



Where Sól and Máni Lead Sköll and Hati

by TrynaLiv

There may be a distinct lack of windows in this particular chamber, but the aura of light shed from the Entity beyond their dark shape more than makes up for it, especially when combined with the glow of the cracks running through the black stone floor.

She can't help but note how her skin almost appears silvery white from the intensity with which those cyan eyes gaze upon her, rendering it luminous enough to rival a moon that no one is sure has set or risen yet. Mildly mesmerized by how her flesh glimmers, she delicately picks up her pawn carved of pale amethyst between her fingers. As she moves it from a copper square to a gold one, the faded white streaks cutting through its transparent body wink brightly from the light reflecting off of the metallic chessboard.

White pawn from f2 to f3.

There is nothing to indicate that the Entity has any eyebrows, but the narrowing of one eye and the simultaneous widening of the other is enough to convey skepticism all the same.

With a wispy tendril of pure shade, they make their move, raising their own pawn of dark turquoise, riddled with black veins mottling its surface like fossilized cobwebs. Their piece marches more boldly, bounding two squares instead of one, exchanging copper for copper.

Black pawn from e7 to e5.

The Entity doesn't miss the way she straightens up.

With purpose, she grabs yet another pawn, one stationed upon gold, and tries to match their brazen nature.

White pawn from g2 to g4.

Burning pinpricks of cyan blink as they let a long quiet hang over her head. Yet she only blinks back innocently. Has she no grasp of the error she's made here?

If she shall fail to learn, then they shall teach through failure.

In lackadaisical fashion, they raise another tendril, kicking up motes of cyan as gust does while kissing embers. Slowly—to doubly ensure that she does not fail to bear witness—they move their most ambitious piece, securing victory diagonally.

Black queen from d8 to h4.

Checkmate.

They scoff. “I must wonder if you’ve even tried. Surely your sense of judgment can’t be this lacking?”

“I haven’t tried,” she murmurs softly. “I’ve done. I’ve done what I meant to do since the start.”

The Entity blinks. It’s twice in an hour that they have. They can’t recall how many weeks it has been since they last blinked more than once a day... at most.

Why *are* they even taken by surprise?

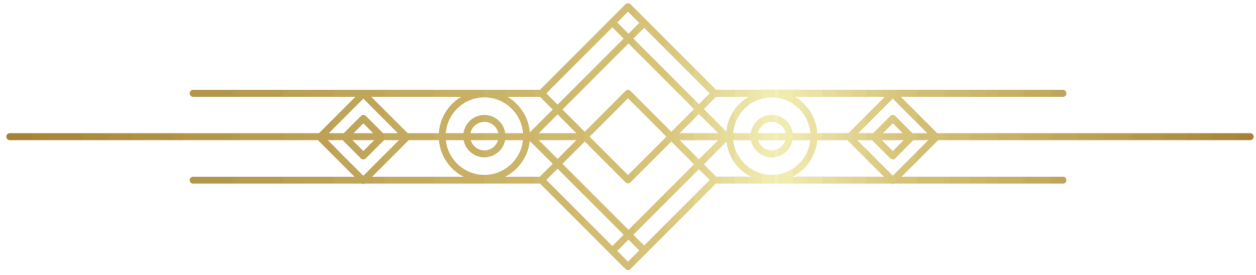
As if she has read their eldritch mind, the motions to the board with a serene hand.

“Your definition of victory is the defeat of enemies. My definition of victory is the absence of casualties.”

Her words sink in, and they shed more sparks of seething cyan.

“You threw the game?”

She merely stares back, unblinking. Unperturbed.



Gahamer can't help but stare.

It is rare for any member of most species to have a body shared between two heads. The yureokts are no exception to the rule. And yet, this abnormality sitting in this tent with the rest of them is not what intrigues her most.

No, it is rather how much these conjoined twins remind her of the sun and the moon. Their poor condition notwithstanding, the contrast of their hairstyles captivate her so—orange streaks highlight wavy locks of yellow; indigo tips lowlight the cut strands of blue. If only their whitish skin tinged pink did not visibly bear bruises past their silks, if only their red and cyan eyes did not peek through their hair to only stare at the ground, they would be beautiful.

Something must be done about that.

“Well?”

The young theocratic tyrant turns away from the twins to acknowledge the voice of the mayor addressing her.

Peace talks are not the most interesting of activities, let alone the most festive, but there is no harm in indulging the weak and coddled by giving them a chance to prove themselves to the strong and ferocious. There is always something exotic to be gained from a bargaining table, and she cannot ignore the fact that the great schism of her race has reaped benefits and hindrances alike to the two sides. The yureokts that have turned themselves into city folk have prospered splendidly as eons passed.

Of course, there is no denying that the Hallows are of superior fiber, for they have not deserted the gods.

“I am thinking,” she hums indifferently before taking another sip from her fincan of coffee, glancing about the inside of the tent granting shelter from the sweltering heat outside... not that something as trivial as that is of concern to any Hallowed yureokt worth their mettle. She takes note of the guards, thickly and stiffly kitted out, on the side occupied by the representatives of the Dilachis Republic.

Zavo and Moso rule their coalition of towns together, elected by popular vote. They are handed the privilege of influencing all their citizens by the latter's own choice. Not an unwise method of proving one's merit in governance... impractical as it sounds.

"It puzzles me," she says at last, "what your idea of a gift is."

Zavo turns to her husband briefly, the two mayors exchanging amused smirks.

"It is what it is," comes Zavo's airy response. "It isn't unheard of for cultured and civilized societies to offer hostages as part of a negotiation."

"Surely you understand this?" Moso adds, eager to support his wife and co-ruler. "We do hope you will accept these fine boys as your consorts. We took care to pick ones that would be to the liking of your people, what with your... ahem, practices. They are powerful and proficient in their control over energy; there are few youths in Dilachis as strong and smart as them."

"They are the best token of good faith that we can offer," chuckles the woman. "You won't find yourself disappointed with their services... whatever you demand of them."

The discreet mumbles of Gahamer's selamlık and harem behind her only echo the doubts stirring within her gut. There is something missing here.

Some hand that Zavo and Moso are not showing.

The Godsworn chieftess turns to the offerings yet again.

"Look me in the eye."

A violent flinch ripples through them before they reluctantly meet her piercing orange gaze.

"Good. Now, I have one simple question. I expect you to answer with honesty. Am I understood?"

Is that even allowed? The two heads glance at each other with worry.

"How is it that you have come to agree to offering yourselves up to us?"

She takes note of the way they freeze before they slowly turn their eyes towards their masters.

Moso may think himself subtle, but Gahamer catches the nigh imperceptible shake of his head out of the corner of her vision.

So. The values of the Hallows speak true to her instincts once more.

“Answer me, you two. Your fate rests in your choice of words.”

She sees it, the incredible yearning in their eyes, but she cannot dismiss the terror that also borders their lustrous irises.

The man of the two mayors clears his throat lightly. “I’m afraid they aren’t quite accustomed to speaking their mind—”

Several blades are pointed towards the throats of all the Dilachish present.

“Then it is about time,” Gahamer lowly giggles, “that they start.”

The grin she gives the boys is one that stretches from ear to ear.

“Well?”

The sun and the moon share another look.

“...There was no agreement,” whispers the latter.

“We do as we’re told, that’s it,” rasps the former.

Now Gahamer’s smile reaches her eyes, causing them to close into twin crescents.

“I see.”

She stands from her cushion upon the sands, lightly dusting her dress of sheer muslin as she does so.

Her dozen consorts do not withdraw their swords.

“Walk with me, you two. There is much to discuss.”

Tentative yet hasty, they scramble to their two shared feet, ready to follow no matter their fears. Within a split second of Gahamer’s beckoning, they stand by her side, ever so slightly hunched from their trepidation.

Laying a hand on their shoulder, she turns around, beginning to guide the twins away.

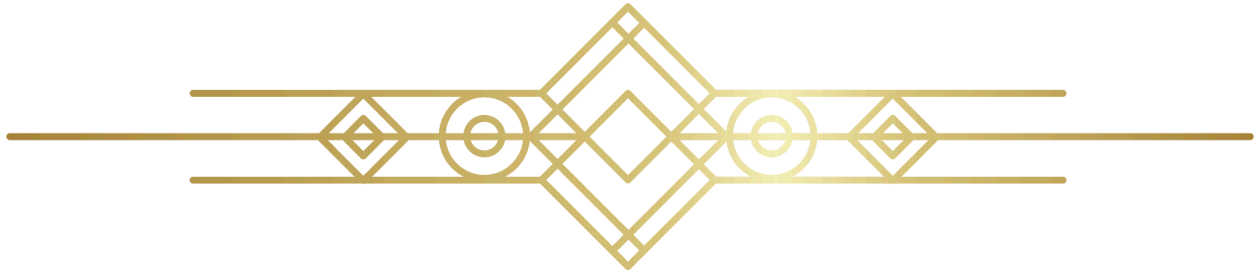
“Make sure,” she tells her spouses, “that there is nothing left of those immutable blood traitors.”

“Even the soldiers?” her primary concubine asks, not taking his eyes off of the mayors.

“No, spare them... but give their blood and bones a lesson to remember. Anything goes as long as you don’t break their legs. They’ll have to take word back to their precious republic that the Hallows refuse to stand in allyship with them.”

She glances back with a sneer.

“After all, with their armor and clothing, how many of them do you reckon will make it back through this desert in one piece? Let the gods pick their prey.”



It’s just another night.

Everything to see. Everything to hear.

Whether or not there will be anything to do is up to chance as usual.

So far, though, there is nothing, nothing at all. She wonders if it’ll be a rare, bittersweet night of nothing needing her intervention.

Unorthodox as it may be, a magical girl is still a civil servant in her own right. She would be remiss if she were not to deliver on her diligence. If she isn’t to aim for the satisfaction of good deeds, then she’d rather vie for the contentment of catching onto the latest of errant gossip.

On the flip side... a night left alone is a night free to stargaze.

Thus, she cranes her neck back, purple eyes turning skyward.

She feels the urges of her heart awaken once more. They’ve been amplifying as of late.

The skies of the Ryūen Ward have always been alluring to her, since she was a little child. Perhaps others would’ve been too restless to put up with watching clouds or stars, but she had always found herself entranced by the little changes and details that the atmosphere right above had to offer.

Back then, however, it had merely been that—a liking for that which she could not reach.

Since she’s become a magical girl, however, it’s become distracting to the point of obsession.

No, perhaps calling it an obsession would be an overstatement; it is not as if it monopolizes her life to the point of sabotaging her academic performance. But even with the credit given where it is due, her argument stands: that longing to rise higher in the most literal of senses is occupying all of her daydreams in her spare time.

And still she is clueless as to why she feels the need to hold captive the magic belonging to the skies above.

“Hey, look! Right there!”

Ah. That sounds loud. Urgent, even.

“No way! Is that really her?!”

Never mind, she takes it back.

“Let me see, let me see!”

“Think my camera can zoom in enough?”

She sighs and shakes her head with a smile. She has to admit, it assuages her heartache from time to time to receive the adoration that she sorely lacks when not on duty, just living her mundane life as a regular human girl hiding her magic. Not that she desires it.

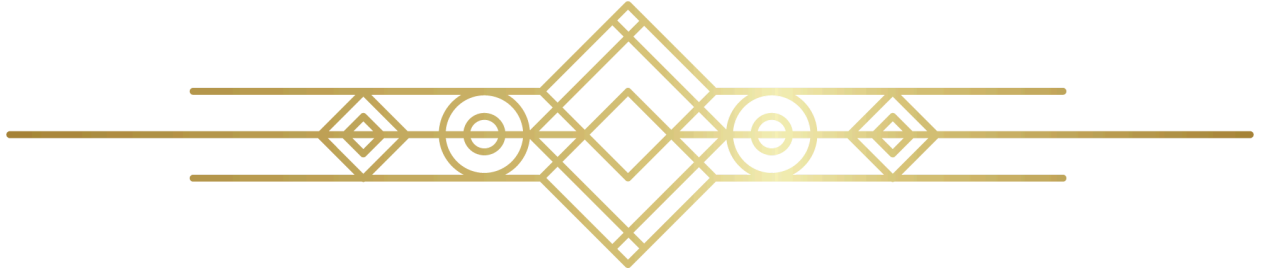
...Where did that thought come from? That's one of the biggest lies I've ever told myself... I think.

“Miss Violet Vigil?! Miss Violet Vigil!”

Snapping out of her stupor, the magical girl dubbed Violet Vigil by her beloved city takes a leap of faith, descending from the radio tower towards the small crowd of children waiting for her.

Arms of pure shadow snake out of the pavement before the juvenescents to catch their hero and idol. As she lands upon the hands of her own magic with grace, Violet Vigil finds that a deep-seated part of her is busy pitying itself, for creating distance between her and the sky.

Forcing the accursed feelings down in the moment, she smiles warmly at her little admirers.



In the plains of green, a Zweihänder forcefully shoves past the curve of a scimitar, the edge of its blade grazing a pure white throat without drawing blood. There is no clash of metal; there is no metal at all.

The owner of that threatened neck smiles coolly as she dispels her magic, causing the scimitar to burst into shards of mana before fading into nothingness.

“Well done, Los and Nul.”

They aren’t sure how many moons it’s been since the Godsworn took them under her wing.

There wasn’t much she could teach them in the first place. It didn’t matter that she was a yureokt, just like them; their respective peoples had chosen such different paths for themselves that despite what overlap they have in energy control, there were very few Hallowed techniques the twins found applicable to themselves, even with their two heads put together.

That was why Gahamer had decided to focus on teaching them the art of war alone.

“Look how far you’ve come,” she continues as the pair dispel their own weapon of choice. “I daresay you fight as well as any of my husbands and wives these days.”

The solar head, Los, blushes before turning his head to the side. The lunar head, Nul, scratches bashfully at his cheek.

“It’s all thanks to you, really,” Los mumbles, “for giving us a chance to grow stronger.”

“We’re not sure if we deserved it,” Nul murmurs, “but we’re grateful for your kindness.”

“Kindness?” Gahamer huffs with no small amount of disdain. “It isn’t compassion that motivated me to mentor you. I merely thought it unfair to release you without instilling in you the notion of agency.”

She folds her arms, turning her gaze to the far horizon.

“Speaking of... I suppose it is time we put that free will of yours to the test, to see if you are truly ready to leave.”

Redirecting her attention to Los and Nul, she beams with excitement.

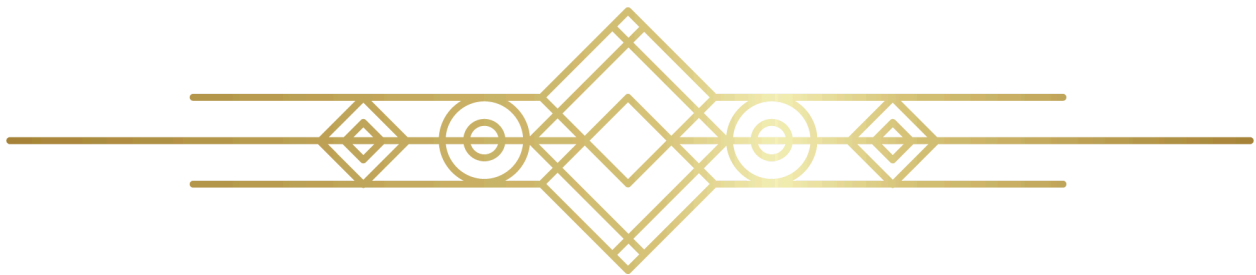
“Now, then. Is there anywhere in this world that you have always longed to see and brave of your own accord?”

Given their nature, Gahamer almost expects them to answer that they’ll think about it.

She finds herself pleasantly surprised when the two heads give her a concrete response to go by.

“We’d like to go over the Pantheons...”

“...and seize our freedom on the other side.”



“Maybe it’s a scam.”

“Is it?” Rikimaru Umeko hums, fiddling with the paper. “It feels authentic enough. Posters like these feel... smoother than our printing paper, you know? It’s almost a little like plastic. They’re at least being professional about it.”

“Are they? It’s not that hard to get paper like that anywhere if you know where to look. The right amount of money, the right kinds of connections—or even just having the right materials stored away in advance.”

“Any other indication this is the real deal and not some kinda big hoax?”

Umeko frowns, briefly pulling at a lock of her short plum red hair. Her friends have been raising good points thus far. After all, a commission to travel to the Peak of Mount Panthea?

Even daredevil explorers hesitate to travel up the Pantheons in general.

And yet, her heart has always been hard to ignore. The heights keep calling to her, beckoning like a promise with a voice that has never lied before.

It doesn’t make sense. It makes less sense than usual.

“How desperate do you think this person is?” she utters after a long while. “Of all the places for a flyer like this to reach... why is this pinned to a school bulletin board?”

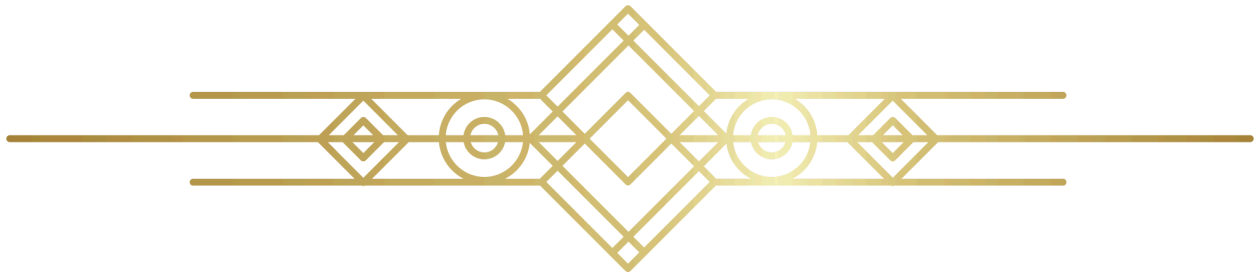
“Oh, that was just Sanyu,” her peer comments, waving a dismissive hand. “You know how she gets. Anything interesting that has nothing to do with us is something she’s gonna sneak in here whether the teachers like it or not.”

Umeko can only purse her lips, her mind running a mile a minute.

Two years. It’s been two years of trying to feed her hunger to reach the firmament, with no success. But here, right in her hands... is a call to Panthea.

Isn’t Panthea the closest she’ll get to fulfilling her heart’s desire?

I’ll just have to leave a note for Uncle that I’m sleeping over elsewhere. Then, I’ll steal away in the night.



It’s cold at the base camp, just as expected, especially in the wee hours.

Gahamer and Violet Vigil find themselves led along by Cain, who had greeted them some time ago with much enthusiasm upon their arrival.

Los and Nul had been greeted as well, but they’d flatly refused to follow the human man anywhere. Not that Gahamer couldn’t understand—this has nothing to do with the freedom they seek.

Still, intrigued by the prospect of observing all these non-yureokts getting in touch with spirituality, she’d chosen to join.

After a briefing over the unusual experience Cain had had within the walls of the terminal, they walked in through the doors.

Only when they’ve strayed far enough into the lobby do the main doors shut violently and seal themselves supernaturally.

A whirlwind kicks up into the air among them, shedding cyan waves and sparks before a shrouded entity reveals itself from within the eye of the miniature storm, blinking its pinpricks of glowing pupils open.

“The powers that be finally deigned to do something about us, huh? I should’ve figured when that idiot came in here whimpering about being here to help. Let me guess, they told you to get rid of us by any means necessary? That they would pay a king’s ransom for your service. Hmph, typical. Now you’re trapped in here with me. I’ll tell you now: in the Bifrost Terminal, I am creator, judge, and jury. Nothing happens without me knowing.”

Gahamer grits her teeth. This seems not like a god, yet they see the right to hold such dominion over this place?

Violet Vigil is equally displeased... not that she shows it.

“You are all still in one piece because I decided you should be. So, explore the terminal, ask questions. You are all here for a job, aren’t you? Well then, allow me to assign you your work task: figure out how to free the souls trapped in this godsforsaken facility. And as incentive, the *first* among you to succeed in freeing all of the spirits here shall be allowed to leave The Bifrost Terminal. As for the rest of you... If you don’t finish *first*? If you slack off or annoy me and your fellows instead of putting your nose to the grindstone? Well... I’ll leave that to your imagination.”

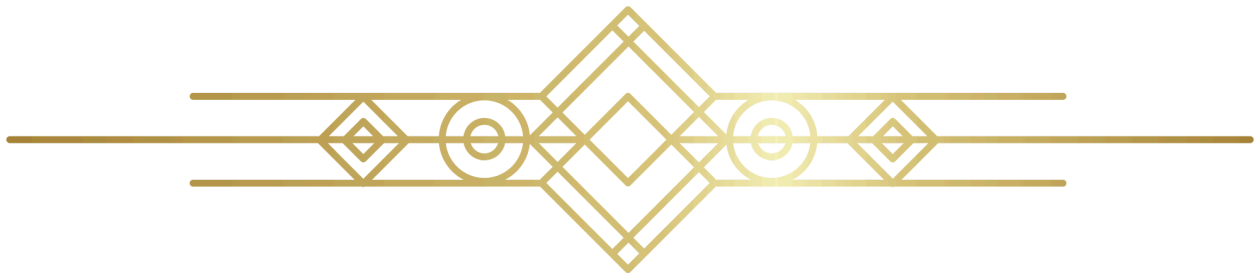
When the violent winds die down and the entity disappears into nothingness, Gahamer only scoffs loudly. How dare that creature?

She begins to storm off, ready to track that entity down and give it a piece of her mind when her foot collides with what seems to be a large, broken urn.

Bending down, Gahamer traces her fingers along the insides of the shattered ceramic before raising them back into view.

Her eyes widen by a fraction at her white appendages stained lurid red.

“I wonder what it must’ve been like up here,” Violet muses aloud some ways away, “back when this terminal wasn’t here.”



They take to the peaks on dragonback. It isn't as if they'd had much of a choice in the matter.

With a grunt, the captain of the expedition resolves to have a road paved—or at least cleared—if all goes according to plan. Truly, this is the worst decision the higher-ups have made to date. They could die of frostbite making this trip! Even through the haze of the blizzard that reigns eternal at this mountaintop, her blurring vision can make out her mount tiring, and the rest of the flight of dragons fares no better. This journey is not worth the trouble!

No, she resolves. It's too late to think like that. It's not right to think like that.

She does understand the choice made, ultimately. There is a reason why it has to be the peak of Mount Panthea and nowhere else, symbolism aside.

"Come on," she hollers over the howling gales, "we either finish this while we're still warm, or we set up camp at the risk of getting mummified."

Not even a second after she finishes speaking, a shadow passes over them all.

They look to the skies.

Fleeting as the movement is, they can make out every detail of the huge avian creature flying overhead.

They've found it.

"Mush!"

They chase, not to hunt, but to track, for their own survival.

By the time they soar high enough to catch sight of it once more, it stands over its nest, ready to brood more eggs than they have ever seen in any livestock's clutch.

The dragon mounts do not slow down, choosing to perch at the edge of the nest, dangerously close to the primordial bird. It squints down in turn. Whoever heard of prey that comes willingly?

It does not peck. Not yet.

It can be patient.

The captain slides off of her dragon and takes a couple of steps closer.

"Hey! Nice to meet ya!" she shouts, hoping she can be heard above the din of Panthea's tumultuous air. "We just wanna talk!"

Grabbing the hide around the breast pocket of her heavily padded flight jacket, she raises a pinned medallion towards the giant. “You can read, right?! These people! They sent us in good faith!”

The beast bends down, tilting its head quizzically as it attempts to decipher the script.

Several agonizingly cold seconds later, its beak parts.

“TI...TAN?”

