

The street was dark and deserted, smelling better than Old Town usually did. The rain had washed much of the muck and stink away, leaving a clean feeling to the place that was sure to disappear the following day. Not even the crowds of homeless folks were about begging for change. It was all too wet.

Abby felt a little apprehensive walking to her car – Zelda’s sudden and complete lack of security suddenly required her attention. And she remembered where she had parked.

*Crap.*

For a second she cursed herself for refusing Miles’ offer to stick around, but steeled herself and began the walk to her car. After all, what were the odds that there would be someone waiting around to mug her right at that particular time? Right at the time most bars were closing, and bartenders were walking around with wads of cash?

*I’m an idiot.*

Too busy worrying about her tips, she didn’t pay attention to where she was walking until she’d come right up to her car, lying right where she left it. And a second later, she saw the two men breaking into it. Never having experienced anything like this before, she did possibly the stupidest thing on record. She got their attention.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

The words spilled out of her mouth in an ill-advised rush before she could stop them. Apparently the car’s assailants were too busy with their robbery to notice her approach, just as she hadn’t seen them until she was two feet away. It was almost comical. The two carjackers, whose faces she was never able to recall, jumped at the sound of her voice, the most inept robbery foiled by the stupidest apprehender.

They spun around, shouting in surprise, and before Abby could register what was going on, the closest one backhanded her across the face. She squeaked in pain as she fell to the pavement, but before she could launch into some serious screaming, a hand covered her mouth and nose tightly. Something happened, there was movement in the corner of her eye, a lot of rough shouting, and then there was pain in the side of her neck. Her impulse was to shriek, and so she did, but there was something wrong with her voice. It only came out as a weird gurgle. There it was again, this time right under her ribs, and she gurgled again. It was worse than the time she’d burnt her hand on the stove a year ago, worse than anything she’d felt before, and it was only heightened by the panic that welled up from her gut and threatened to choke her. Her eyes widened in terror as something flashed by them, a wicked-looking blade covered with blood.

*Is that mine?*, she wondered inanely as she shuddered with cold and lancing agony. The

pressure on her face let up and her killers disappeared, their retreating feet sideways in her vision. Wincing and unable to draw breath properly, Abby tried to consider her options. But shock was making her mind all cloudy, and the pain wouldn't let her reach out to see if her cell phone was still in her bag. She tried anyway, but quickly recoiled into a fetal position. Her breath hitched oddly, and she could feel something escaping from her neck and stomach where they must have stabbed her. She was bleeding, and judging from the increasing feelings of cold and drowsiness, probably pretty badly. Most likely she was dying, and the realization suddenly calmed her in a strange way. Its hard to be upset about anything when one is in so much pain and about to die. In fact, the pain wasn't so bad anymore, just the cold. It was then she heard a voice, just barely over the roaring in her ears.

"Well, this is unfortunate," Seth said, hunkering down next to her shaking body. "I was looking forward to speaking to you again."

What the hell are you doing here?, she thought idly, and tried to ask him. But her vocal cords were completely destroyed, and only that strange gurgle came from her mouth along with a good deal of blood. Black spots crept into her peripheral vision, but she could still see his face.

"I'm afraid I can't keep you alive, Absinthe," he said regretfully, "You would be dead when I got to the hospital and beyond help by the time an ambulance came."

Thanks, asshat, that's comforting. Where there had been terror and panic moments before, once she realized she was going to die her mind was completely clear. It was good to know she could still be sarcastic. A small comfort, sure, but comforting nonetheless.

"I am sorry," he said, seeming to realize how little his words were comforting her, "But I can stay here with you until you are gone."

She felt a hand taking hers, warm and soothing. It drove back the panic a little, but not the inevitability. She squeezed Seth's hand as hard as she could, and stared desperately at his face. She didn't want to die, but there could be worse things to see in a person's last moments. She tried to say something to him again, but was met with the gurgle again.

Something strange happened then. Seth's hand clenched on hers and his face contorted into an unnatural expression, like he was trying to keep from vomiting, and his eyes closed tightly. Considering he was watching someone bleed to death, Abby couldn't exactly blame him. But when his eyes opened, something had changed. She'd seen his eyes a few hours before, they were a clear green – ageless and kind. The eyes she saw then were black, like his pupils had dilated to the point of obscuring the entire iris. They were inhuman, ambivalent where Seth's had been caring. It was a different creature entirely who spoke to her then.

"As he says, we cannot prevent your death," it said, regarding her wounds and the growing pool of blood that surrounded her coolly. "But I can make it so that injuries like these can never kill

you again. Indeed, I fear it is necessary.”

The thing in Seth paused, waiting for her answer. The cryptic quality of his words was a little offensive, like he didn’t realize she was about to die, right there on the wet pavement under the stupid viaduct. Was this some kind of bizarre dying hallucination? The next thing it said didn’t let up on the cryptic, either.

“Are you ready to die, Absinthe?”

What was he talking about? Of course she wasn’t ready to die, but it was about to happen, wasn’t it? Not much anyone could do to change that. She blinked at him and shook her head slightly, coughing up more blood as she did so.

“Alright, then,” it said, the voice as calm as if she’d just accepted a surcharge from her insurance company. Then he did something that really sent what was left of her consciousness spinning. A strange-looking knife appeared in his hand, and he cut her open, letting her heart’s blood out on the pavement. She felt her heart pumping what was left of her out and away.

Her first impulse was to tell him to stop. After all, she didn’t have a whole lot of blood left and she needed what she had. Then the pain from her wounds returned and she didn’t think anything anymore.

Seth dropped the hand holding the blade, and she squinted through her clouding vision to see what he was doing. His other hand, covered in her blood, rested upon her heart. A string of words issued from his mouth, a language that flowed like water and melted like wax. Something was happening, she could feel energy gathering at the place where he’d cut her. It was all foggy, reality seemed to blur before her. Shadows danced and spun with lives of their own, and some of them had faces. Anticipation was upon their countenances, then fear, then joy, all within the span of a blink.

The world faded away from her, but she knew somehow she wasn’t dying anymore. Only Seth’s form remained real to her, and she felt the last of her blood leave her.

There aren’t many people who can say exactly what it feels like to bleed to death, and Abby was never able to put the experience into a coherent thought that could be shared. What happened after that existed in a separate part of her, a part sealed off and incomprehensible to the rest. The horizon between life and death is a place most never visit long enough to remember it, and fewer come back from.

The blade appeared in his hand again, and he cut into his own arm with it.

*Oh, jeez. What the hell is happening?*

That was her last conscious thought, as he raised his bleeding arm over her body. It was directly over her chest, and with a painful rush she felt his blood set her heart afire. There was another presence, then, but she couldn't keep her mind together long enough to form a lasting impression. Maybe it was the Angel of Death, and if death was her lot this night, she decided it was time she stopped fighting. With a definite feeling of relief she surrendered to the creeping black.

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It was late, and the moon was just setting as Seth's car barreled down the highway, kicking up trails of water as it went. The road was far too slick to be driving at the speed he was currently employing, but he'd had plenty of years to practice. He remembered back when the car was just coming into its own as a mode of transport, no one then could have imagined one day people would be able to propel themselves forward at such speeds. Seth looked young, between his late twenties and mid-thirties, but in reality he was much older. He'd stopped counting a long time ago, after a few centuries keeping track of one's age just loses its importance. Just as he'd had lots of time to exercise his driving skills, he'd had even more time to learn to multitask. His eyes may have been on the road, but his mind was in a different place altogether.

The place was sunny and warm, a grassy hill in the countryside. There was a villa atop the hill, made of sun baked stone. It was the kind of place an ancient Greek noble might have called home. There were orchards to the south of the house, grape vines to the east, and a garden just outside. The smell of flowers and vegetation floated into the stone villa as the sun warmed the interior. The house had stood in the real world at one point, but that time was long gone. Now the only place it still existed was in Seth's mind, and it was his Center, a place of peaceful retreat. This time, there wasn't much peace in the air. Seth sat at a carved wooden table across from another figure, a man stooped with age. His hair and beard were white, and both trailed almost to his belt. The man's eyes were sharp, though no emotion seemed to reach them. By contrast, Seth's face was a study in offended fury.

"It is an inexcusable thing you have done, Tiresias. There is a reason the calling hasn't been performed without the formal ritual in centuries. This girl will not survive it."

Back in the car, Seth glanced in the rearview mirror at the figure crumpled in his back seat, her face pale in the waning moonlight. There was no sign of life in her features yet, but Seth knew that wouldn't last for much longer. It was the calm before a terrible but familiar storm. He knew he needed to find some sanctuary for her, and there was really only one person who could help him. But first he went back to the villa – there was something he needed to know. Abby, for all appearances, was peacefully deceased, but what was going on inside her head, he could only imagine – and he didn't particularly want to. His own death, and Tiresias' calling had been painful enough that he still remembered it an eon later. But he had had the benefit of the ritual, which served to calm and direct the pain a calling brought to a human host.

The old man was not perturbed. He smoothed his beard as he spoke, unaffected by Seth's rage.

"Perhaps she will, perhaps she will not. It needed to be done, and in your hesitation the moment would have passed. In the end she will not be any worse off either way."

A derisive snort escaped Seth's lips. "She should have died then. She will probably not survive this ordeal – and even if she does, it is most likely that her mind will be broken by it."

"Either she survives or she doesn't – in any case she won't be any worse off than she was before."

"Unless she's insane." Seth's lip curled. "Then we'd have to kill her ourselves. Again."

"There are larger things at stake here, Seth," Tiresias said, impatience creeping into his tone, "You think I would do something like this lightly? I did not enjoy causing the suffering this girl must face, nor did I wish it upon her. But it was necessary, and you hesitated. I do not tell you a thing is necessary without just cause."

"Why? Why is it so important that she become a Ward?"

The old man shook his head.

"You don't know? You're a seer, Tiresias! You put both of us through this mess and you don't even know why?"

"My sight did not tell me. Only that she would play a great part in something that is to come – a mighty evil is coming, and without her much damage will be done to this world." His expression softened a bit, ancient eyes lowering to the table. "Believe me, Seth, I would not have acted unless it was absolutely imperative. I know the pain I have caused you, I feel it myself."

A sigh issued from Seth's lips. "I know. We have been together for many centuries, Tiresias – I trust you. But you came forward without my permission, and dictated actions without me. It was a violation, my friend, even if it was necessary." He looked around the villa. "I don't think I'll be back here for a while. When Abby comes through her ordeal, for better for worse, you will see me again. If I can help ease her suffering, perhaps it will help me forgive myself for what we have done to her."

He could hear Tiresias' voice faintly as the landscape faded into the darkness of the outside world. "I understand. But do not stay away too long – there is something dark coming, and we must be prepared."

Abby had not stirred an inch through Seth's inner conversation, but her face had twisted into a fearful grimace. It would not be long before she regained consciousness, and who knew what madness that would bring. He pulled his cell phone out and dialed. It rang a few times before anyone answered, and for a tense moment Seth thought his friend might be out carousing. Hiro was older than Seth, much older, but the millennia hadn't dulled his taste for good liquor and pleasant company. But after the fifth ring or so, a sleepy voice grunted over the line.

"Seth? You undeniable shit, I swear you have the worst timing in the universe."

"Hello, Hiro. Sorry to call so late – am I interrupting something important?" There was a note of smug amusement Seth just couldn't keep out of his voice.

"Just the first decent sleep I've had in a week, you ass."

Seth cringed for a second. "Ah. Sorry about that. Insomnia acting up again?"

There was an irritated grunt on the other end.

"I've never really understood your pathological attachment to sleep in the first place. It is not as though you need it."

"Quality of life is important, my friend. How else do you think we can bear to live this long? Anyway, what do you need? And skip the crap, I'm in the middle of a good dream"

"I've got a new Ward on my hands, and I need somewhere for her to stay during her transition. It might be a while, quite possibly a few months."

He heard Hiro scrambling out of bed to his feet, and there was a pause on the line.

"You aren't kidding."

"No."

Hiro sucked in his breath sharply. "That hasn't happened for over a century. Did someone die?"

"No. It's a story I'd rather not tell in a speeding car over the phone. Will you help me?"

The voice over the phone suddenly lost all of its sleepy quality. "Yeah. I'm at home – I'll let the guard know to expect you."

"Thank you." Breath shuddered out of Seth's lungs in unexpected relief. He knew Abby couldn't hear him, but he looked back up to the mirror and spoke to her anyway.

“You’re going to be ok, child. I promise.” He hoped fervently he could keep his word.

There was a building on the outskirts of (the fancy district, still working on a name) that Seth referred to as Hiro’s Compound. In reality, it was just an abnormally large apartment complex, eighteen floors tall. Hiro, whom Seth had always known by that one name, was the owner. The first five floors were occupied by normal-sized studio and one bedroom apartments, making up the most exclusive and sought after low-income residences in the city. Whenever asked after that uncharacteristically philanthropic move, Hiro always responded that it was an effort to smooth his karma, and that the exorbitant rents he collected for the ten floors above it more than picked up the slack. The apartments above the fifth floor ranged from lavish to downright decadent. Some of the largest units in the city, in terms of square footage, were in Hiro’s building. A couple of the floors contained only three or four enormous domiciles.

Seth’s car screeched into the valet parking area, where a young well-dressed man came busily up to the vehicle.

“Hiro’s expecting me,” he said hurriedly, then glanced into the backseat with a sinking feeling in his gut. How exactly, he wondered, was he supposed to explain a seemingly dead girl in the back seat of his car? But before he could open his mouth to offer what would probably be a very lame-sounding explanation the valet held up his hands in a forestalling gesture.

“He’s already called down to the desk about your friend. Do you require any help carrying her?”

If the man was amused by the current state of things, there wasn’t a single hint of it in his voice. Seth cocked an eyebrow at him – Hiro must pay his people very well for them to refrain from asking questions. But he was never one to ask questions of good fortune, so he just smiled.

“No, thank you,” he replied, handing the valet his keys, “I think I can manage.”

He eased Abby’s still-lifeless form out of the car as gently as he could and carried her inside. There was a jacket in his car he’d used to cover her bloody clothes and gaping knife wounds, but he still felt conspicuous carrying a dead woman around. A perpetually bored security guard sat behind the security desk, and told Seth which area he could find Hiro in. The elevator had a fingerprint scanner that he had to activate to access the top three floors, which were Hiro’s own personal space. His, and whoever was visiting him for various business endeavors. The biometric lock was mostly an afterthought, to keep strangers from wandering in where they weren’t wanted.

The elevator lurched into life quickly, but not quickly enough for Seth. Abby’s body had been cooling when Seth had driven away from Old Town, now the opposite was happening. He could feel heat radiating through her clothes as her body temperature rose. She would be conscious soon.

He found Hiro in the room the security guard had indicated, kneeling on the floor next to a bed. All the rest of the furniture that had been in the room before was gone, and there was a bottle of nice whiskey and two glasses sitting on the floor. One of the glasses had been used. The bed had been fitted with hospital restraints, Hiro was just finishing the attachments. That being done, he stood up to face Seth and his cargo.

Hiro looked like a Japanese man in his late twenties, neither tall nor short, with light skin and striking features. His hair was black, generally shaggy, and somehow always fell into that perfectly groomed messiness that the Asian males of the current generation had perfected. But there was something around his eyes that marked him as inhuman, something in the way he carried himself that suggested this form was not the one he was born in.

“You should have a drink,” he said, “This is turning out to be one weird evening.”

There wasn’t any arguing that, but Seth’s hands were currently occupied supporting a very-swiftly heating human form. Between the two of them, they got Abby strapped into the bed and made her as comfortable as they could. That done, they both poured themselves some whiskey and settled onto the floor, eyeballing Abby’s lifeless form with tense anticipation.

“What happened to the furniture?” Seth asked, downing his drink in one fell swoop and pouring another one immediately.

“Had it cleared out. Last time I saw a calling was centuries ago – but I remember it being pretty violent. Didn’t want anything broken that didn’t have to be. So, you going to tell me what happened?”

“Will you tell me how you got all this pulled together so quickly? I only just got off the phone with you fifteen minutes ago.”

“Seth, when you’re as rich as I am, you can get things to happen very quickly, quietly, and no one asks any questions. Now talk.”

“She works at a bar in Old Town. I was wandering around the city last night – I like the rain,” he said thoughtfully, taking a long sip of whiskey, “Makes the city seem cleaner. I had a drink where she worked, we talked for a minute. She was polite, seemed intelligent, but nothing out of the ordinary. It was late, but I didn’t feel like going home yet, so I wandered around some more. On my way back home, I found her in the street. She’d been robbed and stabbed twice, she only had a couple minutes left. There was blood everywhere.”

“So you changed her to save her life? Seems a little out of character for you.”

“I know. It wasn’t my intention at all, I just couldn’t leave her there to die alone. I held her hand, told her I would stay with her, and then I felt Tiresias’s sight. He told me that something was



coming, something catastrophic, and that she had to be a part of it. He told me to change her, but I hesitated. I didn't want to put her through the agony that would entail. So he stepped in front of me and did it himself."

Hiro sputtered, choked on his drink a little. It took him a couple minutes for the whiskey to clear from his windpipe. "He did what?!"

"I almost didn't believe it myself, even though it was happening right in front of me. This whole situation is strange, he couldn't tell me why she was so important, but he took over my actions to save her. It was like watching someone else in my own body, very frightening. Anyway, I put her in my car and called you."

"Geez, man." Hiro's face was solemn. "That's just peculiar."

"You're not kidding. I don't know what's going to happen next, which is ominous for someone with a seer living in his head to say. I guess all I can do now is help Absinthe pull through this."

"Absinthe, huh," Hiro said, studying her shrewdly, "You're right, this is very unexpected."

Almost as if on cue, just as Hiro finished his exclamation Abby's eyes shot open. She was definitely alive, with a wild look in her eyes. She didn't move at first, but her eyes darted around the room frantically.

"Kind of creepy," Hiro observed, pouring himself another drink, "What do we do now?"

"Nothing. All we can do is keep her comfortable, and prevent her from hurting herself." Seth sighed, a note of futility in his voice. "Either she'll come out of it unscathed and a Ward, or the energy of whichever demigod she's bonding with will consume her. There'll be nothing left but a pile of dust."

Hiro sighed heavily, "Not much of an alternative. Well, at least she's alive for now."

"If that's what you call it." Seth did not seem convinced.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, watching. Abby's eyes were still the only part of her that moved, darting around the room like a frightened bird. Slowly, as though creeping through a thick morass, the fright in her eyes crept into her face. It changed then from a blank mask, twisting into something horrifying and strange. Her mouth opened, and for a second nothing happened. Then a gut-wrenching howl filled the room, deafening the two observers. Hiro's eyes widened in shock.

"Holy hell! That is just downright appalling."

Seth nodded, though he did not appear to be surprised. The sound didn't seem like it was coming her throat alone, but issuing from her entire body, but he sat there unmoving and seemingly unaffected.

"Why is she doing that?" Hiro shouted.

Seth looked at him for a moment, then stood up and motioned for Hiro to follow him out of the room. With the door shut firmly, the unearthly wail was only ambient.

"No one knows exactly why that happens." Seth shook his head wearily and stared at the whiskey swirling around in his glass. "Different Wards exhibit different symptoms during the change. Some remain perfectly still, looking like they're dead. Some thrash about like they're possessed, screaming like this. Leads me to believe some transitions are tougher than others. But no one knows what's really going on in anyone's head but themselves. And most of us aren't eager to talk about it."

"How was yours?"

"I've been told I was a thrasher."

Seth wouldn't say anything more after that. He took the bottle of whiskey and went back inside.

"She shouldn't be alone," he said.

Hiro nodded. "Well, its my building so I won't be far. If you need me to watch the banshee I can. Keep the bottle."

"Thanks, Hiro. I owe you."

Acknowledging the thanks with a nod, Hiro headed back to the elevator and threw one last look at the closed door. It wasn't until the heavy metal doors closed that the screams faded from his ears.

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Abby awoke on a beach of white sand. It was not the bleached tan shade most people referred to when they describe sand as being white – this beach was stark white, devoid of color. The blue water of the ocean contrasted vividly with the white of the sand. She could almost see the border where the one stopped and the other began. It was like a crude oil painting, no blending nor mixing in the elements of color, but beautiful in its own way. The absolute contrast only emphasized the vast loneliness of the place, the sheer alien nature of it. No sound reached her ears, even though cobalt waves constantly crashed upon the shore. There was no wind, no

sign of life.

“Hello?” Abby’s voice was loud in her ears. No one answered. It was as though she was the only living thing in the world. She searched her memory for a clue, something to help her figure out where she was. All she could remember was bleeding to death, and a face. Seth’s face.

“What the hell happened to me?” she groaned piteously, but there was no one there to hear her cries.

There was nothing to do but walk, so she picked a direction and did so. The bleached sand swallowed her footprints behind her, giving the disorienting impression she wasn’t moving at all. Time passed, she didn’t know how much. She might have walked for weeks, or just a few minutes – it was impossible to tell, until something appeared on the horizon. At first it was only a black speck on the edge of her sight, but it grew larger quickly until she could make out its outline. A black horse stood on the shore, water from the waves washing over its hooves. It was as obsidian black as the sand was white, as divided from the rest of the world as she was. It had a kind expression on its face, and though it didn’t say directly, she could feel it telling her that it could explain everything to her. It wanted to show her something, needed her to get up on its back so it could take her there. Without thinking, she obeyed, climbing up its massive flank. For a moment, she felt like she could see the entire universe from that height, but the moment she settled herself it tossed her off as lightly as if she’d been a fly. The ground met her back with a painful jolt, knocking the breath out of her lungs. The beast stood over her, and its once-kindly eyes began to burn a fierce red, melting into pools of demonic fire. Trying desperately to move away, she pushed away from the sand and felt something wrench away from her. She’d left her body behind, her spirit floated above the scene, horrified and impotent. The monster lifted one hoof and placed it on her chest, where it touched she burst into flames. She heard herself screaming, and ran down the beach. The screams faded, but she could feel the fire burning into her soul. She kept running, fleeing blindly into the horizon.

She was not alone, there was an invisible force with her, pulling her away from the horrific scene behind her. Closing her eyes tightly, she allowed herself to be led. As long as it led her away from the monstrous horse and her own burning body, she didn’t care where she went and what she ran into. Blindly she ran, careening across the stark landscape. It was imperceptible at first, but with a growing certainty, the ground under her feet changed. Her footfalls, instead of thumping quietly and sinking into the sand, began to pound insistently against firm earth. It was packed tightly by the feet of thousands – a road, perhaps? The sound of her own screams faded finally and were replaced by a chaotic mix of sounds. Shouts, clanking metals, the roar of harsh voices were all present in the bedlam. Just as she was contemplating opening her eyes to look around, a voice thundered in her ears and demanded her attention.

“What are you playing at, woman!” it barked, “Our troops depend upon our leadership, yet you stand mute as our foes rush to destroy us!”

The voice belonged to a giant, towering far above her head, eyes blazing in fury. He wore armor of a medieval design, fashioned so thick and heavy that only a hugely powerful individual could wear it and still stand. An enormous flail dangled from his hand, its head larger than her own. He carried it as though it was made of Styrofoam. Abby shrank away from him, quailing in fear and confusion. But no sooner had he finished speaking than he turned away from her, toward an approaching goblin tide.

“Very well. Stand there, stinking of fear if you must, my lady. I will not have history remember me turning my back to a battle.”

With that he hefted his weapon and charged the unearthly horde, a deafening roar exploding from his lungs. His footsteps thundered against the earth, and each stride sent shock waves in all directions.

The hulking giant's battle cry seemed to scatter enemies before him, and the gigantic flail did the rest, throwing goblins to the side like sacks of flour. He cut a wide swath through their ranks and, their courage bolstered by the giant's bellow, the rest of the army behind Abby drew their swords and began to follow suit. The wild cries filled the air, and the glare of a thousand glinting swords blinded her. She cried out in terror, and tried to draw the blade at her waist. It would not come free from its scabbard, and as she tugged at it a horrible apparition appeared out of the glare. A goblin came at her, its grimy teeth dripping with saliva, its eyes fixed fiendishly upon her. He raised his sword, an evil-looking serrated affair, and brought it down with a frightful shriek. The blade cleaved into her shoulder and continued down into her vital organs. Blood welled up in her throat, a taste she found all too familiar, and she fell backwards to the ground. The sky was bright blue above her, not a bad sight for her last. The goblin blade flashed, eager to sever her head from its rightful place.

It was the third time she'd died that day, and she was fully tired of the feeling. This would be the last time, she decided, and let her consciousness slip away from her. It was not how she would have liked to end her life, bleeding to death once under a bridge and now again in whatever mad limbo she was trapped in. But she was tired of fighting, tired of running, and tired of the strangeness that had overtaken her. She wanted rest.

But that was not in the stars for her that day, for the second she gave in to the waiting abyss a familiar presence appeared. It was the same invisible force that had guided her away from the beach and its demon, and it apparently wasn't going to let her go into the void just yet. An incorporeal hand grabbed her heart and pulled, drawing her spirit away from this latest dying form. She flew into the sun, away from the metal-clad giant and the battlefield. Soon the horde was a speck in her vision, then it disappeared altogether. Instead of guiding this time, her invisible savior was dragging her along behind it. Pulling her through, it seemed, layers of every twisted nightmare she could remember having in her life, and some she didn't.

In one of them, two beautiful little girls smiled evil smiles. They stood on a hill, handing people

their death sentences in the form of blank sheets of paper.

Next, she saw her little brother take the form of a horned demon and eat her entire family over the remains of Thanksgiving dinner. She couldn't look away, because she didn't have eyes to close.

A black-haired ghost crept up to her sleeping form, ready to devour her soul. Its legs twisted under it as it crawled closer. She couldn't scream a warning – she didn't have lungs.

She saw herself, running across a barren field, desperately fleeing a dark nothingness that existed only to take her with it. Though she moved her legs as fast as she could, and her breath burned in her lungs, she could not move more than an excruciatingly few feet at a time.

Thousands of images, an entire lifetime of bad dreams, flashed before her as she was dragged along. It seemed like the dreamscape would go on forever, layer after layer with no end. But finally her helpless flight came to a shuddering halt.

The first thing she noticed was she had a form again – she wouldn't say that it was a physical form, since something told her she was still in the strange world of dreams, but at least she had arms to move and eyes to close again. She was seated at a picnic table, and the surroundings were familiar, but she had to take a moment to collect her bearings before she recognized them. A few shuddering breaths escaped her, and she had to clench her hands together to keep them from shaking.

The summer between her junior and senior years of college had been riotous. It was then her parents finalized the divorce Abby had seen on the horizon for years. They'd sold the family house and gone their separate ways, leaving Abby to stay at a boarding house for the summer. Her room was small, drab, and claustrophobic, so she spent the entire three months bouncing between a coffee shop and a pub that were just across an alley from one another. The pub had an outdoor patio where she spent countless nights playing cards with friends over cigarettes and lots of beer. After the tour through her own nightmares and fears, the easy comfort of the place almost brought her to tears. It was exactly as she had last seen the place, right down to the pack of cards she and her friends left affixed to the underside of the table with Velcro. Music danced lightly around the tables, which appeared to be empty except for two figures.

"Well done. I thought she was never going to make it here," one of them said. It was a woman who spoke first, neither young nor old. Strength radiated from her like an aura, but she carried herself as lightly as a mote of dust. Her eyes were dark, flashing with cold intelligence, and her hair was wild. She dressed in a simple tunic that looked like it had been made from the skins of several different animals, but her legs and feet were bare. In her hand was a long, vicious spear, its tip still stained with the blood of her last kill. Beside her was a gigantic white cat, like a tiger with no stripes. It raised its head above its paws lazily, and a long tail lashed restlessly behind it. It was bigger than any creature Abby had ever seen, its ears coming up almost to the

wild woman's waist even lying down. She swallowed hard, bewildered.

"You are lucky to have made it here unharmed," the woman said in a harsh voice, inclining her head to the giant cat, "Without his help, you would not have."

The huge beast only huffed in response.

Abby was too shocked to ask any questions at the moment, though thousands of them swarmed in her mind like bees. Where was she? Who were these two, and why did they seem familiar to her somehow? Most importantly, was she dead, or just insane?

Just then another person entered the patio from the door leading into the bar. It was an old man, wizened in appearance but with an aura of great power. He was dressed in a simple robe and carried a tray, loaded with three glasses of beer and a bowl.

"Ah, here she is," he said, smiling at Abby welcomingly, "I thought we should have something to drink while we talk, there is much to discuss."

With that he set the bowl, which was also filled with beer, in front of the cat. One glass he handed to the woman, and one he set in front of Abby.

"There you are, child," he said, patting her shoulder reassuringly, "Have a drink. It might only be a memory that you are tasting, but I think it will help."

She took his advice, draining almost a quarter of the glass at once. The old man was right, the beer tasted exactly as she remembered it from that summer, and it did help.

"Who are you?" she managed to ask at last.

"I am the Teacher," said the old man with a smile, and nodded to the woman.

"I am the Hunter." The woman's words were clipped, as though she didn't enjoy speaking very much.

"Guardian." The big cat's words came out as a growl, not exactly in any human tongue, but somehow Abby understood.

"And this is your Center," the Teacher said, his gesture indicating the patio. "You are a Ward, and we are your gods."

"That," Abby said, recovering a bit of her personality, "Did not help the least little bit. Am I dead?"

The Teacher nodded. “Yes. In a manner of speaking. But your life is not over, Abby. I am sorry that you were not given a decision in the matter. You bled to death under that overpass, and at the last moment of your life we were called to be your source of power.”

“You should begin from the beginning.” The Hunter growled impatiently as she said this. “And dispense with your ambiguities. There is another out there. Things are not as they should be.”

“Yes, yes. There is so much going on in my head that sometimes I forget what I have said aloud and what I have not.” He took a seat at the table, straightening his robes as he did so. “I understand you are very confused, this being your first exposure to the world behind your own. I shall try to make my explanation clear.”

He cleared his throat, looking exactly like a wise professor about to embark on an enlightening lecture, and began speaking. His voice was soothing, but also commanded attention.

“The world around us is made of a combination of the material and the immaterial – a physical side and a spiritual side. Some call it the natural and the supernatural. There are many names for our dual universe. Theologians have debated the exact nature of the spiritual world, and atheists have spent many years maintaining that the supernatural doesn’t exist. But we’ll put aside those arguments for now and just assume that the physical world is accompanied by something else, what we call the spirit world.

“Millennia ago, the natural and the fantastic lived in balance. Wonders walked the earth in the forms of gods, demons, and creatures of legend. Human reason and will hadn’t fully developed – it was the childhood of mankind.”

“I knew it.” There was gleeful triumph in Abby’s voice as she cut into the Teacher’s soliloquy. “I knew the real world wasn’t all there is. Were there elves? Dragons? Golems...”

But Hunter cut into her excited stream of questioning. “Do not interrupt. He loses his train of thought.”

“Thank you, my dear,” said the Teacher, and continued as Abby descended into reluctant silence.

“Yes, there were all of those things, after a fashion. Not as your artists have described them, exactly, but present nonetheless. Now, I believe I was talking about man. Yes.

“But eventually men grew up, and into their arrogance. The spirits, gods, and legendary creatures saw a war coming. Man was becoming too proud, unable to tolerate creatures more powerful than they. Perhaps the gods would have won, perhaps man with his newfound intelligence and resourcefulness. But the world would have been a casualty, leveled by the conflict. Mankind had not yet learned nobility, so it was up to the older supernatural creatures.

It was put to a vote, and the result was to let man have the Earth for a time. After all, there are other places we can exist and mankind had only the one. Those who refused the decision were... persuaded. The gods faded back to their own home, the spirit world, and the creatures of legend faded into the background. They did their best to blend in and not attract attention to themselves. Over the years, the memory of them faded and only mankind remained.

“Eventually, though, it became apparent there was something not right with the human race. They were out of balance, not at peace with their own natures. The gods noticed that some of the human’s souls were not returning after death to the origin place. Further study revealed something disturbing.

“When a human dies, the soul is separated from the body, an admittedly traumatic event. Sometimes at the moment of death, something in the person’s life ties them to their physical existence. It can be something painful or tragic, or something they loved that they can’t stand to let go of. Or perhaps its fear – oftentimes it is fear. They can’t stand to leave, and their soul remains locked on the physical plane, where it drifts. Ghosts, floating aimlessly about the world. Eventually whatever emotions were with the when they died, good or bad, dissipate into impotent fury and jealousy. They can no longer affect the world around them, those they knew and loved. Most of the time they don’t understand why.

“On their own, ghosts cannot do anything to affect the world they drift in. This only adds to their fury and feelings of loss – and through these negative emotions they begin to attract each other. Eventually they cluster together in what we have come to know as a collusion. If enough of them gather together, their ineffectiveness disappears. At first they can only affect small changes in people’s mood. They are spirit beings, so it is easiest for them to change the spiritual energies around them rather than physical matter. The human soul is a beautiful thing, but fragile. It is easily affected by the events and feelings surrounding it. At its best it is still vulnerable to temptation or despair. And these souls who gather together are not at their best – consumed as they are with rage and sadness. And so the bigger the collusion becomes, the more they can work together to wreak havoc upon the world they are no longer a part of. It has been many centuries since the last great disaster caused by a collusion, but its effects still ring across the years. I have seen earthquakes, plagues, great hurricanes, and many other disasters caused by restless souls gathered together. Also, they are not limited to just natural disasters. Once they get strong enough, they can affect the actions of humans trapped in their wake, causing rashes of mass murder and suicide. And the more souls remained tied to the mortal world after they died, the worse these disasters became. It was determined that an intervention was needed, but the gods were at a loss.

“The first Ward came about from an accident, and I must say was a complete failure, but it presented the answer we had searched for. Even after the gods faded into the oblivion, we did not cease to exist, and there were many who still spent time in the physical plane among humans. They would manifest and live out a life among mortals, never enough time to draw undue attention. Most human myths are actual recordings of demigods living in various



cultures. In any case, one of these, a relatively minor deity, was present at a human death. It was particularly violent and most likely would have resulted in a wandering ghost. But at the exact moment of death the aspect of the god was drawn into the human's psyche and fused with the soul. Both remained in the body and became an entirely new entity.

"They were stronger together – the physical body had already died, so many of its limitations were gone. Two minds in the same head improved its reflexes and cognitive abilities. But the strain of the new presence in the human's mind was too much. The first Ward went quite mad."

"What happened to him?" Abby blurted out, and winced as Hunter glared at her. She also noticed her beer was full again. The Guardian was also starting on a new bowl, pointedly ignoring the conversation as though he'd heard it thousands of times. Apparently Hunter had taken the jobs of refilling beer and discouraging interruptions on herself.

"To my knowledge, he was destroyed. Terrible things happen when one of our number goes wild. Most terrible, but I have no time to get into that. Trust me, young one, you will find out eventually.

"There was another god who decided to try again. This time, when he fused with the dying human's soul, he created a place inside their minds that would be a bridge between them. We call it the Center. The god usually forms the Center to be a place where the human was most happy and at peace. The human barely made it to the Center before destroying himself, but once he was there he and the god could form a bond of sorts. The balance of the mind remained intact, and the Second Ward was born.

"After that, a ritual developed to make the transition less painful for the human host. For even though the Second Ward survived, the pain he had endured hampered his power a great deal. That is what you experienced under that bridge." The Teacher paused, indicating with a gesture that she could now ask questions freely.

Abby snorted. "That didn't seem less painful to me."

"Indeed. Your transformation happened without the complete ritual, for apparently there was no time to prepare it. And for some reason I cannot explain, the circumstances surrounding your death called all of us to you instead of one. A most unusual occurrence, and to be frank I am surprised you have not perished yet. Usually one has a single aspect, enabling them to do a small amount of things. Those things they do magnificently, but still the area of experience is small. For instance, Seth's aspect is a seer – and he sees the lines of future probability excellently and clearly. So he can predict where a collusion is likely to develop, an invaluable skill, but he cannot disperse it alone. You on the other hand, have all of us. My use is obvious – I know many things. The Hunter tracks, and the Guardian protects. It is he you will most need when you encounter a collusion."

"You forget, Teacher. We are not alone." The Hunter began to get agitated.

"What does she mean by that?" Fear crept into Abby's voice.

The Teacher looked puzzled, which only served to exacerbate Abby's fear. "It appears a fourth aspect has come along with us, but does not want to be found." He smiled reassuringly, forestalling Abby's sharp exclamation. "This is most unusual, but I would not worry about it for the time being. Hunter is determined to track it down, and she is quite good. For the moment, you need to get back to the waking world. Time has passed while we have talked, and the longer you remain here, the harder it will be for you to leave. But don't worry, your journey back will not be as traumatic as the path you took to get here."

"What about when I need to come back?"

"You will find your way. Now that you have been here once, it will be easier to find. Now run along."

"This sucks, but alright." Reluctantly Abby set down her beer glass and headed to the stairs. An involuntary hesitation overtook her just before she set her feet outside, because despite the Teacher's soothing words she expected another hell to await her. But when her feet left the pub and stepped outside she saw exactly nothing.

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Even with her eyes squeezed shut, Abby could tell she had returned to... reality, would probably be the proper term. She could tell because when she was on the patio she wasn't in pain, and now she was. A fierce, whole body ache was at the foundation of it all. Her mouth felt like something had crawled inside her throat and died a few weeks ago, and that was only compounded by a feeling of extreme thirst. Wherever she was, it didn't smell like her apartment at all. Her eyes ventured open for a moment, but quickly retreated to their former state as thousands of lancing needles pierced through them to her brain. It seemed she had not seen daylight in some time. Immediately her mind began to race desperately, wondering where she was, how much time had past, what the hell she was going to do now. Underneath it all, though, was a realization that she was going to have to open her eyes again at some point.

It took a while to acclimate herself to the light in the room, longer than she was comfortable with. While she waited for the light to stop burning her retinas she felt around her neck where she remembered being stabbed. There was nothing there but smooth skin, not even a scar. The wound in her chest was gone as well, the first comforting thing to happen in her situation. But when she was finally able to look around without squinting, she began to wish that she was still unconscious rather than faced with the reality before her. Nothing around her was familiar, and every new thing her eyes took in painted a strange and terrifying portrait of what had happened

while she was out of it.

The only furniture was the bed she was lying in and an armchair. The armchair had a mostly empty bottle of whiskey and a stack of paperbacks on the floor next to it. Someone must have been watching her, but they were gone now. The view out the window was completely unfamiliar, but she still appeared to be in the city. Looking down and around revealed a set of hospital restraints hanging from the bed.

The hell?

As if that wasn't bad enough, when she reached out to examine them a flash of color caught her eye. The first thing she saw was the IV needle trailing from her arm to a bag of blood on a stand. That made sense to her – she'd lost most of her blood earlier. What didn't make sense were the ornate marks that trailed up both her arms and legs. Someone had given her a bunch of tattoos while she was asleep, which she was fairly certain was not legal. After a moment of inspection she found the marks covered a good percentage of her body including, to her crushing dismay, her head. There weren't any mirrors in the room, but she could tell by feel that her hair was gone, reduced to a fine layer of fuzz.

"This is a nightmare," she whispered, her voice rattling a bit in her throat like an engine that had been ill-used and neglected.

Maybe it was the finality of hearing her own voice for the first time, but suddenly it all became too much for her; the IV, the strange time she'd lived in her head, the tattoos. Her hair. She didn't even know how long she'd been asleep. The tears started without her quite realizing, but soon she was sobbing wildly into her pillow. A ruder awakening could not be had, and her cries were so loud she barely heard the door open.

"Damn," a voice said, "I knew something would happen if I took a break. But a man has to piss sometime."

Abby looked up, her breath hitching in her throat as she tried to stop crying. The voice came from a man standing just past the door he'd just closed. He was obviously of Asian descent, but Abby couldn't pin down the specific country. His skin was very pale, and he had sleek black hair that was attractively disheveled. The clothes he wore appeared to be expensive and well-made, but were rumpled as though he'd spent a lot of time in them recently. Above all those things, though, Abby noticed that he was very attractive. Instinctively she tried to clean the tears and snot off her face in an attempt to appear less frantic and blotchy, but realized a moment later that ship had most definitely sailed. An urge to dive under the blanket in embarrassment washed over her, almost too powerful to resist. Instead, she managed to only curl her legs up and wrap her arms around them protectively.

"Who the shit are you?" she snapped, angry that anyone had seen her in her current state,

much less a marriageable member of the opposing sex.

“I’m Hiro,” he said, and if he was put off by her hostile tone or bedraggled appearance it didn’t creep into his voice or expression. Both were unsettlingly bland. “I promised Seth I’d keep an eye on you while he was away, but honestly we weren’t expecting you to wake up for a long while.”

He stayed where he was, looking at her warily, almost as though he was waiting for a sign that it was safe to enter. They eyeballed each other carefully for a moment, then the flood of questions Abby had been biting back exploded out of her mouth.

“Where am I? Where’s Seth? How long have I been here? How do you know Seth? What – ”

Hiro sat down wearily in the chair next to her bed. The apprehensive look on his face as his eyes lit on the marks on her arms brought one question to the forefront.

“What are these tattoos? And where the hell is my hair?”

“It’s gone, of course,” he stated in a tone Abby didn’t like at all, “But I suppose that’s a good place to start. They’re glyphs – each one performs a different function. The most crucial one had to be placed on your skull, your hair was a necessary casualty. It helps keep your thoughts in order, keeps your mind from slipping into chaos.”

Abby just narrowed her eyes at him.

“Damn,” Hiro sighed, “This is not what I signed up for. Seth promised he’d be back fucking yesterday.”

Abby bit back a snarling retort and only asked, “Where is he?”

“Don’t know. All he would say was ‘important’ and ‘crucial’ and other superlatives.” He rolled his eyes and waved his hands in an exasperated gesture. “So I suppose I’m the only choice for your intro into the big wide world.”

He pulled out a phone and started texting busily.

“Don’t let me keep you from anything important,” Abby snarked at him, “I’m just waking up from being dead for...” How long had she been out?

“Three weeks,” Hiro muttered, not looking up. “And don’t get your panties in a twist, I’m just asking my assistant to get you some clothes.” He looked her up and down. “You look about an 8. This is going to be a long conversation and I don’t intend to have it in this gloomy little room.”

Her skeptical expression did not dissipate.

“Relax. I’m not stuffing you into a cocktail dress and dragging you to the Plaza, if that’s what you’re thinking. But even the most casual steak houses frown upon hospital scrubs.”

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It was dark when they left Hiro’s building, but Abby couldn’t guess at the lateness of the hour. The city was the same as it was three weeks ago, but she still felt out of place. The world might be the same, but she was definitely changed which made wherever she was unfamiliar territory. Hiro called a car for them and directed the driver towards a restaurant in what Abby privately referred to as the yuppie district. The place they were going was not what Abby would call a “casual steakhouse”. She’d been there once, with some friends, and it had been a great experience that neither she nor her bank account would ever forget. But she got the feeling that she and Hiro had different concepts of what was a median spending level. The clothes he’d given her were nicer than most of the things she owned, but he’d handed them over like he’d just dug them out the Goodwill pile in his closet. His aura definitely suggested it had been a long time since he’d had to worry about finances, if indeed he ever had.

Soon they were ensconced in a large red booth, its bulk shielding their conversation from prying ears. There were a few moments of near-panic as she saw all the people around her. She couldn’t shake an irrational determination that at any moment they would notice she was not one of them and turn on her. But the host seemed to know what kind of table Hiro was looking for, and sat them within minutes. It surprised Abby, as her food service-trained eyes spotted at least four couples and several other groups waiting for a table. She must have had an apologetic look on her face, because Hiro frowned at the waiting groups as they passed.

“I’m rich and I come here a lot,” he said, “May not automatically entitle me to special treatment, but the whole staff knows they’ll get more money out of me than any of those folks.

“Fair enough,” Abby replied, mentally assigning Hiro’s net worth to the ‘solved’ pile of her problems. If only everything were this easy. As attractive as she’d found him before, his unashamedly superior attitude subtracted from her opinion every minute. But he’d included a nice-looking hat in the request for her clothes, so he must have sensed how uncomfortable she was with her head fuzz. She started to ask him something, but his hand went up in a forestalling gesture before her mouth had a chance to open.

“Food and drink first. Then I promise you can interrogate me to your heart’s content.”

It wasn’t until there was a bottle of wine and a decadent array of appetizers at the table that he gestured for her to speak as he poured glasses for them both. Abby glanced at the spread with suspicion.

“Can I still eat this stuff?”

Hiro raised an eyebrow, a fried piece of seafood most of the way into his mouth already. Somehow he managed to speak and eat simultaneously without ever showing her a mouth full of half-chewed food.

“I suppose you don’t need to, technically speaking. I’ve seen Seth go a few months without eating. But why would you want to live that way? Go ahead, it won’t hurt you.”

She took a piece of calamari, chewed it experimentally, and swallowed. There was no cataclysmic explosion of wrongness when it hit her stomach – she must still be partly human.

“So what about the tattoos?” she inquired.

“Glyphs, like I said,” he replied, still shoveling food into his mouth, “I assume since you’re still here, you’ve had a conversation with your kami?”

“My what, now?”

“Kami. Little god. Your new mental roommate.” He looked up, waited for her to nod, and continued. “Thank the stars. The less speechifying I have to do, the happier I am. My people developed the glyphs as a way of sealing our power. When the old ones left this world, some of us stayed behind. We had our reasons. But it was agreed that we had to blend in with the human race, live like they do. We have a great deal of power, you understand, and not all of us could adapt to the new forms we had to inhabit. Energy would bleed out of the edges, frighten the men we lived with, in worst cases hurt them. We developed the glyphs to contain the power they couldn’t control.” He paused long enough to pour more wine for them. “There are two forms for the glyphs. The one we gave you will allow you to release their restrictions on your energy, if you are properly trained. The other...” Hiro shuddered, the first real emotion Abby had seen him display. “The other was designed for those without hope of controlling themselves around humans, even with a structure of discipline aiding them. The glyphs are completely absorbed into their being, leaving no visible trace, which confines them to their human form for the rest of their lives. They can’t access the power they used to in any way. But it doesn’t shorten their lifespan, either – we live for a very long time. Terrible way to live. Some of the Bound Ones killed themselves rather than exist that way.”

“Don’t see what’s so bad about being human,” Abby said grouchy, “I am.”

Hiro regarded her serenely. “Not anymore, you’re not. And when one is used to flying, leveling towns, or changing your form at will, its hard to adjust to walking everywhere and being required to eat every few hours.”

“What sort of creature are you, anyway?” Abby inquired. It was the bit about leveling towns that

peaked her interest.

“Nothing you have to be worried about. I was pretty dangerous in my day – still am. But I’ve been blending in with human society for centuries.”

“Good to know, I suppose,” she said warily.

“In any case, after a certain point it became apparent that if we didn’t intervene, you wouldn’t survive the transformation. So I called in one of my people who know the rituals involved with the glyphs. After that you showed improvement. Well, things were less dire.”

She had to be content with that answer.

The evening continued quietly, up to a point. Hiro remained ignorant, or unwilling to disclose where Seth was. He told her a little bit about Seth, and how long they’d known each other. It was a very long time, as it turned out. Then Hiro explained that her apartment had been vacated, and her stuff stored in Hiro’s building. That was when things began to go south. He said her landlord called about an alarm clock continuously going off, and they’d decided to move her out because they had no idea how long she’d be asleep. The longest recorded transformation coma had been two months, and Seth had fully expected her to be out that long or longer. The fact she’d woken up after only three weeks was fairly amazing, even with the glyphs.

“That’s why Seth left, by the way,” Hiro said, draining his wineglass, “If he’d thought you’d be up and running so fast, he probably would have stuck around.”

“Why, because he knows you don’t like babysitting?” Abby cringed to her the petulance in her voice, but the entire time she’d spent with Hiro since she awoke he’d been giving off a faint whiff of annoyance. Like she was a badly-disciplined child he had been left with for too long.

He glanced sidelong at her. “Because he’s responsible for your condition, not me, is why. And as a matter of fact, I don’t enjoy this. I don’t know jack about Ward business, beyond what I’ve seen and heard over the centuries. I’d rather be drinking alone and reading a book.” His face and tone remained completely neutral – he was either too old to realize how rude he was being or he was an incredible douchebag. Maybe both.

Abby bolted up from the table, her pride getting the best of her fear of facing the outside world.

“Well, don’t let me keep you,” she snarled. “I’m leaving, and I’m going somewhere to get these stupid tattoos removed.”

Hiro rolled his eyes. “Will you stop being so dramatic? You can’t get rid of the tattoos, they’re more than just ink. Besides, what are you going to do about your things? And I can’t let you

wander around by yourself – bad things could happen.”

“Let me, huh?” Abby gulped down the rest of her wine. “You’re buying that. Because you are a jerk. And I’d like to see you try to keep me here. I’ll scream date rape, and I know that whatever kind of thing you are, you’re all about blending in.” She tapped the side of her head. “See, I can remember stuff. So fuck you. And as for my stuff – I guess I’m already dead, so its not like I need it.”

And with that she stomped out of the restaurant and into the night.

“Gods damn it,” Hiro muttered, signaling the waitress for his bill. He frowned away her attempts to engage him in small talk and she hurried away with his credit card. “This isn’t good.”

While he waited, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed Seth. He was already assigning Seth to the most painful levels of hell for dumping this situation on him, and would hope for worse if he didn’t pick up.

“What is it, Hiro?” The voice on the other end sounded crackly and faint. “Is something wrong?”

“You could say that,” Hiro sighed, “Your girl’s awake.”

A string of words floated into his ear, which Hiro had to assume were curses since he didn’t know the language.

“What?!” Seth sounded a little frantic. “This wasn’t supposed to happen for weeks!”

The situation must be pretty dire, Hiro thought. Seth was never frantic.

“Where is she?”

“That would be the other problem. I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.” The center of an iceberg would be warmer than the tone Seth used.

“I took her out for some food, and to try to explain things to her since weren’t here. I suppose I wasn’t the most... understanding person. She left.”

“Gods. You didn’t go after her?”

“She threatened to scream bloody murder if I followed her, and she had this crazy look in her eyes. She probably would have. Figure I’ll give her some time to cool off and then go looking for her. Which brings me to why I’m calling. Where do you think she would go?”



There was an ominous silence on the other end.

“Hiro, listen to me,” Seth said finally, “You have to go find her. Right now. She’s new to the world, completely untrained, and in a black mood. A collusion is going to form around her soon, and a bad one. The ghosts will be drawn to her emotions, and to her power.”

His stomach plummeted. “How bad could it get?”

“Remember that earthquake in Australia a few centuries ago? That bad. It could turn the city into a gigantic sinkhole.”

“Shit.” Hiro remembered. He didn’t like to, but he did. “Just for a bad mood?”

“She’s a pressure cooker of spiritual energy. Its probably already started. I’ll be on the first plane back, but there’s no way I’ll get there in time. Try the bar she worked at, a place called Zelda’s in Old Town, she’ll be looking for familiarity. You have to find her, and get her to disperse it somehow.”

The frantic note in Seth’s voice had changed to more of a sweeping overtone, something Hiro had never experienced from him. It was quite disturbing.

“I’ll find her.” There was a click on the other end as Seth cut the connection. Hiro ran a hand through his hair wearily. “Oh hell.”

(There’s a bit missing here that I haven’t wrote yet. It starts with Abby going back to her bar and almost leaving. She runs into Miles and he insists on buying her a beer because he got the job he wanted. It ends with them walking towards a bridge, talking, and Abby starts seeing strange black shadows flitting about.)

She was on one of Old Town’s bridges when he found her, and a maelstrom had already formed. It wasn’t visible to his human eyes, but he could still see it. His inner eye, that which he used to view the spirit world, showed him. It was huge, much bigger than he’d expected after such a short time. A whirling tornado of black misery had enveloped most of the bridge, with Abby at the center. Luckily it was late enough that there wasn’t much traffic on the bridge. Any humans caught in this storm would, he realized, go completely insane in seconds. It was murky as he strode through it, like a black mist, one that was made of thousands of faces. Their eyes were vacant and cavernous, and full of malicious intent. All of them screamed terrible things with their cavernous mouths, not audible to the human ear, but with a single voice that could slice through ones soul. Hiro’s soul was fortunately unaffected, as he’d never been human. Nonetheless, he fervently wished to be anywhere else at the moment. He’d nearly been burned as a warlock once, and he would rather be back there tied to a stake than where

he was right then.

But he made his way to the center, the screams of the dead all around him, until he reached her. She was huddled on the ground, hugging her knees to her chest and rocking back and forth. Her eyes were wide as saucers, completely empty of any thought, and there were tears streaming from them that he didn't think she was aware of. For a dreadful moment he was afraid her mind was already gone, despite the safeguards he'd put on it, but he knelt beside her anyway and grabbed her hands. Her eyes darted up to meet his and he could see she was still there.

"Abby. Absinthe," he said urgently, hoping her full name would get her attention more efficiently, "Listen to me. You're in the middle of a collusion. Do you understand?"

"Miles," she sobbed, "We were walking. He just jumped off. Why did he do that? He'd gotten the job and everything. Why did he do it?"

"It was the ghosts. Look around... they want you, too. You have to get rid of them. Look, I'm sorry for being an asshole. But you need to call your kami now, get rid of this. If you don't, it could level this neighborhood, maybe the whole city."

"Don't know how." Her voice was distant, too distant. "Why bother."

"Just..." Hiro searched his brain for something, anything to say to help her. "Tell me its name. I'll try to help you."

"Teacher. Guardian. Hunter. There's one more... I don't know what it is."

His eyes widened. "Four??"

Abby slumped, her head knocking against her knees.

"Alright. You can do this. I know it. No Ward has ever fused with more than one kami and survived. And to come out of it in three weeks? You're stronger than you think." His mind raced, gathering information as it went. "Go to your peaceful place. Call the guardian."

"There's no one there," she sobbed hysterically, "I tried. They're gone."

"They're not gone. Just not there right now. Call him and he'll come."

"How?"

Hiro, for all his centuries of experience, didn't know. The ways of the Wards were far outside his purview, but he tried to make something up that sounded helpful.

“Say his name. Out loud, and inside. Keep calling, he’ll come.” He hoped. If the situation went sideways, Hiro wasn’t sure even he would survive. He would prefer survival. Most of his mind was telling him to run, but he’d promised Seth, and he always kept his promises. Abby shuddered, eyes glassy and staring at nothing. The black shapes seemed to be passing through her body, and each time she twitched spasmodically and grimaced in pain.

“Abby, you have to listen to me. If you don’t pull yourself together this whole bridge will fall apart in minutes. Focus. Say his name.”

“G...Guardian,” she stammered.

“Good. Think about what he looks like.”

“Big... cat... white.”

“Keep doing it. Just keep calling... imagine he’s already there. I don’t know. Shit.”

At first nothing happened, and Hiro started to believe nothing would. He thought if he moved fast enough he could get away once the bridge collapsed, but he’d have to transform into his true form. The would be one for the history books. He could probably haul Abby with him, but the city was toast. Something happened, though, interrupting his last-ditch plans.

Most of the time the things that were visible in the physical world were completely different from how they looked to Hiro’s inner eye, and so he’d grown accustomed to the contrast. Every once in a while, though, the difference surprised him. As far as his eyes were concerned, Abby had disappeared completely. But in his true sight, she’d bolted upright, her head darting this way and that. The eyes that were formerly vacant and empty were suddenly full of wild intelligence, and she appeared to be sniffing the air around her. Then it seemed all her senses focused on a single point within the collusion, and she snarled ferociously. Abby, if that’s who was currently in control, hunched over for a second and seemed to contract into herself. Then her arms flew out wide, her back arched and she let a feral shriek loose at the sky. The sound of her voice appeared to release something as a huge shape erupted out of her chest. It was made of brilliant light, an absolute contrast to the black hurricane around them, and swirled around her for a moment before coalescing into a gigantic feline predator.

The shining cat charged into the black, jaws snapping and claws tearing at everything they touched. The shadows retreated from it, trying vainly to keep their shape. Wherever its teeth snapped at them, they scattered. Hiro could see them desperately trying to reconnect in its wake, form back into the storm of power they’d constructed. For a while it seemed they would succeed, that their sheer numbers were too much for Abby’s guardian. But ultimately its stamina overcame theirs – it only seemed to grow brighter while the shadows flickered and separated as the cohesion of their hate fell apart.

Hiro felt the air grow lighter around him as the miasma dissipated, and all of a sudden he realized his head felt like exploding. He'd forgotten to breathe, and the air rushed back into his lungs so fast he choked on it.

"What are you going on about?" came a weak voice, "Don't tell me after all your talk of being old as dirt you've never seen that before."

Abby was physically visible again, the luminescent shape had retreated back to where it came from. She didn't look good – her skin was white as parchment and her eyes had taken on a fever-bright quality. Her back was braced against the bridge railing, and it looked like she wouldn't be able to support her own weight if she should try to get up.

"Well, the attitude's back," Hiro observed between coughs, "I think that's a good sign. How do you feel?"

"How do I look?"

"A little like last week's death warmed over."

"Well, that's how I feel. Dick. You really need to learn some tact."

"Whatever. Let's save this argument for another day and get you home."

"Huh. And where the hell is that, exactly? You packed up my apartment."

"So we did. We'll start with somewhere inside and safe, how's that?"

"Fine. Too tired to argue."

Hiro nodded and got an arm around her waist, hoisting her upright. Even with his support, though, her knees buckled underneath her.

"Goddamn," she said, "I think maybe I should just go to sleep right here."

"Not an option." He gathered her up in his arms as easily as if she were a child. "Come on."

He was on the phone as soon as they were in the back of a taxi.

"Seth. No, the city was not destroyed. You're welcome. Yeah, I'll have a transfusion waiting for her when we get back. Ok, safe flight. You owe me."

"A transfusion of what?" Abby muttered when he hung up.

“Blood. You need something to bind you back into your physical form.”

“What? Why?”

“You know what they say – ‘The blood is the life.’ By the way, I think I’ll leave the explaining to Seth. Didn’t go as well last time I tried. But you’ll be ok.”

“I know.” She looked completely exhausted, but before she dozed off she looked up at him.

“I’m sorry I called you a jerk.”

Hiro laughed. “Don’t be. It wasn’t inaccurate.”