

# Here I Kyth

by Kurokawa Taizen



For as long as the town of Ouwe could collectively recall, Abendroth manor had lain empty. It sat at the far outskirts, part of the settlement but only just, buffered by foreboding forest instead of protective walls. The first opportunists and trespassers had spoken of halls kept pristine with not a soul in sight. An uncanny concerto intermittently pierced through old wood, stone, and metal. Though not lethal to the ear or truly unpleasant, it chilled the soul, sundered the senses, and rattled the mind. Lurking shadows on the walls and heavy, directionless footsteps heard all around further quelled any growing curiosity. Since then, a dwindling number of couriers hastily threw their letters at the front entrance before fleeing.

The grounds were ever-more unsettling as the plants and gardens thrived most beautifully in the seeming absence of attendants. It was also outside where a rumbling dirge persisted most often, as if issuing forth from the trees themselves. There were unsettling reports of a tall, dark figure wandering about at all hours of the day and night, sickle in both hands and harboring the verdant scent of inevitable death.

As much as it was a source of promised wealth, the manor remained undisturbed.

Körbl von Abendroth was long an ornamental hermit in his own estate, even before all his family and immediate relatives set out into the world, never to return. Unmoved by duty, glory, honor, pride, wealth, or ambition, Körbl cared for little save the gardens and the petunias of which he cultivated with utmost care. Music had been another of his cares, but he learned early from the immediate displeasure of his family to sing only to himself and for himself.

While he kept to his hermitage outside the manor as well as the general grounds, Körbl nonetheless maintained the residence in its entirety. Though he possessed no real fondness or need of the manor and its contents, leaving them to ruin would have attracted all manner of unwanted entities, both human and inhuman. Putting everything up to market would require dealing with the needless hassle of people and bring all sorts of avoidable trouble. Thus, it was simply easier to conduct tidying up the empty manor as a daily rite in and of itself.

Save in the form of envelopes piled high on the too-large dining room table, he held no fate of any Abendroth who once resided in the manor. The letters he hadn't bothered with because the black wax seals alone told him all that was necessary; the exact details of demise, posthumous honors, and obligatory condolences undoubtedly shared within all were a waste of time and effort to pore over. He'd yet to receive any personal effects or bodies.

No bodies until, one day like any other, he wandered about to the front entrance and found a woman's stood against the doors. There was little blood on the pathway itself, but plenty of fresh crimson on the doorsteps themselves, as if she only permitted herself to bleed after reaching them. At least he wasn't to contend with something shambling dead, for the moment. Given the lack of commotion, she must not have arrived through Ouwe, and Körbl strongly considered casting her off into the woods to be done with the entire affair.

However, noting that she still lived, he resigned himself to preserving that life to the best of his ability. For all the seeming severity of her wounds and the scrapped remnants of armor held more by liquid friction alone, she was remarkably intact. He had no qualms simply carrying her to one of the grander and furnished bedrooms.

As her garments were ruined beyond mending and there was no dearth of women's clothing on hand, he simply cut her out of them to facilitate examination. Beneath it all, there seemed nothing that cleaning, stitching, dressing, nutrition, and rest could not resolve. Körbl repeatedly drew a hot bath to rinse blood and debris while adding oils of wolfsbane, camphor, wisteria, and other tinctures to each fill of bathwater. They were as much to cleanse and promote healing as they were to discern inhuman natures before true conflict could manifest. The only consequence was the bathroom scented like a perfumery, and so he continued until her wounds were cleaned and dressed. Enrobing her in the simplest garment that preserved modesty and wouldn't catch on swathes of bandages and stitching, Körbl left her to bed rest.

Now that she was cleaned and tended, Körbl did note her facial features resembled those of the women in the family and her hair held the same silken texture, as well as the distinctive sheen of red over blackened roots. That she was also powerfully built had little bearing on those observations.

He left the room a while and returned with pitchers of water and spiced wine as well as a platter of savory pastries filled with venison, dandelion, and quince to set down on the bedside table. When Körbl left again, he returned to sit by the door. In one hand, a book to pass the vigil. In the other hand, a sickle, should he have truly invited something troublesome across the manor threshold.

He knew not how long she pretended to sleep after waking, but had little desire to further entertain it. Körbl made the deliberate and very audible effort of reaching for the nearest drawer, depositing the sickle within, and closing it. He rose and did not wait long before she fiercely sat up and declared, "You are in the presence of Irmgard von Abendroth."

Whatever else she had yet to say, Körbl forestalled with a raised hand. He did not care to hear the particulars of what was assuredly a long backstory of how she came to be, what demands she had, or how exactly she was related to family. That she could assertively name herself an 'Abendroth' was all he required. He was out the door before she could lodge any protest. The plants still needed tending.

Irmgard's recovery was added to Körbl's daily rites. He cleared empty dishes, refilled the pitchers, brought food, and checked her dressings. She was not nearly injured enough to require aid

with else, particularly with the bathroom being in an adjoining room and the closet full of plenty of clothes for all occasions.

For two days, Körbl answered her incessant questions and musings about the whys and hows of current Abendroth affairs, at least for the time he was in the room and no further.

On the third day, he found the bed empty. He encountered Irmgard throughout the manor as he tidied up and noted her combing through everything. She even accompanied him to the gardens and his hermitage to watch him awhile. Unused to having company, Körbl sang a strained shanty to himself per usual, and Irmgard surely proved to be his relative given the manner in which her visage steeled in a grimace without further comment. As for his hermitage, she neither moved to enter nor was invited in.

The fourth day saw no signs of Irmgard anywhere as well as the absence of various weapons and select pieces of armor from their displays. What little stores remained in the manor pantry were depleted, as if for long travel. There was a scattershot of missing items and valuables across various rooms.

Every black-sealed letter laid broken open on the dining room table. Set beside them were a garden sickle, an ornate key, and a hefty, decorated iron chest comprising what must have been the family coffer; something Körbl had not bothered to seek. The key fit the chest and if anything was missing from the substantial contents, Körbl could neither tell nor care. He tidied up the letters into a neat pile and with sickle in hand as well as key in pocket, carried about the rest of his day.

Several weeks later, it surprised him greatly to find Irmgard collapsed around his hermitage. Unfortunately, she had decided to fall onto his flowerbeds, but at least had the good graces to spare the petunias. However, she did not have the good graces to avoid soaking the soil with her blood or confine the metal fragments, unrecognizable flesh bits, and other assorted detritus to her person. Of all the equipment that may have left with her, only the bec de corbin remained in hand.

After dousing her with several pailfuls of water, Körbl could admit that Irmgard's seemingly haphazard selection of armor pieces was aesthetically pleasing in combination, even marred as they were. He cut her out of them and in a repeat of their first meeting, carried her to a familiar bedroom for tending.

Where she fell was unsalvageable. There was little to do but clear the bigger debris, replant elsewhere what could survive, and rework the soil for future sowing.

He cleaned and kept the armor in his hermitage. Körbl could not justify discarding something that could yet be mended, regardless of his current lack of skill. The bec de corbin was restored to its original place in the manor after some cleaning and oiling.

The moment she was conscious, Irmgard boasted at length about how she hunted down all the family assets, gathered all the honors, and collected all of whatever the letters bequeathed in addition to

going out on her own awesome ventures along the way. He tolerated it so long as he was in the room. She was fine and that was all that mattered.

One morning, he watched from the bedroom window above as Irmgard proudly strutted about to a gathering crowd of onlookers about one impressive thing or several dozen. Covered wagons arrived throughout the day. Körbl ended up having to find a place for the deluge of valuables and finery, including some of which he recognized as belonging to one Abendroth or another. The family coffer was hardly empty before, but now its contents spilled onto the dining table. Of all the spoils she brought home and shared, Körbl only took a crystal container of curious seeds. He had an empty patch to plant them in.

It was when Irmgard disappeared again with the rest of the supplies, another assortment of armor pieces, and the bec de corbin he recently placed back, that Körbl thought to curtail what was to become a wasteful pattern. While he had sustained himself solely on forest forage as well as the literal and figurative fruits of his garden labors, these were below Irmgard.

He skimmed enough off the family coffer to close the chest and headed down to Owue for the first time in ages. Körbl purchased, in its entirety, a vacant space on the far edge of town and just within the walls. The coin was enough to brook neither negotiation nor inquiry with the property holder. And so, he made several trips by his lonesome to set up shop.

Unaccustomed to having any Abendroth around, the town of Owue suddenly had to contend with two.

One styled herself as a Gloaming Queen, sacred dark femininity gilded in silver-scarred armor. She was known for her elegance and extravagance in all aspects, backed up by an excess of martial prowess and far too many successful venture-returns from a very unforgiving world. As her reputation grew, so did the local economy as well as the general bustle as business and life became easier to conduct. A difficult woman to ignore, she made her presence well-known long before she threw abundant coin around.

The other Abendroth posted at a small shop taken over by all manners of plants. An indistinct warbling seemed a constant emanation from the verdure, though it ceased once anyone stepped inside. The fruits he sold, kept preternaturally fresh. The vegetables remained flavorful beyond their span. The herbs manifested their potency across all senses, tangible or otherwise. But it was the flowers, near eternal in vibrancy and fragrance, that were most sought after. That Körbl accepted only barter and permitted only three attempts per day on any one transaction was merely a trivial oddity as a cost of doing business. Potted petunias were kept close, sightly as anything but never being offered for any sort of sale.

He kept a small board where he requested specific items, though whether it made the barter any easier was debatable when it consisted of esoteric listings such as ‘perspective of the armorer’, ‘improved beak to rend and tear’, and ‘oils protective in the pale’. With these and more, Körbl mended

Irmgard's armors without compromise to appearance, refined her favored bec de corbin, and ensured she always had supplies available for her next journey.

When Irmgard wasn't out and about, she accompanied Körbl as he went about his day. She well-learned his agitation at her continuing presence was quelled so long as he was uninterrupted in motion. Therefore, she freely discussed to him at length about herself, all that she accomplished, and all her further ambitions to a captive audience.

His greater irritation was occasionally finding Irmgard downed on the same, beleaguered flowerbed as an omen of a recent, successful adventure. She made up for it by including a myriad of unknown seeds in the rewards she shared. Körbl still took nothing but those and continually sowed them in anticipation of one day seeing what could germinate before despair descended once more.

It was when a month passed in absence of word or whisper that Körbl could admit he missed Irmgard's company. He harbored a viscous dread, however small, of another black letter arriving at the manor. There was nothing to do, however, but to wait, and perhaps hope. He stepped out of his hermitage, only to step back in and guard himself with the door.

Heedless of the bare, black loam beneath, garbed in dressed semblances of wood and flower, a woman sat serenely as if she had always been. With closed eyes and languid smile, she said to him, "Free sacrifices directed at none, may be taken by all. Of blood, steel, flesh, and silver, I've laid fortunate claim for your continued welfare."

He was closing the door completely, until she continued, "She yet lives," and beckoned to the spot before her.

Körbl walked out cautiously, leaving the door open as an avenue of escape, and had armed himself as she did not appear to be. Only when he was close enough to grasp, did she speak again. "Direction I cannot provide, but I can offer the means to greater success. Pact with me and—"

"I accept."

She paused. "The terms are—"

"Something to be found out later."

She opened her eyes and looked at him properly for the first time. "Yes. I suppose you shall," she said and offered her hand.

No sooner than he laid his hand over, did a meandering pain branch through it. When it subsided, a band of dense ironwood had grown on his ring finger. Its dark surface dappled with pearly snowdrops like moonlight spilling onto the forest floor. She too, had a ring, though formed in entangling briar with gem miniatures of blue and purple petunias peeking out between.

“Heidrun, my dear Körbl”, she said while gently caressing her ring. “Ere you go for a time, would you perhaps sing to me?”

He was hesitant, for no one had ever suggested to be his audience, but saw no reason to deny the request if it would secure whatever assistance she may provide. Körbl started on a staccato opera.

The plants all around leaned in. He passed it off as a play of imagination for the moment, though he could not help but notice Heidrun’s dress blooming in sharp relief and a potent florality whorling viciously around her being. They were already close, the distance pruned further as he regarded amber depths he’d never seen. Before the last hanging note could leave his lips, she had already moved to capture it. The private canopy formed by her hair made Heidrun the only focus.

She held for as long as he did. As the reverberations in his throat quieted, so too did her quickened heartbeats, a vibrant blossoming still gracing her features. Heidrun drew away slightly to rest on the crook of his neck and Körbl found himself needing to steady her. It was a serene moment she did not overly prolong.

“What a lovely voice...” she said, as her hands trailed down to clasp his. “A shame, or perhaps not, that its destructive beauty is unappreciated by those lacking the roots to endure.” With that, she released him with neither lingering touch nor reluctant hesitance. “Travel light, Körbl. You may afford it where Irmgard cannot.”

The sickle in hand would suffice. As Körbl made no motion back to his hermitage, Heidrun stood before its threshold. “Take heart. It will all keep. And you shall, if naught else,” she said and crossed with unbothered ease.

An individual as self-storied as Irmgard was incapable of passing without announcement. Körbl was quick to find her whereabouts. She had accompanied a grand company that sought to eradicate, in whole, several flocks of sirens nesting near some particularly trafficked ports and trade routes. No word, not even of any dead, was heard since.

Körbl was no wayfinder. He walked the most direct route to the coast and followed from there. He unceasingly traveled day and night without true need for water, sustenance, or rest. Of monsters and men, he remained unbothered so long as he touched upon forest, plains, marshes, and wherever else green paths wound. Regardless of how far he traveled, the bearing always known to him was toward his hermitage; specifically, where Heidrun dwelt.

On the shoreline, he became a corvid among many and the sole disinterested party in scavenging the many dead. Of the human remains, Körbl did not see Irmgard.

When a particularly large raven clattered at him, he approached. It perched on the bec de corbin, and the weapon itself rested in great violence through the throat of a siren pinned to the sands. Körbl

laid a hand on the weapon. The raven bobbed its head four times and flew off. In the direction of its flight was an odd trail composed only of dead sirens that led back inland to the forest.

It was simple to follow the dulled songs occasionally punctured by the keen whistling of metal moving at the speed of death.

Körbl found Irmgard still engaged with four adversaries. The sirens bombarded her with befuddling song, but she continued to furiously claw at any fluttering within reach. Irmgard's eyes held no awareness. Only a lifetime of trained motions and instincts kept her standing and retaliatory, even in losing attrition.

He was no warrior. And so, waited for an opportunity. While Körbl could appreciate aesthetics, he was not particularly compelled by the sirens' bared beauty or wild allure. Their luring songs proven to charm many into certain doom passed through his hearing as mere sounds.

When the combatants moved deeper in, Körbl moved as well. A mistake. However clouded and unseeing her eyes were, Irmgard had noticed and taken a step toward him before permitting herself to fall. There was no circumstance in which he was swifter than four sirens swooping down on unguarded prey.

But sound was.

The only warnings the sirens had and did not heed were the sealing of above by leafy canopy, the armoring bark on trees around, the sharpening grass blades beneath, and the erupting fungi below which barricaded the fallen Irmgard.

An iron aria wreathed in cold fury rent forth, and the only songs the sirens could yet produce in response were those of gurgling blood and deathly rattles. Körbl arrived and swept his sickle four-fold until only the tranquil din of the forest remained.

Irmgard was mostly unscathed. Her armor averted anything requiring immediate attention; the body underneath strained beyond measure. Nothing water, food, and rest couldn't alleviate. These, forest and foraging could provide for along the path home. He spirited her away before anything else could make itself known.

Once awake, Körbl set her down and helped Irmgard along on her feet before her pride could rise in full. She was surprised, to be sure, and made silence her only answer as they trudged along.

"Hey," she said as they neared the shoreline. She stopped. Even in her weakened state, Körbl could not move her. Though she struggled and failed to make full eye contact, she said, "Thanks. As always, I suppose." He patted her on the shoulder several times.

Amidst everything that could have caught her attention, Irmgard started tumultuously as he unseated the corpse from the bec de corbin and handed the weapon to her.

“Is that a ring?!” bounded across the shorescape and to a cacophony of displeased caws.

“No time to explain.”

Homeward bound was certain to be livelier, as he was already enduring Irmgard’s relentless inquiries and interrogations. Anything to do with Heidrun at home was certainly unknown in all aspects. However, two Abendroths were returning to the manor, and that was all Körbl required.

