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Ethereal Child

(A short story to the Kisodoh series)

Schaimarhad of the universe, guide the Jashafyt forever forward,

until the cycle of life is yet to begin again, and then from her ashes -- the next five cloaked women shall arise. Crimson birds of the night sky. Descendants of the Nebula gliders. Divine matter of the universe, extend your hand onto your children and bring us to our future.

- Origins of the Schaimarhad, 871.1 Tablet.

There was something timeless about this place.

An elysian stroke of twilight upon an empty canvas, abandoned by an ancient civilization that had become muddled, mixed, its violent directions streaking like the beautiful disorder of a world that lived in the constant dichotomy of time and existence. Change and consistency. Positive and negative space. It all bled into the sky, clashing like a waterfall of sacred hues above our heads, not flowing up nor down — but existed somewhere in between.

It engaged the harmony of polarity, a constant friction could be tasted in the air — not cold nor hot. A celestial presence whispered from the stones, carried by the spores of the twisted oaks. If you were silent enough, you could hear it carrying the voices of the ancestors, echoing from stone to stone. Vines twisted and burdened each stump, almost hidden from the deep green overgrowth of the sleeping forest, a dark and bitter green against the chaotic blues of the sky.

I was born underneath that blue tantrum in the sky. The sky of Sinnilah.

For me it was the sky of my home. The home of the Schaimarhad women. The descendants of the first humans to inhabit the earth who could harness pure dark matter from the environment, called Akrasia. A cosmic manifestation into psychic energy that only descendants were capable of harnessing.

Much like us, Sinnilah was a place alive from the inside, breathing and existing on the brink of time and the unknown in an endless cycle of life and death; then life after death. That was why Sinnilah was called the Land of Unknown. Not even its inhabitants truly understood everything about it. We could only speculate its foundation based on what the Nebula Gliders recorded on ancient stone.

At least that's what the Elders told me. They told me most of these stories of Sinnilah at the age of five, and I was the age of ten when I was informed I would be the next Schaimarhad woman.

The age I am now.

Me, a ten year old who cried from bee stings and knee scrapes, would be the next woman to fill a seat in the ancient Schaimarhad council that awaited beyond my homelands of Sinnilah. It meant that I was one of the direct descendants of the Nebula Gliders, who claimed the everchanging lands of Sinnilah as their homes before the great migration to Jashafyt. The women who maintained the balance and order of the world and held the future in the palm of their ebony hands.

I was to be the next one in line.

That much I understood, but according to my mentor Koqimoe, there was still so much I needed to learn. From what I saw of their likeness on the temple walls, they always maintained a mysterious

presence to them. Schaimarhad were always portrayed as women covered from head to toe in long red robes, decorated in beads and seashells, not even their faces were permitted to show. Something about skin being too sacred and the common gaze being inferior.

Majestic red birds. My brother used to always call them back when we actually spoke to one another. He explained the bird reference as a metaphor for how all Schaimarhad eventually 'fly away' from Sinnilah after their training is complete and their names are given by the cosmic megaliths.

"Once you receive your name from the Sinnilah stones," Koqimoe said as she led me through the undergrowth. "Your training for the journey to Jashafyt must begin, if you should succeed during your journey, you will earn your rightful place on the council."

Koqimoe had the skin of brittle oak, dark and leathery, and her limbs were lanky enough to be compared to the branches of the trees. Except some the tree branches extended to the sky for miles since they often grew from the heads of other trees. Trees growing from trees and whispering stumps were not uncommon in Sinnilah.

Koqimoe was tall as well, thin from what the eyes would show you, but strong in many ways that I could never comprehend. Most women in the village had long and stretched earlobes but I always thought Koqimoe had the longest, elongated from years of occupying large bloodmare ivory disks from her youth and her teeth were indigo like the other Elders.

"Will it be hard?" I asked while observing my mentor's large sturdy hand clasping the wrist of my small tiny one, her palms black.

"Yes it will," her head turned slightly to the side so that the light caught the rim of scarification around her eyes. "Sinnilah is never the same, winters change to a humid summer in seconds, calm winds shift to an icy storm in a single night, a grassy plainfield becomes a barren landscape in a single blink of an eye. You will need to learn how to navigate the ever changing nature of these lands, Eh child."

I knew all of this of course. Sinnilah's nature even remained unknown to its own inhabitants, including the many creatures who were forced to adapt to the rapid pace of atmospheric change.

Somedays I would see a species I had never seen before, and the next they would be gone like they never even existed just to return again the next year. There were cycles of animals that came and went with the time shifting of Sinnilah, but we always remained.

A fragile existence at best. Time shifted, up became down, south became west, the sky flowed up and beyond, and star debris storms meant instant death if you didn't know how to find shelter. Despite my nerves, I was still excited for what laid ahead. I would finally be receiving my name. I was going to become a Woman of the Red.

Koqimoe suddenly stopped, causing me to almost stumble into her rump from behind.

"We are being followed." she finally said, eyes scrutinizing the shadows of the trees.
I heard the sound of a body shifting between the trees, and when I looked up I noticed a pair of round twinkling eyes from a young boy staring down at us from above, balancing on two tiny knees.

My brother.

"You know you shouldn't be out here boy," Koqimoe growled and I felt her hand tighten over my wrist protectively. "Go home now eh."

"I want to watch the naming ceremony." my brother said while running a hand through his dark shaggy hair.

"I won't tell you again."

I tugged Koqimoe hand. "Why can't he just watch Moe? He's not hurting anyone."

Her eyes shot me a warning look. "You know why."

I did know why, the Elders would never let me forget. I knew that they feared that me and my brother would become close if we were ever together; even once.

We had been separated since we were born, so it wasn't hard not to miss him, but he had always been there to linger around, no matter how many times the Elders chased him off. The reality was that he was the male sibling of a Schaimarhad, and according to Koqimoe, he was not expected to live past the age of thirteen because of it. The less bonded we were, the less painful his passing would be.

I didn't understand why he had to die, but the Elders still wouldn't explain to me completely. It was just an inevitable consequenc of untamed dark energy and such unknowns could not be questioned. These were the ways of Sinnilah.

My brother narrowed his eyes at us as Koqimoe pulled me away towards the large clearing that awaited in front of us, and when I parted through the trees I finally saw the statue that would grant me my name.

It was a statue of the previous Schaimarhad, a woman with her head turned up to the sky, hand lifting above her head, eyes clear and round. It seemed to radiate with energy, untouched by the vines and moss, like it had been carved merely hours ago rather than centuries before I was born. Chiseled into her chestplate was the scenery of a grassy hilltop with the faint edges of mountains in the distance and something like a small cot sitting at the top. The birthplace of the last Schaimarhad.

I knew the statues of Sinnilah held great amounts of Akrasia from being aligned with specific constellations and carved from ancient meteorites. Most of them harnessed energy transmitted from the vibrations of cosmic frequencies.

"Embrace the stone," Koqimoe said to me. "And it will grant you your name, show it no fear, accept all and everything it gives you."

I breathed out when she released my hand, then stepped towards the enormous statue in front of me. I didn't hesitate, I knew I couldn't, I spread my small arms and wrapped them around the stone while pressing my ears against its surface. The energy spread like ink through my body and a shiver rushed up

my spine causing a gasp to escape from between my lips. My fingers bent and I sucked in my breath as the next wave came from the ancient meteorite.

There was a presence. Not eerie but beautiful, and there it offered an image of a woman running through the whispering trees until she came across an ethereal white creature that swam through the air like a translucent sea serpent. The woman had one brown eyes and one white one that flashed back and forth across the ground like she had lost something in the bushes. But what was she looking for?

Perhaps her name…

A warmth spread from the burn in my throat, a rosebud of fire blossoming between my lips, a burning presence somehow lodged there where words could not escape. All I could do was hold on to the statue as my vision seemed to shatter into an empty void that offered neither darkness nor light, but only a precarious balance between the two, as my small shivering body flirted on the precipice of the unknown and a lounging within it.

I heard the vibrations first, buzzing hard in my ear.

And then the voices began.

"....child...child with blood so red...a Schaimarhad child...yes she is….she is...Akorrinah...Akorrinah Asalih….child *Akorrinah*."

Akorrinah Asalih. My name. I had a *name*.

My lips spread into a relieved smile. The name was perfect, even the way it sounded was like music to my ears. I was content with it, I was — until the tone of the voices shifted and became oddly uncertain, and the words they spoke wiped that smile from my face.

"She is the Asalih...traitor of the Red...she is the traitor of the red...traitor..*traitor*...they will come for her...they will come for their traitor…."

I backed away and sucked in my breath when the stone became hot against my cheek. I pressed a trembling hand to the side of my face as I stumbled back from the statue.

"What says the stone, child?" Koqimoe asked from behind me.

"They…" I swallowed. "They gave me my name, it's...Akorrinah Asalih."

"Akorrinah," Koqimoe smiled. "A beautiful title…a title bequeathed to one destined for greatness eh."

I blinked the daze away and returned her smile, pushing aside the confusion and the uncertainty that began to flood my thoughts with every passing second as I took my mentor's hand again.

I knew I should've told Koqimoe that the stone had granted me more than just a name.

That the ancestors had given me something other than a Schaimarhad title.

The title of a traitor.

Of the traitor I was to become.