The conflict at the settlement had not taken even a day, no vampire could rise under normal conditions within such a short amount of time. She had warmth, was not bound to grave soil nor coffin, and sunlight did little more to her than any living creature. Raze had compiled all these traits and more when he held her back at the settlement. The base human part of him or more precisely the aspect that evolved to paranoid sensitivity toward the supernatural, had ruthlessly sought any sign that would justify her demise. The slightest flaw would suffice; a faint wavering of the glamour, a micro-fracture in the masquerade would be all that was necessary. But the deeper it delved for inhumanity, the more contradictions it encountered and thus it could not proceed when it reluctantly concluded that Blythe was only a human shaped like a vampire.

After thanking Weylin for his time and knowledge, Raze left the Blackmore Manor with a sleeping Blythe in tow. The Blackmore Patriarch certainly knew much about a world that no one else seemed to but it strangely fit regardless. There was little to do but pick up the pieces that remained after the calamity. Raze El-Harkim had already buried his son and his daughter-in-law, that was simple. The challenge of raising his granddaughter was a far more daunting task.

Between managing the company and raising Blythe, the latter proved to hold its own share of unique difficulties. There was much resistance in letting even stay in Gekkou Karei. Much of it centering around the potential danger she would pose to others, though some had posed the point more politely than others. It was through the methodological presentation of his evidence about her condition, that he managed to convince otherwise. Admittedly, the endorsement of the Blackmore Family had lent significant weight to his arguments. Blythe was a grudgingly accepted and tolerated presence which was only added to her burdens as time passed.

In her earlier years, Raze handled Blythe's developmental and educational needs with ease. Of course, this necessitated that she be with him and so she became a consistent presence in his office. Having his granddaughter around had certainly dulled the monotony of paperwork and as an odd side benefit, allowed him to be virtually undisturbed by his employees without truly justified cause. Blythe had

spoken very little about the incident and his gentle attempts at coaxing the information out of her were fruitless. But there were times when she sought him out restlessly; times where the thought of being alone was unbearable for her. And as she grasped him in a desperate hug, Raze could surmise where memory had taken her. She would often mumble things as she dozed off. Fragments about the shield of a dragon-fang blade and a lady of luminosity; the last, valiant stand of a couple to protect their only daughter.

Interestingly enough, it was when Blythe was older and more self-sufficient that Raze could no longer effectively divide his attentions. Out of his teachings as well as necessity, she could provide for herself but her continuing education could no longer be sustained as a matter of course while Raze was working nor in the little free time he had to spare. Finding appropriate tutors proved to be a near-heroic ordeal in itself. They were either unwilling or unable to be in her presence for any length of time, much less in a one-on-one situation, and no amount of coin could sway them otherwise. No matter how polite and well-mannered Blythe was, her vampiric nature constantly set humans on edge. It was sufficient enough that it drove an attempt on her life; an action that she had not taken kindly to. The man was not killed, only severely injured with the slightest effort, but it marked the end of Raze's attempt at human tutors. He had very well considered sending her to the Blackmore Household as the family did not mind her in the slightest and would be more than willing to help. But he was uncomfortable in relying in their aid once more when they had already given so much. In his youth, Raze possessed a dogged insistence to tackle his problems through as much of his own means as possible. An attitude that was tempered with age but still resided within him. He would find another way.

The solution to secure tutors that were willing to teach Blythe was simple and even easier to execute as Raze began seeking among the more supernatural beings in the Nusquam Esse. Their knowledge was vast, their tolerance greater, and the payment they accepted though varied were not overly difficult to fulfill. But even as her education grew by leaps and bounds, Blythe's interactions with the various Elves, Fey, Youkai, Warforged, and other supernaturally-inclined races began to manifest in more than her learning. It was something that Raze observed but could do little to mitigate entirely.

His granddaughter had already spent the majority of her life as someone not completely human. And though she made frequent appearances outside of the El-Harkim estate, her reception in Gekkou Karei was lukewarm at best. Any venture into social interaction, from playing with her peers to mere conversation, was constantly rebuffed. As a consequence, she spent the majority of her time alone and the rest in the company of her inhuman tutors. While Raze took great pains to provide for her and be a part of her life, he remained an extraordinarily busy man. With the passing seasons, Blythe's inherent nature and the reactions to it had shaped a perspective that was alien to humanity.

Specialist

There was a brief pause as Yasuhiro compiled the influx of information, after which he was the first to break the silence. "What would you have me accomplish? Or more truthfully, why call upon my aid specifically?" Yasuhiro helped people and rather enjoyed it but asking him to overcome years of a reinforced nature was a formidable request and surely there were better, more professional sources to tackle it.

Raze had an answer waiting in the wings, "Know that there is no expectation for the reversal of her condition or halt the progression of such in it's entirety. It would be more than unreasonable. Blythe is a learned and intelligent young woman who simply requires proper context for social situations. If you are able to provide her the tools so that she may manage on her own, that itself would be quite

sufficient.”

“Noted,” said Yasuhiro as he visualized how he would work out such a scenario while still attentively listening.

“As to why I specifically sought you out,” Raze continued. “You are a Blackmore,” he stated as if it was the sole justification that was needed. “But more importantly, you are a catalyst for change.”

“You are attributing more credit to me than is due, I believe. People make their own choices and while they may be shaped by their interactions with others, I am only one among many”, Yasuhiro said.

“True,” Raze said. “But take my word for it, you are accelerating developments in others that would otherwise not occur or at minimum require vastly more time. He gestured outward in a seemingly random direction but Yasuhiro had no doubts that the man knew exactly what laid southward beyond the park and its forest. “The Kryeziu girl is one example. With her strict and sheltered upbringing as the consequence of her family's insistence for a perfect heiress, she had always been distant and overly careful about outward expressing any emotion that would be unfitting of her family's standards of etiquette. And yet I saw her today, full of good cheer; a normal child among other children, unconcerned and unburdened by her status. Remarkable.”

Raze gripped Yasuhiro's shoulder with his gauntlet-hand and stared firmly into his eyes as he spoke, “As one who must venture forth and return to Gekkou Karei, my perspective is sharper in this regard. Among otherwise unrelated people, I have found you to be the one, consistent commonality. Aware of it or not, deliberate or not, you allow others to not only be aware of what is within but also enable them to grow in light of it. It is charisma enough to wage war and something I trust will never be utilized toward ill intent.”

“I understand,” was the only response Yasuhiro could offer. Though outwardly composed, he was slightly shaken by the seriousness of the man's words. He had never thought of his actions in that manner or detailed their influence to a fine degree. More than that, he was acutely aware of a cold fire in his shoulder that seemed to originate from the man's grip. Whether it was his “Anti-Sword” Origin manifesting in reaction to the arcane gauntlet or merely the equipment itself he could not be certain but he ignored it as much as possible.

“It is just that the most optimal method of teaching Blythe would be to have her observe what I myself would do in social settings and apply it herself. The rest is rather improvised,” said Yasuhiro. If Blythe only lacked context then he could provide that and then some. And with practice, her social atrophy would also be combated.

There was a wry smile on Raze's face as he withdrew his grip and flipped his hand over to reveal a blue-steel key suspended just above his palm. “Such a plan would certainly have free access to her as a required prerequisite.” Raze's mirth continued as Yasuhiro tentatively grasped the key to the El-Harkim estate. “You have been given a great responsibility, Mr. Blackmore. I trust you will uphold it.”

“I will put forth my best efforts,” said Yasuhiro as he pocketed the key. “You do realize that rumor and speculation will abound? Something of this nature will be difficult to keep covert.”

Raze nodded in agreement, “Rest assured, I will ensure that all is well on my end. Though you will have to handle your own share of entanglements as a consequence but you have done marvelously thus far in your current situation. A lesser man would have fallen already under such pressures.”

Yasuhiro scratched behind his head nervously, “Ah, yes. That. I manage.”

“You are a Blackmore. I am sure you aspire to greater,” said Raze with a knowing smile. “I am already indebted to your family and it would seem that accumulates greater still. It is very difficult to repay a Blackmore I have found. Even so, the days ahead already seem more hopeful, a feeling that had not made itself known in a great while.” He eased himself off the bench and made as if to leave. “I thank you for taking the time to listen to an old man's troubles. And I trust we shall be seeing much more of one another in the future. It has been a pleasure, Mr. Blackmore. Good day and farewell.” He tipped his hat to Yasuhiro as the younger man responded in kind to the parting before making a leisurely exit.

Left alone, Yasuhiro was to consider how to initiate this scenario with Blythe. He had taken out the key to study its intricate simplicity as he pondered. Impossible carvings and engravings composed the solid key if one looked closely but casual inspection rendered it as quite plain overall. A fitting item for an El-Harkim. He pocketed the key once more and made his exit. There was a balance to be maintained between contemplation and action. He had already done enough thinking.

Eventually, Yasuhiro found himself at the gates of the El-Harkim estate. It was a large place. Not because of showy opulence but of necessity. As he passed through the gate, he made note of the various displays that could be faintly seen through the many windows. Walls of books, collection of objects, and various postmortem creatures, were in view and arranged in neat order. This simple but sturdy residence was more akin to a museum. It certainly did not seem like a home. The grounds held some interesting flora and the building was well-tended but it was all pervaded by a subtle sense of emptiness. It was as if no one had lived here for a long time, as if this was a place that rejected people.

There were no knockers on the great doors but his firm rapping generated a strangely hollow sound that was amplified many times over. As Yasuhiro took time to admire the designs on the wooden doors, he could almost see the sound reverberating through each and every corridor. There was no response. He inserted the key and the doors opened before he could barely turn it.

As the doors shut behind with an air of finality, he was a single soul in a dimly lit manor. His senses informed that such solitude was an absolute lie. The moment he had stepped into manor, the pressure of someone's gaze upon his person was readily apparent. It was an undeniable weight that engaged his body for conflict and put it on high alert.

A massive set of stairs greeted him and shrouded in the gloom at its height, Blythe El-Harkim stood waiting. Dressed in the same red-black finery he had first saw that night, she was beautiful as memory and equally as terrifying. Her golden eyes were cast downward and he felt very much like prey under their scrutiny. It was a penetrating gaze that seemed to peer beyond the physical and into the veil that was not oft seen by mortal eyes unaided.

She took a single step downwards before making herself airborne. With a grace normally reserved for felidae, Blythe descended from her position up high and landed as if in curtsy at the bottom of the stairwell. She affixed him with a most curious look as she straightened up and stepped forward.

Yasuhiro had become aware of his stance and so released it. The preparation and execution of battle was generally unbecoming to welcome a lady with.. Though any passive hostility was dispelled, his hands remained relaxed and more importantly open. “Yasuhiro Blackmore. It is a pleasure to meet at last, Blythe El-Harkim,” he said while she meticulously examined him from head to toe.

Without reservation, she threw her head back and laughed, “Kaka.” It was light, lilting and all the more distinctive, the sound of it confined to her only and made display of her fangs. Chin still tilted upwards and staring directly into his eyes, Blythe extended her hand forward as if in beckon and said, “Can I eat the one standing before me?”

Certainly an odd request that would give anyone pause but Yasuhiro was a bit more focused on the delivery as rather than the content. Her voice was bewitchingly melodic. Her laugh foreshadowed its qualities and in addendum, it possessed a strange, harmonious flow that made it a pleasure for the ears. Beyond that, she had asked a question and he was expected to answer.

In a motion that he hoped was not overly forward, he gently grasped her outstretched hand and turned it over. He then proceed to chastely touch his lips to it for a brief moment before drawing back to await a response.

“Kaka. Tis providence that graces I see.” Whether or not she thought his answer to be acceptance, denial or even proper, he knew not but she was at the very least, highly amused. With introductions somewhat concluded, Yasuhiro began to detail the nature of his visit and sequential ones in the future, all the while feeling that coming days were going to be quite occupied even relative to him.

That Which Comes From Darkness

From that day forth, Bythe had become akin to Yasuhiro's shadow. He arrived at the El-Harkim estate early each morning and it was not until late evening that he would escort her back home. Blythe even took her meals at the Blackmore house where to her surprise she became a welcome and shortly familiar sight. Though she did often insist on dinner together at the El-Harkim estate for want of not leaving her grandfather to dine by his lonesome and sure that he most appreciated the company. Indeed, Yasuhiro and Blythe were rarely apart, the time of sleep perhaps the only consistent absence of company.

It had taken little time for him to become accustom to her constant presence. Ever the natural, he merely went about his day. There was no concrete plan nor did he place himself in the role of formal teaching. Question and answer, observation and conversation, composed much of their daily routine. He improvised much of it and did what was within his power to accommodate when she had specific requests in mind.

The predicted murmuring and rumor was manifest the moment Blythe was seen in his company. True to his word, it seemed that Raze did indeed quell much of them on his granddaughter's behalf. Some individuals had made their displeasure known to him personally. However, he assuaged their concerns and made proper introductions in the progress.

Oddly enough, the Kryeziu heiress had taken an immediate shine to to Blythe and always look forward to playing with her when he explained why he brought the El-Harkim to their play-dates. Blythe herself was uncertain as to how to proceed and clearly uncomfortable but Yasuhiro managed to coax her into the activities. Better late than never he supposed even if it meant that he spent much of play combating her lack of restraint. The sessions frequently turned into competitions between Blythe and him but the little heiress was delighted in following from the sidelines. She merely thought that “Big Sister” Blythe was simply really good at games. Yasuhiro could only surmise what the Kryeziu family thought of their heiress' recent friend. Perhaps they had conceded to her wishes or their words feel upon deaf ears of

their own making as she made appearance time and time again unhindered.

The turbulence reached a climax of sorts when Yasuhiro attended a formal gathering with Blythe in tow. It aroused the immediate discontent of several individuals, most notably women, and forced him to conduct damage control for the rest of the evening. Although his efforts were made all the more difficult with Blythe offering pointed statements and inquiries, he attributed it to her progress and skillfully managed nonetheless. There were reparations to be made of course and the entire process only repeated when he appeared to make good on them along with Blythe. At the very least, Blythe received an abundance of exposure to social conflict and how to handle its varying forms.

However reluctantly, the populace of Gekkou Hakurei began to acknowledge Blythe as a person. Once they could not help but see her, the image as an enigmatic, maleficent enigma gave way to one of a strange, if naturally imposing woman. A shift that was aided by Blythe's own efforts as her interactions became more and more natural; in alignment with humanity. Passively, Yasuhiro was a formidable force in bringing about the change. For if people desired to interact with him, they would have to accept Blythe. And Yasuhiro was relatively unkind to those who would treat her as less than a person.

Even then people desperately sought rationalization for the pair. Baseless accusations of enchantment, coercion, bribery, and outright seduction were thoroughly dismantled as they were uttered. Yasuhiro's word and action were as good if perhaps better than any. A person he chose to spend much time with could not truly be bad. A sentiment that paved the way for Blythe to stand in their eyes under her own merits.

The Shadow

It had been less than a year since and Yasuhiro had more than enough reason to consider her progress significant. Not only had she taken greater confidence in socialization but she did so most skillfully. Endearingly, her language remained somewhat archaic. In addition, the atmosphere surrounding her person had transformed into something more approached and the people treated her accordingly. And yet, he did not consider his task done, not until Blythe deemed herself ready.

Today he found himself in his own room at her request. It was rather plainly furnished and lacking in personal embellishment. The sole decoration came from the myriad of mementos that were neatly organized and on full display around the room. Drawings, stuffed animals, and other small items received from others that he cherished in favor of his own trappings. Even the shelves that housed various tools and their associated works were more for the purpose of others as opposed to marking him as dabbler in many crafts. As he looked everything over and recalled the people who originated them, the sunlight was smothered as he heard the curtains being drawn.

Blythe had apparently finished her examination. He followed her motions as she moved away from the window and sat on his bed. In the dim light, he thought the sundress she wore most resembled a nightgown. The combination of the dress, the sultry way her hair had fallen to mask half her face, and the subtle golden glow of her eyes lent her an allure that amplified her seductive beauty to considerable degrees. She seemed pleased with herself and while leaning forward to ensure their eyes met, she spoke.

“Even I am not unaware of the implications of inviting a gentleman to his own room.”

She was utter temptation and even through that, a slow realization welled up in Yasuhiro. Unintentional

as it was, Blythe had become someone intimately close to him. Closer than any individual outside his family had reached. In helping her understand the human perspective, he shared much of himself and she reciprocated in kind. There was no distance between them.

Yet he found himself unable to answer her. The mere thought of responding positively beset him with an immense guilt and a deep-seated sense of betrayal. But the betrayal of whom was something he could not determine. It was certainly not his other female peers who he maintained just out of true romantic intimacy. There was no person, no promise that would inspire such emotions but it surely existed, fresh and raw. It was not as if he could refuse her either. At heart, it was a desire to help people and an unwillingness to refuse others. The underlying emotions had become something nebulous. Meshed around them was persistent drive for atonement that seemed not apparent before. These warring conflicts held equal ground. Snarled in their midst, Yasuhiro could only hold-fast.

Blythe pressed her body against his in a tight embrace. Warm and comforting, it dispelled the emotional torrent. “Kaka. Neither able to boldly accept nor politely decline. Just so,” she said softly. She led him by both hands to his bed and bade to sit. However, she only relinquished her grip on one of them as she followed suit.

The finger of her free hand was swiftly raised to his lips before he could scarcely speak. “The fault is with I. Apologize not,” she said. “Twas an unintentional, nay, unforeseen consequence, is all.” He reluctantly nodded and she withdrew her hand. “Very good. Then permit me an explanation.” Frivolous words for she well knew that he would listen.

“At the onset of our affairs, I found you a most curious individual. This was attributed to the novelty of your compassion and magnanimity to one who had never been the oft receiver of such,” said Blythe. “Rationalization found wanting, this first impression was not entirely incorrect. Nay, it gathered in strength and surely, piecemeal as the days passed, it was lucid to perception.”

She leveled him with the same penetrating gaze she gave at their introduction.. “The Shadow,” she said.

“The Shadow?”, he said. Never had he heard of such a thing. Surely if it existed, either of this parents would have taken notice and likely measure. Blythe looked at him as much as she past him at something only apparent to her eyes.

Blythe nodded. “Tis my container for it but a description most apt,” she said. “I was beyond appalled that some entity would possess the audacity to take root in your being.” Her grip on his hand tightened momentarily. “I sought to revoke its working once but soon realized the effect impossible.” She placed her free hand on his chest, directly above his heart. Taking in every blood-circulating pulse through her fingers tips she said “Not bound to you. Not called by you. Not harbored through you. A bleeding; an imprint. Intimately and innately familiar to blood, bone, and soul if not your mind. It is thou and thou art it.”

Yasuhiro could only furrow his brow at her words. He had his share of adversities to be sure; a weakness to iron, haunting but dreamless nights, being a focal point of events but they were circumstances of birth more than anything else. Everyone had their obstacles to overcome and he accepted his with grace. He may not have known what she spoke of but her words were truthful.

“Ah. It is an unknown quality after all,” she said while averting her eyes. “Justifiably so. The Shadow and yourself resonate to a terrifying degree. Wills aligned. Bearing indistinguishable. Existence as one.

Water of two springs poured into one vessel or more properly, a pattern welded blade forged of two metals.”

Her hand slid from his chest to her lap whereupon she gripped her dress in worry. “It is likely that my outside standing allows me to perceive it thus. And no instance may I see it more clearly than when a woman is involved but understanding extends only from moments previous,” she said. “Dual guilt wars within. Equal in power and capable of ascending to immovable forces in the proper context. One is born of betrayal but not of self. The other of a need for atonement, nested within the first.” With those words she fell silent.

Struck more by Blythe's disposition than her words, Yasuhiro placed a reassuring hand on hers. Always he had seen her as an individual of quick wit with the emanation of noble grace in every action. To see her appear so fragile and vulnerable caused him no small amount of distress. Though to be fair, it was not a sight he particularly enjoyed from anyone but there was doubt in that reaction now. He had always believed that his choices and emotions were entirely his own and though her words were not something he liked to hear, he accepted them nonetheless. The doubt they cast was not confined to shadow. “Please, continue,” he said and gently squeezed her hand.

Though bolstered by his actions Blythe shook her head. “Little more can be broached. Always have you espoused the understanding of self and the change that may pass in its wake,” she said. “Good or ill, I have opened thine eyes.”

There was a slight movement and Yasuhiro suddenly found Blythe fitted comfortably next to him. Their positioning immediately reminded of his mother and father and undoubtedly, she had gleaned the action from her time in the Blackmore household. He was no stranger to amorousness from his female peers and found it to be harmless overall so long as he did little to fuel them. Blythe had never displayed such traits before in their months spent. He was careful to not let surprise color his voice, “Blythe?” Her actions carried a certain calculating gravity to them and thus could not be ignored.

“Shame about the initial statement, probing though its purpose. I am hardly adverse to bold acceptance. Tis a true shame indeed,” she said while laying her head on his shoulder. “The El-Harkim owe the Blackmore debt which cannot be fully repaid. I to you, greater still. Consider it my Blackmore, this El-Harkim belongs to you.”

The guilts roused but he swiftly cleaved them aside now that he was prepared for the appearance. His protest was immediate, “I cannot ask-” but lost momentum as she lovingly ran her fingers through his hair.

“You shan't ask, never have. I do this of mine own accord,” she said and continued stroking his silver hair.

“Why?” he said. If there was no dissuading her, he would at least like to hear of her reasons.

“Tis simple, I would think,” Blythe said before contently leaning at his side once more. “My standing is much improved but I've certainty that my prospects for courting are few and absolute that none would hold me in the same regard.” She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and let out a relaxed sigh. “We are similar existences you and I. Human born, apparition made.” Though he could not see it, a wry smile graced her lips. “In short, you have spoiled me considerably. Thus you are at fault in this regard.” Yasuhiro chuckled in response, he supposed it was in a way.

"I also desire to provide you an alternate fate." He raised his eyebrow in question and she continued, "It is exactly so. Intuition speaks. You will seek answers for questions yet raised. It will be a journey filled with peril and tragedy beyond the mundane." Her voice was full of conviction and though her words were only for him, it may as well be a declaration to the world. "No matter how it changes you, I await at end of all paths and welcome you with arms open. It is my resolve and the best, the only manner in which I may support."

Gold eyes peered into steel ones as Blythe pressed her forehead against his, their lips almost touching. "So long as you remember my words. So long as you draw breath. Under no circumstance will I be accepting of a bad end at journey's conclusion. Are we at an understanding?"

At his nod, she immediately closed the trivial distance between them with her lips. He offered little in the way of resistance. Quite the opposite considering he found himself responding positively to her delicate kiss and silky lips. Though relatively chaste, it seemed an eternity to him before she withdrew.

Blythe brought a clasped hand to her mouth but had failed to completely cover her growing grin of satisfaction. "Delicious. You've practice." He turned away somewhat bashfully, neither confirming nor denying. "Kaka. Regardless our oath is sealed."

"I see" was about the only response Yasuhiro could offer. He had heard her piece in full and it gave him much to ponder. But for now, the day was still young and moved to stand. He could not.

"I do not recall granting permission to leave just yet, Yasuhiro. Kaka," said Blythe. Her grip on his hand was a soft iron. "I will be indulging for a while at my pleasure. I trust this will not be an issue?" And she pushed him onto his own bed.

Physical resistance was beyond Yasuhiro, for she was possessed of a strength greater than his own. He also knew that despite her hugging him like a pillow and nuzzling the crook of his neck lovingly, she would disengage at a word. But try as he might, he could not find issue with the situation at hand. "I was under the impression that you were to wait?" he calmly noted as he repositioned them to be more on the bed itself rather than dangling partially on the side.

The sheets ruffled as Blythe set about to maneuvering while maintaining her hold. She let out a content note upon finding a comfortable spot. "You are not incorrect. The journey is untrod and answer unspoken. But," Her breath tickled his ear and her hand idly traced his chest muscles. "There is inconsequential fault in reinforcing the foundations while fate is yet written in stone."

"Hm" was his only response as they spent the morning in comfortable silence.

He saw her off at the El-Harkim estate that night whereupon she informed him that their daily rendezvous was at its conclusion. Though that was only in terms of his obligations and none else. It was a point she emphasized under the amused eyes of Raze when she pulled Yasuhiro into another kiss. Blythe licked her lips and flashed him a mischievous smile before departing into the estate. Smirking, Raze tipped his hat to the Second Youngest Blackmore and bade him farewell.

Yasuhiro slept soundly that night but his rest was far from uneventful. The phantasmal dreams that he had for so long but never remembered gained a startling and undeniable clarity. Vivid as memory and heavily-laced with familiarity, all was known to him at last. He comprehended who the girl was, who

he was in the dream, and more importantly, who they were. He was finally privy to the conversation which tore the schism between them. But there was one detail that stood above all. Something that was engraved into the primordial memory of every cell of his body and inscribed onto the entirety of his being.

His death.

Eyes of a Noble Color

It was not with a start that Yasuhiro awoke but a measured extraction from the dream through sheer force of will. His mind was leaden and breathing heavy. He laid in bed until he was composed and opened his eyes.

“Kh!” He had the barest glimpse before sharp pains jabbed through his eyes and into his brain. The world became dark as he immediately shut them in reaction and covered them with his hands as well for good measure. The pain lingered like rust but did not intensify. He hesitantly peered through his fingers with one eye before the lancinating pain forced it closed once more. The sensation gradually ebbed to a dull burn through clenched teeth and he was left to contemplate the cause. He could think of no stimuli especially in the dark bedroom. Making his way unaided by sight but hardly blind, he arrived at the bathroom without incident. Judging the light levels through closed eyes, he attuned the switch to provide the barest illumination.

There was a moment's pause before he faced himself in the mirror with both eyes fully open. It was unspeakable agony; the sort that makes a man beg for a release from suffering, merciful or otherwise. But Yasuhiro endured it for the world was a different place even if his hold on consciousness became exceedingly tenacious. He saw what best could be described as cracks in the mirror. They were hairline at best but suffused throughout its whole. The sink beneath bore these fractures as well. He idly noted that his fingers had impossibly dug into the ceramic object and in that brief moment of attention, it gave way beneath him. His hands shot forward in reflex to stop his fall forward but they made barest contact before the fractures on its surface were made reality and the mirror became a cacophony of shattered glass. His valiant but futile struggle against the oncoming darkness ended at that instant. Even overwhelmed by sensations around him, Yasuhiro took note of one unmistakable detail before all turned to black. No longer the color of steel, his eyes blazed in an iridescent blue flecked with inclusions of violet.

Rejoice

Gradually, Yasuhiro regained his senses and their initial survey told him of a change in surroundings. Proprioception informed him that he was lying down at the moment; quite comfortably and also in someone's lap. Barring the quietest shift in cloth, the area was pervaded by a solemn tranquility. He knew well where he was even if he could not see, Kirei's false church. Around his head was wrapped a swathe of cloth and Yasuhiro was grateful for it as his head throbbed with phantom pains.

“Finally returned to the world of the living. You've a very interesting morning, I gather?” said a person above him. Filled with such dry amusement, it could only belong to Kirei Blackmore.

“It was. Sorry for the trouble,” said Yasuhiro who only heard a “hm” in response.

“I would not be much of an older brother if I could not aid my younger siblings,” said Kirei. It was

easy to scoff at such words, Marisa certainly would as Kirei teased her constantly. Others would dismiss them. But Yasuhiro knew them as truth and it still held to this day. "I am pleased to note that my decisions thus far are sound."

Beneath the blindfold, Yasuhiro raised an eyebrow. Kirei hid something in those words but that was a matter of course. "Kirei..." he said, feeling the man's smirk at his predicament. "Good morning, Blythe," Yasuhiro said to the space above.

"Tis a fine morning indeed! If only it favored you more. Never did I anticipate my words to effect so soon," she said. Yasuhiro felt light touches around his his eyes. "How frightening."

Yasuhiro could only sigh in resignation. "I very well know why she would be present but why is she here, Kirei?" The question was wholly trivial but as Kirei would have coaxed such inquiry out regardless, asking would be more efficient for all involved.

"I only inquired about your current condition and potential causes," said Kirei with nonchalant amusement. "Logically, the girl you have spent the most time with would better suit the nature of such." He shrugged with his arms spread open and fingers wide.. "And well, if she happened to accompany me out of worry for you...it would be uncouth of me to stop her."

"So, how does it look?" said Yasuhiro. Judging by the blindfold, Kirei already knew more than himself did.

"Abnormal but that is your lot in life. But I will allow them to arrive before elaborating," said Kirei and there was a creaking of heavy wooden doors after. "Speaking of."

The fall of footsteps echoed in the still air. They were confident, steady, as if the person walked a path of no regrets. Within the sound of them, there was the light patter of another set. Barely discernible, but in tandem.

With a swirl of air and the fluttering of cloth, Yasuhiro felt someone sit at his head. A feminine hand but not Blythe's traced his eyes out of concern before resting on his forehead. "Blythe stole my spot, I see. Darn," said Kurokawa Amaya which was followed by an airy sigh. "Though the two of you make a most adorable pair. Mother approves Yasuhiro."

"It gladdens me that you think so, Mrs. Kurokawa," Blythe said. Yasuhiro noted an unusual fluster of embarrassment in her voice. He felt his mother lean over him which elicited a small "eep" of surprise from Blythe.

"Do not worry, Dear," Amaya cooed. Presumably she had captured Blythe in a grand hug. "You would make a fine daughter-in-law though your competition is numerous thanks to my son."

That was the power of his mother Yasuhiro mused. Affectionately disarming.

"Kirei, present your evaluation if you will." Straight to the matter and always serious, that was most certainly his father speaking.

"Very well." There was the distinct click of Kirei adjusting his monocle, likely for show. "From my examinations, there have been recent alterations in his eyes, optic nerves, and brain structure. Very

forceful additions to portions of the brain, lost consciousness was the minimum consequence to be expected.” Despite intentions and appearances, Kirei had a talent for healing, particularly of a spiritual nature. It was something he cultivated thoroughly but made no show of it and so it always came as an absolute surprise to strangers.

The crinkle of pages indicated Kirei continuing through his notes. “Aside from significant stress in the aforementioned areas, his eyes and optic nerves have seemed to regress to an earlier state, as if unused. As improbable as it sounds, I may only conclude that Yasuhiro is dealing with the strain of adjusting to a new visual input. Though I cannot determine the sort.”

“I have only suspicions though I hope I make much of naught,” said Weylin as he placed rough, callused fingers on Yasuhiro's temple. “Kirei, fetch an object that is sturdy and will not be missed terribly.”

“As you wish,” said Kirei and he was gone in a matter of footsteps.

Originating from the tips of his father's fingers, Yasuhiro experienced a fleeting emanation that rippled from his eyes to his brain. An unobtrusive if thorough analysis. “Father?”

“Reinforcement. A basic specialty of mine. Bear with it, objects and myself are the intended targets. Much like before, Yasuhiro experienced a subtle sensation of flow. Though unaware of its purpose, the pain in his eyes and head dulled. “Temporary but it will serve,” said Weylin. There was an echo of footsteps and the blindfold was carefully shifted on one side. “Now, open that eye slowly. Confine your focus to a single subject for even strengthened, visual overload is still a possibility.”

Following his father's advice, Yasuhiro was careful to concentrate straight ahead when he opened his eye. He braced himself for pain that did not manifest. There was however, a very certain strain; a tension derived only from utilization. In the unadorned stone ceiling, he perceived thin lines where they should not exist in the structure. Few in number and traveling every which way across, they seemed to have always belonged there.

Blythe moved into his line of sight, concern plain on her visage. So too were the lines but of a different sort. They were not the fixed entities present in the ceiling, static and unmoving. On Blythe, they subtly scrolled across her at a crawl. There was one other quality that caught his attention: each and every line on her had a red thread spiraling around it. Under his scrutiny, the corner of Blythe's lips turned upward ever slightly. “Steel is more suitable by far but gem-colored eyes are also fair in measure. Rather striking.” With that said she carefully helped him upward. A slight vertigo began to wash over him and he closed his eye in response until the motion passed.

He was greeted with the sight of Kirei casually making his way toward him. The lines on his clothes, accessories, and the sizable cube in his hand differed little from the lines in the ceiling. On him they were a tad unusual. The lines were of varied thicknesses but languidly floated across him all the same.

From Kirei to his father, the lines of the latter became drastically different in appearance. They started from just below the man's diaphragm and extended outward to his extremities in tightly-packed but planar bundles. They traveled a linear course that never curved, only shifting in parallel unison as appropriate. However, these lines were a constant image, much like an object. His father often described himself as a sword. Perhaps there was an amount of truth behind the sophistry.

The cube that Kirei handed to Weylin seemed to be a rough specimen of granite and the lines were of little note. However, he observed something interesting once it was in his father's hands. From the man's center to his hand, a muted glow traced along one of his lines to seemingly into the stone itself. Immediately, the lines of the stone condensed together into a more organized weave and altered slightly in nature. As far as Yasuhiro's understanding was concerned, it was as if a paling was erected to enclose each line. This changed object was presented to him along with a simple command, "Strike it."

And so, Yasuhiro did. Not with great force or expectation, he rapped his knuckles against the lines of the rock. While the lines themselves displayed no change, the material beneath crumbled into fine powder. He stared at his hand in horror. His lines were exceedingly thin and difficult to view but seemed strong despite, like fishing line but that was not his concern. "What is this?" he said with growing trepidation. It was clear now that he was capable of a terrifying power with little in the manner of restraint. How was he to proceed when he had become such a danger to those around him?

"I do not know this," were Weylin's words and they struck Yasuhiro with a small despair. "However, I know of something similar." The Blackmore Patriarch pried his son's exposed eye open further and intently examined it. Yasuhiro was careful to keep his hands to himself. "The Mystic Eyes of Death Perception. A true rarity among the mystic eyes and noble in color, said not to exist at all. Though such classifications are irrelevant to you," Weylin said and removed his hand. "It allows for the sight of the death contained in all things as lines and points. Subsequently, it allows of the end of such by cutting along those lines and striking those points now revealed. There are few that escape the scrutiny of such eyes, not even poison that flows within a body."

"But," Weylin said while observing the downcast visage of his son. "I am led to believe that, however it came to be, what you possess is comparable but ultimately different. Very much limited but more accessible. The exact distinctions are unimportant at this time but the end result has not changed. Your eyes and their higher perception are granting you the capacity for immense destruction."

The sky was not about to collapse on him and the ground was not to crumble beneath. The whole world was not to perish in an instant. Still, the ceiling of the false church might, along with the rest of the structure. Once an impossible task, now made horrifying simple to call into motion. "Is there a manner in which to seal this power?" Unsettling as they may be, Yasuhiro regarded their potential to be too great to discard permanently for trivial reasons such as his discomfort. He merely desire not to see all laid bare in every waking moment. "Or am I to pass life ever-wary that I could bring the end with an errant touch?" said Yasuhiro with an edge of concern, not for himself of course, but for others.

"Being a bit dramatic, it is not as you fear. Though if you wish to seal mystic sight, there are certainly methods of sheathing such until it needs to be drawn," said Weylin as he pensively rubbed his chin. "I still find myself curious as to how you acquired that which is even disallowed of the Phantasmal Races."

"I will field that question," said Amaya suddenly. "Though I first require a private discussion between my second youngest son and myself." It was a simple request spoken lightly but brooked no argument. Weylin motioned to Kirei and Blythe. "Understood. Come you two. It has been ages since I have needed to craft mystic implements. I will be requiring secondary opinions." He strode out of the false church and Kirei dutifully followed.

Blythe rose as Yasuhiro moved to allow her. She clasped both of his hands in hers and flashed him a brilliant smile. It was a smile that dimmed when she noticed his hesitance to look at her. To which she

replied by encircling her arms around his head and hugging him to her chest. "I am hardly so fragile, Yasuhiro," Blythe said while clutching him to her bosom. She released him at arm's length and tittered at the light flush across his face. He was no longer averting eye contact; her point made clear. "Excellent. We are again, at an understanding." With that said, she followed the departing pair out of the false church.

Amaya firmly guided Yasuhiro into a lying down position on her lap. "Lovely girl, that El-Harkim." she said and took careful, methodical strokes of Yasuhiro's hair. "You are free to choose Yasuhiro but it is mother's opinion that she is most suited." She put a hand to her mouth and giggled in a lady-like fashion. "In your specific circumstances I am also inclined to say you are free to a number as well but I feel Blythe will make objections well known."

"Am I truly your son?" said Yasuhiro and was immediately greeted with an irritated silence. Lips pursed and eyes narrowed, mother's face loomed darkly in his vision. It was an adorable scowl really, like the visage of an annoyed cat. He followed her hand as it moved into his field of vision. Helpless before her, he could only watch as her hand positioned perfectly in front of his face and her middle finger straining against the restraint of her thumb. He braced himself for impact.

"Ita!" The full nail of her finger struck him perfectly between the eyes. The pain blossomed in a concentrated instant even as the force reverberated through his skull. Flinching, he clutched his face at a sensation that remained long after the event.

"A foolish thought! And the utterance equally so!" Amaya crossed her arm and huffed in action that would seem childish on a grown woman. She somehow managed to make it look criminal to enact her to do so. "You are the son of Kurokawa Amaya and Weylin Blackmore, Yasuhiro. Let no one, most of all yourself, doubt that," she vehemently declared.

The tone of voice was hard but continued to soften as she spoke, "It is a cycle of great tragedy which Izanagi and Izanami have chosen to play out. You are not Izanagi but rather the one deemed most fit to carry his burden and act as his representative in the current circulation." She shortly returned to her previous ministrations after answering questions unspoken. "After all, there is hardly much of the man left."

Amaya's cast the situation lightly though it is perhaps words themselves were insufficient to capture Izanagi's awesome deed. Yasuhiro suspected it to be the primary trigger for the alteration of his eyes. One did not simply gaze upon death in its purest conceptual form and not see it evermore. He could not tear himself away from the sight as it condensed into the black mud that devoured him in its suffocating mass. It was not simply his eyes that were violated, for every cell in his body became intimately familiar with death. More remarkable still, was his tenacious survival in the face of the black mud.

The dream allowed Yasuhiro to experience Izanagi's venture into the underworld as if he were the man himself but it was the his final moments that were felt in their full brutality. Izanagi did not succumb to that fate imposed on him by the black mud, not completely. He desired to live even as his being was eroded like a stone beset by the onslaught of sand that came with the furious tide. And so he committed to act in a situation where most others would fall to despair and futility. He allowed the curse to consume his physical form; the least and simplest sacrifice. He let it eat him, little by little, until it passed through him, until it could not sustain itself on him. Izanagi became nothing and thus weathered the onslaught but the heroic feat had left him faintly more than a fragmented collection of a being with the barest touch of identity. The curse had failed to touch what he coveted and guarded most fiercely at

the expense of all else: his will to survive and his will to settle affairs. Thus it was no surprise that a hollow existence driven only by such base intents would seek a being that most filled the gaps in its broken form in order to proceed with its last affairs. Whether or not such progress was possible or even permitted was not in its power to determine.

“I will see it through,” declared Yasuhiro after a long silence of reexamining the collective of his recent revelations. Amaya shot him a derisive look and though it was not directed at him, he flinched at its weight.

“Izanagi has found a most willing vessel indeed, how fortunate,” she said. “I ask you, Yasuhiro. Are you certain? For there is a great deal that is not.” She received the expected affirmation. He was a Blackmore after all and the result confirmed but the question was a necessary formality.

“Then you are decided. Now that you have chosen willingly to bear the trial forced upon you, I may only abide,” Amaya said with a note of displeasure. “Considering her status, Izanami is likely to possess a stronger initial connection with her present incarnation. Regardless of their temperament, you will be facing a death goddess. Formidable even at a sliver of power, I would have you well-equipped for the eventuality.”

“How does one go about preparing for such an encounter?” said Yasuhiro. He much preferred peaceful discourse but acknowledged that it was the least likely option. The deep-seated nature of the schism between Izanagi and Izanami was resistant to being settled with honest words and sincerity.

“Strengthen mind, body, and spirit. Reclaim what Izanagi lost, revive what he became. He may be a troublesome freeloader but his qualities will augment your progression significantly. It is in your best interest,” said Amaya. “It so happens that I’ve a stage most worthy of this presentation and stands to benefit the most. The continent of Gaia, my origin.”

Now that piqued his interest. Mother rarely spoke about herself beyond satisfying any inquiries into the topic at a superficial level. And far as the children were concerned if not the court, it was perfectly acceptable. Who Amaya is in the present far outweighed who she was in the past. To volunteer information about herself was unnecessary in previous instances but now, there was a purpose to it, a motive, a need.

And so Amaya told him about her role as Eljared: a superficial overview of her lineage, her manipulations toward an ideal, and her unexpected, accumulating ascendance to divinity. She told him of how she began to grow weary and wary of the power at her disposal and so decided to cast as much aside as was possible. She disappeared from Gaia much like how she was born into it, suddenly and dramatically. Her power was left to the land but more importantly, returned to the hands of the people so they may determine their own course, free of her machinations.

Eljared found Nusquam Esse through chance and desire. A land steeped in a practical reverence for the supernatural and obscured almost totally from the greater world seemed an ideal location for her to settle. In the Southern Continent, Eljared conducted herself in plain sight as Kurokawa Amaya. Divorced from a life of puppetry and schemes, she lived as ordinary as can be. Permitting herself only what could be wrought through the arsenal of keen wit, silver tongue, and firm politeness, Amaya was content to observe and sometimes enrich the lives of those around her in the simplest of ways. From the individual level to the world level, Nusquam Esse was an enthralling place but nothing was more captivating than the man who would eventually become her husband.

Yasuhiro listened very carefully even as mother proceeded fondly onto a long tangent about her encounters with father. She had told him much and intentionally left out large portions of information about Gaia. He found it acceptable. If he was to evaluate the land on its own merits, a naïve perspective was better suited. It was not as if the missing details would endanger his life, quite the opposite. She had thoroughly informed him on all of the certain adversaries she knew of if they would pose fatal danger in his ignorance. A son of Eljared was a tempting asset to be sure and there were more than a few individuals and organizations who possessed more than sufficient power or influence to give chase. He would have to be very cautious indeed though knowing his luck, the reveal of his lineage would occur shortly after his arrival and in some sort of contrived manner. At the moment, such worries had no place and he set them aside as mother lovingly regaled him about her courtship with father.

He realized over the course of her tales how formidable the pair of Weylin and Amaya must have been when they first entered into the public light. One possessing an archaic but applicable knowledge of the supernatural and an inherent understanding of structure. The other, omnipotent in many respects and capable in dictating the flow of events with a fine touch. “You seem to know everything, Mother,” said Yasuhiro when she paused for a moment.

There was a strange expression that flitted across her face before it was replaced with a wink and smile. “I do not know everything, Yasuhiro. I only know what I know.”

Red String

The intention was to leave without much fanfare and so of course Yasuhiro found himself in the midst of an elaborate celebration held in his honor. An errant slip of Marisa's tongue or a deliberate mention in passing by Kirei were the two most likely causes that ultimately left Yasuhiro to be inundated by well-wishes and gifts. It was a lively affair that needn't be but he navigated through it nonetheless for the sake of the efforts put into it.

With the festivities in full swing, he found reason to pardon himself for a moment's respite. Save for one individual who detached herself from the congregation of individuals, none had followed. She steadily matched his pace until she was at his side but more importantly within distance to capture his arm with her own. He gave her a small smile before speaking, “There were far less marriage proposals and love confessions than expected.”

“Kaka. How curious. One may only ponder the influence on such an outcome,” said Blythe as she leaned against him and gripped his arm possessively for effect. A quick glance back at the crowd confirmed the discord such an action had sown among several individuals. Seeing the worry on Yasuhiro's visage, she was quick to respond, “Let them talk. The gossip of idle tongues is beyond one such as myself. And so long as they are content with talk, I deem them unfit. Tis for your benefit.”

He chuckled, “One could say that you are laying claim to me.” In an exceedingly effectively manner, he privately added. Given that people were complimenting his new glasses all day, she and Kirei had shaped their design well indeed. Though Kirei was silent on the matter and left Blythe to make known her contribution on his altered aesthetic.

Blythe playfully tapped the bridge of his glasses. “I am hardly adverse to such an outcome. Nor competition, should there be any worthy of such. In the current state of affairs, my dominance is uncontested.”

“And you believe yourself suited above all else?” he said with a wry look.

“Is reiteration required? For one-” she began and clenched her mouth shut. Her sensitive hearing caught the word from the crowd as they were spoken in indignation: “Monster.” Blythe turned to leveled a cold glare at the culprit and watched the raven-haired girl visibly shudder. In a moment of courage, the girl met Blythe's eyes and promptly paled under the smoldering gold. Kirei gave Blythe a thumb-ups from the sidelines of the disseminating crowd.

There was no resistance as Blythe grasped Yasuhiro's chin and drew him into a deep kiss. Her eyes widened in surprise in the beginning but she closed her eyes to enjoy the pleasure of it and held the act for as long as she was able. The raven-haired girl had long stormed out in mortification before Yasuhiro and Blythe finally pulled apart. The El-Harkim's point was sufficiently made and there were far too many witnesses to have her denied.

She gingerly touched her lips in rare astonishment and was at loss for words even as the one who initiated.

In an action that had become natural to him with the passing days, Yasuhiro adjusted his glasses by the bridge. “I was curious about those canines of yours.”

“And so you decided to venture forth? My, my. How uncharacteristically and delightfully forward.” She draped her arms around him and rested in the crook of his neck. “I will miss you so but I take heart that I am firmly established.” Blythe burrowed further into his embrace, content to stay in such comfort. If only there was more time but that was not possible. “Hmph, monster. So be it,” she whispered. Inattentive to the few prying eyes, she delicately put her lips to his nape and put just enough pressure for her fangs to be felt. “Let no one doubt the love of a monster, for the world means nothing to them without it. To them, you are their love, you are their everything, you are their world...And any who threaten you will know how terrifying a monster can be.”

The First Step

A contained maelstrom of magic announced Yasuhiro's arrival into the continent of Gaia. He brushed himself off as it dissipated. The presence of Izanami in this time or place was irrelevant. His only objective, broadly speaking, was to explore Gaia at his discretion. He did not know where he was, simply that he was in a forested area and that he had ample company.

Faces obfuscated, cloaked in the neutral colors of the surroundings, and armed with simple weaponry, Yasuhiro surmised that the men surrounding him were organized brigands of some sort. Not that they were intent on any offensive even with their weapons pointed at him. Judging by the wary looks they traded among one another and their fidgeting, his appearance was wholly unexpected. He himself was far more interested in the young woman before him.

Out of the plain, purely functional attire she wore, similar to the brigands in fact, and with her dirty blond hair unbound by the bandanna, he thought she would clean up very nicely. She seemed just as surprised as the brigands, though he suspected for different reasons. He followed the gaze of her light brown eyes to the object at his feet. It was a stylized card depicting the silhouette of a jester laughing at a cliff edge with a dog at his heels. The number zero was elegantly framed and prominently bordered at its bottom. The other parties were sufficiently distracted and so he started reaching for the card only to

have it vanish in a burst of pale blue fire. All eyes were on him as he clenched his gloved fist in reaction. Curious, he turned his hand over and opened it to have the card manifest in a gentle bubbling of blue embers. He observed it continuously revolving on its corner before presenting it to the woman with slight flourish and charming smile. "I presume this belongs to you, miss?"

"Yes, yes it does." There was a slight flush of red on her visage as she plucked the card away from him and returned it to the hard case on her belt in one motion. Yasuhiro spied it nestled among similarly decorated cards before she snapped the cover closed over them. Her hand rested there, unsure of how to proceed before she was given a small start as Yasuhiro offered his hand.

"Yasuhiro Blackmore," he said as she tentatively grasped it, ready to release at a moment's notice. She was certainly a cautious one he decided. The murmuring among the brigands was starting to die down as the novelty of his apparition diminished in their minds. Time to act. "Unsure of what the context of this entire affair is, but at your service nonetheless," he said and invoked many snickers among the gathering. Reasonable, considering his well-tailored jacket, clothes, and noble demeanor made him appear far more ready for an afternoon stroll than any sort of fight.

A particularly confident individual stepped out by his lonesome from the crowd and brandished his knife in a playfully threatening manner. Yasuhiro had more than sufficient time during the display to put away his glasses before the man rushed forward. "Trace On."

Lines scrawled themselves on everything but Yasuhiro focused only the brigand. The man hesitated out of surprise as he approached and Yasuhiro took the opportunity to redirect the force of the attack to the side. The brigand stumbled uneasy but recovered quickly and began to attack with a little more earnest now that his target was not as easy as assumed.

A knife dropped onto the ground with a dull thud. It was accompanied by the fleshy splintering of tendons, ligaments, and muscles. The brigand's cries of pain resounded through the clearing as his arm, while intact, contorted in ways unintended by anatomy. His fellows could only watch in horror as he dropped the ground in fetal position from the spasms.

"Father has a policy to leave no true opponent living after the first engagement but provided that you leave this girl alone and give medical attention to the gentlemen, I have no reason to pursue or end matters," said Yasuhiro as he slid his tonfa out into his hands. The brigands were clearly uneasy. The cool glower of his kaleidoscope eyes and the whimpering brigand lent him a palpable air of danger that was hardly present previously. But he observed their morale reforming, if fragile. It was likely bolstered by their numerical superiority. "You have made your choices," he said and felt a feminine form slide up behind him.

"Aria." She procured the walking cane strapped to his pack and removed one of her gloves. Yasuhiro caught glimpse of her long blade-like fingernails, some of them serrated even. Unusual but she seemed to be familiar with conflict at least.

It did not require much more of their number to be incapacitated before the brigands conceded defeat and made a hasty retreat with wounded in tow. Yasuhiro replaced his glasses and after ensuring they were truly gone, his eyes lingered on Aria. "Trace Off."

She crossed her arms self-consciously. "What? Is something wrong?" Though flustered at the attention, she could not help but sneak glances at him.

“Ah, it is nothing. I was merely checking for injury and have found none,” Yasuhiro as he put a hand to his chin. “Likely attributed to the practical brutality of your engagement method. More suited for survival than pure combativeness, it is quite the sight.”

He was treated with an incredulous look. “Of all the things to compliment a girl on...and you choose the way she fights? You're a strange one,” said Aria.

“It is true. It would be rather remiss of me to discount the healthy and capable beauty that not even the most functional of attire is able to mask fully,” said Yasuhiro while he inspected his belongings. “Well, this has been a most pleasurable meeting, Aria. Seeing as you are quite able to handle the situation from this point, I leave it in your hands. Farewell.” He turned to walk off before he sensed a firm tug on his arm.

With an expression that he could only describe as irritated embarrassment, Aria had his sleeve in her grasp. “Wait. You can't...you can't just help me, spout the most sincere flattery I've ever heard, and then leave.” Yasuhiro experimentally shifted his weight forward slightly and found her grip tightening in response. “It wasn't suppose to happen this way, really...the cards. You were going somewhere, it looks like. Let me repay you for the trouble.”

Through her perturbation, Yasuhiro noted a strong resolve and it was a quality he appreciated. “Permit me one question then. I am in the land of Gaia, correct?” He received a very confused affirmative in response. “Excellent. I am where I intended and in addition, had the opportunity to assist you. Your well-being is payment enough, Aria. Now then, I shall not impose on you further. It has been quite the pleasure.” He flashed her a cheerful grin and attempted to leave again but found her grip as unrelenting still.

“I take it back,” Aria said, all traces of embarrassment replaced by quiet determination. “You're not strange. You're very dangerous and I can't leave someone like that alone.” She slid her hand down his sleeve to grasp his hand with her own. “Let's go. My home is not too far. Wherever you're going, the least I can do is give you a place to stay while you get your bearings.” She started out of the forest with him in tow and there was little choice but to follow. “Otherwise I would like to get know you more, Yasuhiro. Over a meal. I insist,” Aria said expectantly.

Not a day in the land of Gaia and it already felt like home.