

The Taste of Death

The first time I encountered death, it was when my grandfather died, my mother's father. I was very young; I didn't understand what had happened. And for the longest time, all that I remembered was the smell of death.

To me, it was the scent of polished wood, the casket they placed him in. The scent of freshly cut flowers, that made up the funeral wreaths which surrounded the casket. The scent of too many people in our small home, as they came to pray by my grandfather's side. Then, it was the smell of wet soil, lingering in the air as we buried him. That was what had remained etched in my mind, what I associated with death.

I had forgotten that when I was turned. From that moment on, death took on a new meaning for me: It was the end of all things sweet and good in this world. The decay of hope, the darkening of one's future. Tasting death, for a vampire, meant experiencing a life. It is the loss of salvation, of succor, absconding with all that was once sweet and never to be felt again. It was like biting into something delicious and realizing it wasn't food at all, but rather a taste that of something unique, that could never be savored again.

Now, when I looked into the single whole eye of the sikiri, as the gold in it slowly bled into red, I learned a new meaning of death. It hissed, and in that tone, I heard death. It was deafening, so loud that it could deafen you forever. The sikiri's cry was a hiss like a hot steel blade drawn across a stone, or a river of molten lava crashing into the sea. I heard its scales grinding against each other as the muscles beneath moved, a melody of violence and power. In those sounds, I heard death.

The sikiri coiled itself, its eye never leaving mine. Then, it launched itself forward. It was so fast that I barely had a chance to react. This time though, I remembered my skill. Its maw opened up to swallow me whole and I stepped to the side, turning to mist.

The color bled out of the world and sounds quieted. I wasn't fast enough. The sikiri teeth passed through a piece of the mist that corresponded to my right arm. Immediately I felt a sensation unlike anything I have felt before. It wasn't exactly pain, but it felt like a thousand needles have just been pushed through every single part of my arm.

My step finished, and I reformed as the rest of the sikiri's body flew by me. My arm felt numb, and my knife slipped from my fingers to the ground. I tried to move it, and realized that sensations was coming back swiftly. I knelt, trying to pick the knife back up when the sikiri's tail lashed out and I dashed out of the way, cursing. It smashed into the earth where I stood just a moment before, sending debris flying everywhere, and I lost sight of my weapon.

Cursing, I took more quick steps back, putting a greater distance between myself and the beast, but also running down the cooldown on my skill.

Shadow was nowhere to be found, and Saia had recovered near the base of the tree she was thrown at. The thundering of the sikiri landing after its attack rumbled through the forest, shaking trees and rattling leaves. I ran to Saia and grabbed her.

"Chain," I said, and she transformed without delay. I took the blade part and put it in my broken left hand. I've healed enough that I could somewhat close my fist, but I knew that wasn't going to be enough. So I used the chain to wrap the blade around my hand, hoping that I could keep it in that was. All the while I kept an eye on the sikiri, as it recovered

and coiled to turn its attention on me again. Before I could finish wrapping the blade, Saia shifted, the chains I wrapped around my arm and the blade melted in my fingers, engulfing my hand and wrist then solidifying into a kind of a gauntlet with a chain attached at the bottom and a blade sticking out straight out of my knuckles.

"Thanks," I managed to say before I had to move again. The sikiri had recovered and was turning my way, this time slowly. I ran, moving around the hole where the quicksand used to be and putting it between us.

There was no use running, I couldn't outlast it, and even if I could, the sikiri was much faster than me. From what Shadow had said, the sikiri was in the 5th or 6th Investment, which made it incredibly tough. And I could see that. I hadn't been able to scratch the reaper corpse, and that one was on the 6th. The sikiri's scales were tougher than the reaper's, though it did have some weak areas. The fact that Saia had managed to wound its eye and that I managed to even scratch its hide proved that true. That limited the ways I could hurt it.

The sikiri watched me with one good eye, its forked tongue slithering out every once in a while. I could see red lines crawling over its scales, the gold in its eye was now almost completely overtaken. The sikiri raised its head, slowly and wavering. It was hurt, I could tell, dazed from the log crashing into its head.

It straightened and headed in my direction. Then, suddenly it paused, its eye moving to the side as if tracking something.

"The blight is taking it."

My hand whirled around at the sound, my hand nearly taking Shadow's head off. Thankfully, I stopped just shy of his throat.

The sikir hissed, then jumped forward, smashing its head into a tree.

"I'm making it hallucinate," Shadow answered my silent question. "It won't last long, not with its Investment."

I glanced at him, seeing that he was breathing quickly, his hair matted with sweat. His blue skin was looking paler than usual.

"It is turning into a monster," Shadow wheezed.

The red lines, the blight, the spread across the sikiri's body was faster now. From everything that he said, once it turned monster, we were screwed.

Shadow, grimaced. "We cannot let that happen."

"How?" I asked. Our plan was as perfect as it we could've made it, and it had gone off as well as it possibly could, it was still not enough.

"I have one more skill in me," Shadow said with a wince. "I need you to distract it."

My fear spiked, the **thirst** quieted down, almost cowed by the prospect of facing the death in front of us. I accepted the fear, took it in and wielded it like the tool it was.

I nodded to Shadow, then took a step forward. With a deep breath, I let the chain and ring drop from my right hand, then I started to spin it underhanded. I settled into the second Kata of the ***Veiled Mist Assault, Tempest in the Mist***, skipping the first one. One leg in front of the other, my balance shifted forward, as if I was in the middle of a step. I spun the chain, faster and faster, until the shrill sound of it spinning drowned out everything else. The sound was like a mountain being torn apart by a storm. A melody of violence.

The sikiri snapped its head back, as if to rid itself of the trance-like state that Shadow's pheromones brought, then it slowly shook its head. Then as the sound of the chain rose, it froze. I had shifted around so that now I was on its blind side, yet it could still sense me. Before it could bring its eye on me, I wound up and threw the chain and ring with all of my vampire might. It flew through the air, thrown by a vampire's strength. It hissed through the air with a thunderous whoosh that braced me for what was to come.

The ring smashed into its snout with a loud crack and made it rear back. The scale on its snout wasn't damaged, but the speed of my throw was enough to startle it. Before it recovered, I jumped forward, spinning and pulling back the chain and wrapping it up around my left forearm as I ran.

As soon as I got it back to a manageable length, I whipped the chain above my head. Again, the sikiri started turning in my direction, and once again I let the chain go, this time aiming more closely. The ring hit the sikiri in the eyes, or rather the ruined wounds that were left of them. A low whine escaped from the creature as it veered away from me, but I quickly followed, spinning the chain above my head once again.

I wasn't fast enough to taunt it and then evade its attacks. I wasn't strong enough to seriously hurt it. I could only attack, give myself over to the Scarlet Moon Style, and distract it with continuous assaults. I pushed all thoughts of defense into the back of my mind, and let my fear come forth. I let it guide my actions.

With every beat of my heart, I discerned what it was that my fear was telling me. The sikiri was powerful, but we had denied it more than half of its vision. It could still hear and use its tongue, if it worked in any way as a snake's one did, and it could still smell me. But I feared it laying eyes on me again, so I moved in concord with that fear. I kept myself on its

blind side, running around it and sending the chain flying at it as fast as I could.

The strikes didn't do much when they hit the scales, they couldn't even crack them, but when I hit its wounded eyes, its reaction was clearly pained.

The sikiri began to lash out its tail in an attempt to ward me off. I evaded, not by getting out of the way, but jumping forward, getting closer and attacking again, faster and stronger. Every time my fear pulsed inside of me, warning me of shadows and danger, I attacked. The sikiri began to hiss louder, then I saw its tail swipe and a long arc of something black headed towards me as if its tail had turned into a whip spinning in circles around its body.

My eyes widened and my blood boiled as adrenaline surged through me, as my fear spiked. I stepped to the side, turning to mist. The whip-like extension of its tail snapped at the ground behind me and I finished my step. My chain reformed alongside me, still mid-spin, but now closer to the sikiri's head. I twisted my wrist, rippling the chain and sending the tip faster. It smashed into the sikiri's ruined eye, the speed and the strength of the ring punching through the wound, sinking into it. Immediately, I wrenched the chain back, pulling it out violently. With it followed gore and the ruined eye that had been stuck inside of the socket. It ripped out of the wound, and came to rest on the sikiri's scales, still connected by the blood covered nerves.

The sikiri roared its fury and the black extension of its tail started smashing into the ground wildly. My breath hitched as I stepped in to meet it. I felt a strange sense of confidence wash over me, like I already knew what I needed to do. Without thinking or hesitation, I ducked and dodged every strike from the tail almost flawlessly; never taking a step backward when a step forward would suffice, not letting my fear drive me away, but using it to know when to move. Not worrying about where my

next move should be taken from there on out; I danced in front of danger passionately instead of fleeing for safety.

My chain was now an extension of my body, an extra limb that obeyed each motion centered around the sikiri's head as if it had become a part of this fight. For a moment, I wondered if Saia wasn't helping me somehow, but that thought faded into the background almost as quickly as it came, left to be dwelled on at another time.

Amidst the chaos and destruction, one thing remained unchanged: my fear was still present with each movement, cautioning me whenever I stepped too close or hesitated too long but propelling me forward at just the right times as well.

With every forceful spin and strike that impacted against its scales, deadly sparks leapt, though still I did nothing more than annoy the beast. The red lines of the blight were advancing faster now, and almost all of its scales had turned crimson. I kept dancing, taking quick steps and feeling [Mist Step] become available again.

Then the sikiri's attack smashed a fallen tree, and it exploded into debris. Wood pieces flew in all directions, but I paid them no mind, I couldn't focus on defense. Not when a piece whistled by my ear, clipping it, not when it ripped my shirt and opened a gash on my shoulder. Not when a piece of wood stabbed into my kidney. I felt the burning pain of the wound in my side, but I ignored it; I needed to focus on the task at hand.

The familiar hum of the sikiri's scales vibrating reverberated through my body like a wave. I could feel it in every bone, but mostly my ears throbbed with pain. It was an intimidating sound that rattled the air and shook the ground beneath my feet.

The sikiri blindly lunged forward, not caring for anything other than reaching me. Its tail smashed into trees, dragging them along as if they weighed nothing at all. I moved to meet it and as I did so, I felt as if I had started to understand the true core of the Scarlet Moon Style; a disregard for defense, just pure offense.

I saw the air shimmer as a sound wave exploded out of its body just on top of me. I stepped, turning to mist. The blast smashed through me a moment before its body followed. The mist stretched, blasted apart, and my mind went white with agony. For a moment I felt stretched to the point of breaking, as if I was on the cusp of forgetting who and what I was. And then the mist moved back, coalescing and my step ended. I reformed and tripped immediately. The momentum of my chain carried me forward as it wrapped around a tree and pulled me aside. I collapsed, twisting and falling on my back, hitting the ground hard, my body completely numb and unresponsive. I couldn't feel any part of my body, instead all I felt were needles that stabbed every part of my existence. My lungs were locked, unable to take a breath, my muscles as if they didn't even exist.

A dark shape rose over me, the sikiri, its eye staring at me and its maw opening up to swallow me whole. The **thirst** raged inside of me, and my fingers twitched. It wasn't enough.

Then Shadow flickered into existence above us, his serpent-tongue spear raised above his head for a strike. One moment he was alone, and then six more of him appeared as if made out of the mists. Three holding the same weapon glowing azure, and three glowing scarlet. Shadow's weapon turned black. He swung and I heard it inside of my mind. Unraveling with control yet somehow hurried and filled with pain. It rang like the sound of a thousand cut strings.

[Song of Seven Mists, Quell Them All]

Then the world went insane. My eyes couldn't follow all that happened, only that the sikiri was thrown back as seven arcs of light the size of its entire body slashed into it. It moved out of my view, and I pushed against my body, willing it to move through the numbness as I heard the sounds of crashing.

After a few seconds, I managed to push myself up and Saia flowed back into her dragon form. I saw Shadow kneeling on the ground in front of me, and a bit away from him the sikiri. Blood was splattered everywhere, the ground had gashes cut into it.

I half crawled; half stumbled my way to him.

"You did it," I managed to say, my throat threatening to seize up on me.

Shadow's eyes were closed, and his face turned into a grimace of pain. He didn't respond, and I saw that he was shaking.

Then, before I could say anything else, the sikiri stirred.

I turned my head toward it in disbelief as it rolled slowly, turning around, its scales now fully crimson. Its head rose from behind its body and I saw that half of its face was gone, Shadow had sheared off half of its head, along with the wounded eyes. The scales all around its head and neck were cracked, and many gone. I could see the bones sticking out through the flesh. Its head lolled around, barely holding on.

"Marianna," Shadow whispered. "I can't move."

I glanced at Saia. "Blade," I said, and she flowed back into my weapon without question. My wrist was recovered enough that I could use my left hand, though it still felt stiff.

The sikiri turned its head toward me enough that it could point its remaining eye in our direction. A single ruby the size of a head glowed in the dim light of the jungle. It glared at us for a long moment, and then its mouth opened up, one cheek completely gone. It hissed, and then the hiss turned into something else, the sikiri spoke.

"A THOUSAND... TIMES... YOU... TRY... KHANUM... A THOUSAND... TIMES... YOU... FAIL," the words resonated in a way that made my skin crawl. I stopped, struck with terror. My breath came in ragged gasps, fear consuming my every thought as I tried to make sense of what was happening. I felt a fire raging within my chest and my heart boomed like a drum, threatening to rip through me. Then, an eruption of pure, scorching hate consumed me, a savage anger toward the injustice of the world around me that no words could describe. White-knuckled, I grasped the chain with unrelenting force, until my nails pierced my flesh. The sound of rage roared in my ears, and I heard it beckoning me to join its chorus, singing anarchy to anything that crossed my path. Anything that pretended to be order, that bowed to the will of others. Furiously, I shook my head, trying to push the rush of emotion back.

"Don't fight it," Shadow whispered. "Let the emotions flow, know and understand that the emotions are yours, but do not let them control you. You use what you feel, not act on it, you act based on what you want."

I closed my eyes, remembering the lessons of the Heart of Azure and Scarlet. Emotion is the fuel that grants me Purpose. I was feeling these things, but they were there to fuel me, not control me. Calm is the surrender to the will of Others. I would not push my feelings out; I would not surrender my will.

"It speaks?" I said incredulously.

"Do not let your emotion overwhelm you, and do not listen to its words," Shadow said. "It speaks blight madness, nonsense that takes root in the mind. Do not think about what it says, that's how the blight infects."

I opened my mouth to ask more but realized that this was not the moment. I just nodded then focused on the monster. It had an aura of red, thin ribbons of red mist rising from its scales. The wound was terrible, blood spilling everywhere, the monster was on its last legs, yet somehow, I felt more fear now than I had before.

"ALWAYS... A THORN... KHANUM... A THOUSAND TURNS... AND STILL YOU... TRY... ABANDON THE FALSE... WAY... ACCEPT... OUR... GIFT," the voice wormed its way into my mind, I glanced at Shadow, wondering what the monster meant. How many times had he fought the monsters that they taunted him like that. I shook my head, pushing all thoughts about that aside, trusting in Shadow's warning.

"It needs to die," Shadow wheezed out. "Now."

I stepped forward, my stance that of Tempest, In the Mist. I started spinning the chain, in front of me. The monster wavered in front of me, then hissed. The emotions hit me like a truck. They were coursing through me like an avalanche, threatening to swallow everything in its wake. I focused on them, let me carry me forward, used them as fuel for what I was about to do. The ground rumbled and shook beneath me, but I ignored it, my steps sure as I ran forward. The monster's scales started to vibrate, red mist coalescing around it.

It reared up, then snapped at me. I swung the chain toward the ground then I stepped forward turning to mist.

My step ended on top of its head, the chain continued and bit into its wounded side, the ring hitting bone and bouncing off. I changed my stance into the last Kata, *Advance, Whirling Mist*. My balance shifted forward, and I bared my fangs as I let all the emotions pulsing through me out. I roared my anger and fear, and let everything go. I attacked as I fell on top of the sikiri's head. I whipped the chain wrapping it around its head and grabbed the ring in my hand, then I dropped on top of it and stabbed with my blade.

The edge slipped into its head, sinking in, but not deep enough. Its flesh too tough for my meager strength to penetrate. Not deep enough to hit the brain. The sikiri rampaged, trying to throw me off, but I kept my grip on the ring, keeping myself wrapped around its head.

Its scales started to vibrate and I let the tenets of the Scarlet Moon School guide me. I let my instinct guide me, I let the **thirst** take the wheel.

I leaned down and bit at the exposed flesh on top of the sikiri's head, my fangs barely pushing into the tough meat. But blood flowed, and I tasted it on my tongue. The power of it nearly sent me into a frenzy. Strength filled me, and I started stabbing the blade again, and again, each time pushing it deeper.

The monster's skill activated, and my body shook, my bones shattered and healed just as fast as the blood flowed down my throat, as the **thirst** took the monster's essence.

Pain and pleasure mixed inside of me, bringing me to heights unlike anything I have ever experienced. It was life, it was delirium, it was death.

My blade came down again, my muscles screaming as I tore them apart, pushing them beyond anything I have ever done before. I felt the blade slip through, I felt it sink into something soft, and I felt the sikiri's

death on my tongue. The churning ocean of my emotions stilled, and I knew that the monster's influence was gone.

The taste of death was like the knowledge of a ripening fruit plucked too soon. It was the taste of the loss of potential, like a sweet, succulent flavor stolen away. It was the taste of victory and fulfillment, like an exotic dish savored with relish.

And then I felt the memories of the sikiri come, flashes of the battle. Immediately, I knew something was wrong. The images were swallowed up by a red cloud swelling up inside my head. It filled every part of my mind, so much so that I could no longer feel my body.

The cloud pulsed, and then it spoke.