

Woe

“I call my school of being, **the Heart of Azure and Scarlet,**” Shadow started, using a stick to draw a circle with a crack in its side in the dirt. We had moved back to the fire and sat down next to it. He started by explaining what a school of being was. Which was exactly what it meant. A way of life, a teaching. What bushidō would be on Earth, or a life lived through strict religious practice. It encompassed everything.

“Named so for the two moons that circle our world. The azure moon is called **Hinda** in the elven ancient tongue, the broken watcher. They say that the moon broke on their arrival, and that it was the act of their goddess attempting to fight the Great Mistake, the Grand Spell that brought them here. They say that their goddess followed them here, and that now she lives in their lands, keeping the worst of this world at bay. There might be some truth to that, the elven continent of Elvaros is the safest continent in the world, monsters are rare there and animals are not highly Invested.”

His hand moved and he drew another circle, this one smaller. “The second moon, one that is scarlet, is called **Nonda**, the hateful eye in the elven tongue. The elves thought that it was the hidden home of the evil god that brought them here, what they later learned was the Grand Spell from the ruins of the Ancient Ones. Meanings and understanding changed over the years, but the names remained. All races call them the same thing, though each has its own ideas about their meaning. For the YoKai-ni, what matters is the color. We place great importance on such things, azure is the color of ruthlessness, of indifference and solitude. Scarlet is the color of survival, of fervor and righteous fury.”

I tilted my head at that, and I saw Shadow's smile turn almost embarrassed.

“Yes,” he cleared his throat. “As I said, I was not a good person when I was young. The prime principles of my school are those of survival at all costs, at leveraging all at your disposal to eradicate your enemies and walk your own path. I have known people, great mages or warriors, who believe that there are wrong or evil Masks, evil practices or teachings. I have never subscribed to that, though I do give room for some of it to be true, in unique cases. My belief had always been that there are no evil teachings, only evil people. A Mask, or a teaching, just **is**. What you do with it is what gives it morality. There have been times in history when necromancer Masks were forbidden, when all people holding them were hunted down and killed. And there have been times when nations rose on the backs of undead cultivating the land. It is all matter of perspective and the morality of the person using the power.” He paused, his eyes holding mine. “Do your martial arts have rules?”

I thought about it. I wasn't quite sure, but I had heard of many ways of life on Earth that had rules, that had oaths or vows. I nodded.

“You said that your world has no magic,” Shadow continued. “Which confuses me, yet... Suffice to say that magic, the Way rather, is a big part of a *school of being*. Everyone in this world has Masks and skills, but there are other ways of achieving power, far more difficult paths. Such as this,” he looked at the campfire that started to die down and threw another piece of wood at it, then he reached out with his hand and flicked a finger at it. A small plume of fire left his finger, igniting the piece of wood. I blinked at that, then gaped at him.

“That was a cantrip,” Shadow told me. “There are ways of learning how to use smaller Weaves without a skill, though it is hard to learn and even harder to master. I myself only know two. I am showing you this to make you understand that there are different paths to obtaining power. A

school of being is just one, and it is part of the Weave itself. Like all things that you do, it will influence your Mask, and it will influence the way you live your life. The Source around us enforces those who live in accordance with a code at the very center of their Way of life. It is the Esoteric part of the three attributes. Physical is self-evident, improvements of the body. The Weave is the cantrips and spell skills, ability to command the Source. Esoteric is... you could call it the *perfection in all things*. A farmer after a lifetime of work, every action done with purpose and understanding. Imagine a blade master that had spent his entire life trying to master a cut, the moment he achieved it, he would gain a waybound skill that would tap into that perfection,” he raised his hand then dropped it fast toward the ground.

[Azure Moon Style; Ruthless Palm]

The skill echoed in my mind, I felt it impact the world around me. And just how he said, there was a perfection there. His palm stopped just shy of hitting the ground, but a ripple of air surged around it, blasting the dirt and dust away in a perfect expanding circle.

“There is greatness in the perfectly executed actions that resonates with the world around us, beyond just bending the Source to your will,” he said, and I could do nothing but agree.

I listened attentively; it seemed like there was a lot more to all of this than I thought.

“For now, you don’t need to bother yourself with understanding. You should focus on learning the base tenets of **the Heart of Azure and Scarlet**. When I say learning, it is more than just knowing it

intellectually. You need to align and embody them, only then will you be able to touch the Way in a manner that will allow you to gain these skills.”

“That does sound a bit... extreme?” I said slowly.

He nodded. “It is, there is great power to be found in a way of life. Being certain of one’s path. But it also requires sacrifice. Perhaps, it would be best if you tell me what you want your life to be like? What are your goals?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. A week ago, the answer to this question would’ve been that I wanted to serve the cartel well. To make my sire proud. I’ve failed in that desire and nothing would ever make it right. Even if I returned back to Earth and found them, what was done was done. They would hunt me down, attack on sight. They were about to execute me after all. No, I was on my own, and I had already decided what I wanted to do. Help Shadow survive so that he could search for the truth behind the message. And help Earth get through the integration as best as it could. I was a vampire, I had gifts that many coveted. Shadow had said that he did not think that there were evil powers, only evil people. He said that he had tried to do good, that he had lost faith in the world on that path. I got to choose what to do with what I had. Perhaps I was a fool, and perhaps the world would disappoint me like it had him, but I would try nevertheless.

“I want to do good with my life,” I answered his question. “I want to help you survive, and then help Earth survive the integration. Create something that is fair for all.”

Shadow’s eyes sparkled with the light of the fire. “Ah,” his expression turned somber. “To do good. Perhaps it is fate that the two of us met. Perhaps life plays its games and we all dance to its tunes. Many great things have come of me following a similar path, and many just as terrible. Forgive me, I am cruel. You are young to bear the weight of choice, I

should not have asked. You would not have even been considered an adult by any race on Kirios save the Harpiem. And yet,” he trailed off.

I took a deep breath. “Do you think that trying to do good is wrong?”

Shadow turned his head down, looking at the ground. “Trying to do good is never wrong Marianna. It is just that you must be ready and strong enough to bear the consequences of such actions. Perhaps I have been alone for too long, perhaps I had my heart broken too many times. But it is your path, and I only hope that it takes you farther than it had me.”

He turned his face back, his eyes sad and filled with age. “It is funny, that we are so similar. Looking at you is as if I am looking at a mirror image from so long ago. Life had taught me many terrible lessons that you are yet to experience. What do you consider to be good, Mairanna, is not what everybody else will consider to be the same. You could wish for peace, but what if the world is so filled with differences that only conflict can resolve them? What if the world itself was built to thrive on it? What would you do if your good, the peace in the entire world, stifles it instead of saving it? What if to save a people you have to kill another? Or what if someone else has the same dream, yet their methods and vision differ than yours? Will you fight for it? Let conflict arise between what you believe to be good and what somebody else knows. Will you listen to the thoughts of others, even those who are not qualified to comment and give such opinions. I have tried so many different ways, and all had ultimately failed. Inevitably, desires such as ours create discord, chaos, unless your desire is so shallow and weak that you would settle for it to be limited. A city, a kingdom, there it might work.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it. It was telling that his mind went to such things. I hadn't thought about it in that manner. I hadn't thought about how or where, but I saw now just how old he was that he had experienced all of that. I knew what he was talking about. The cartel

was... not a force for good. Yet it did good things. The villages in the mountains that the government had ignored and forgotten survived because of the cartel. They had protection, they had food on their tables. The police and the government were the enemies in their eyes, and the cartel were the good guys. It was the same on a larger scale, countries and corporations.

“The tenets of the **Heart of Azure and Scarlet** are ultimately built on selfishness,” Shimi told me.

I blinked at that. “Selfishness?”

“To desire good, is ultimately a selfish goal, when you take it to its logical conclusion. You believe that your vision of good is greater than the price those around you must pay for it. And you are willing to do anything to see it through. It is what I based the tenets of my school:

Ambition is the drive to achieve Greatness.

Emotion is the fuel that grants me Purpose.

Calm is the surrender to the will of Others.

Control is the shackle that robs me of Ambition.

I do not conceal my Ambition, I Relish.

I do not suppress my Emotion, I Embrace.”

I frowned at that. “That sounds a bit... tyrannical.”

Shadow nodded. “And yet... You must hold true to it in your heart. Otherwise, those who have no care for any kind of morality will tear you down. There are many paths that lead to power, this is mine. What you do with power defines you. All those who wish to bring goodness into this world, must be stalwart in their belief and power, for you will always have those who are envious, who covet what you have. I do not know what kind of a world you come from, but here, power is the ultimate currency. Without power, you are nothing, and your desires worth less than dust. To bring about an age such as the Golden Age of the Bond of the Leaf of elves long since passed, you need to have the might to make it happen.”

He shook his head. “Perhaps you are too young to understand, still filled with hope and light. It is unfortunate that such is the way of things, that choices come to us when we are most unprepared. It was the same with me. And now here we are, in this wretched place filled with danger and death. Making choices that might not matter beyond tomorrow should we end up in the bellies of some blighted beast. Tell me, Marianna Rojas, would you pursue this goal of goodness to the very end? Stand as a shield against those who would tear it all down?”

I thought about it, but I couldn't really give an answer. I did believe that I could do good, that I had been given an opportunity to gain power. I had an obligation.

“Perhaps you should think on it for a while. It is a great responsibility,” Shadow said. “More than most ever consider or are ever faced with. If you get to live to be as old as I am, you will perhaps feel the full gravity of choice, the knowledge that most lives beside yours are but a flicker in the grand wildfire of life, and that your every decision can shape the direction that fire spreads. I have done my share of fighting for the good I believed in, and it has left me filled only with doubt and regret. Yet now,” his eyes got a faraway look to them. “When I think about it all. I do not know if given a choice to go back and do things anew, I would do anything

different at all. I had saved lives, I had created a room where happiness could grow. I don't know."

I didn't give him an answer to his question. Instead, a deep quiet settled over us. He went to sleep, and I kept looking at the fire, thinking. Vampires look far into the future, as we live for longer than a human ever could. Many of vampire texts were filled with the references to the low worth of human life. Of their willingness to impose their beliefs on the world.

I remembered Khalil and my discussions. Ultimately, even before I was a vampire, I had believed that they had done net good for the world. Many of the traits that made humanity great had been the traits that the vampires had encouraged in them from the shadows, or at times from atop their thrones. The great deeds that they had achieved had come with a price, often one heavy in lives, and yet, now we look upon the great pyramids and we marvel. They inspire greatness, despite the price in blood that it had taken to build them. We reached for the stars, for the light, inspired by the deeds that had their roots in suffering and darkness. Some said that was all just vampire propaganda, and I wouldn't know if it was. I only knew what the humans knew and what the vampires released in the public. But I had always believed that we have done good for the world.

I lived a hard life, I knew that there was always a price to pay.

I wondered what the world was going to be like now once it was integrated. How many of our great feats would get erased in the chaos that would follow. Shadow had told me only a little of it, but I knew that we were going to tear ourselves apart long before the denizens of Kirios got the chance for it. I had seen how people stabbed each other in the slums, how we clawed and schemed. How we executed little girls just to provoke. There was goodness in the heart of man, but so often we let evil win.

What Shadow was offering was a lifeline, and a path that led to power. I felt it in his tone, saw it in his eyes. To learn what he had to teach would put me on the same path that he walked. I did not know the details, but his words were plain.

I wondered if I could do that. I had always dreamed of being important, but I never had the chance. I cowered, and followed others, taking only what small pittance they deigned I had earned. But I understood power, I knew that all the people in the world who had the means to change things, had it. That they could stand in a room and have everyone quiet down in awe of their sheer presence.

Great leaders of nations were like that, humanitarians, heroes who jumped into fire, people who I saw on the tv from afar who made you stop in that awe of what they had done, what they were doing. Those that made you think that perhaps there was goodness in the world.

I understood then what Shadow was saying about selfishness. I wanted that; I wanted that power, I wanted to be able to change things. On Earth, they would've tried to teach me that it was wrong to want it. That I should suppress it, that there were people whose job it was to do what the rest of us couldn't. That we should all be meek and just follow. But Shadow offered another path. I did not think that he was evil, not that I had ever considered myself wholly good. Unlike my dear friend Khalil, I knew that pure good and pure evil were a lie, the world was filled with the shades of gray. Doing good did not mean that you yourself were good.

I made my decision.

* * *

I glanced over the fire to see that Shadow was still asleep. For a moment, I debated waking him up, but decided that he probably needed more rest.

I glanced at Saia who sat next to me, motionless. If I didn't know what she was, I would've thought that she was just a statue.

"You know," I whispered. "You might want to try and appear more lifelike."

Saia's head turned in my direction. "Query: For what purpose?"

"I mean, it doesn't bother me, of course. But if we survive all of this, eventually we are going back to Earth, and that means other people. If you at least appear as a living thing, you might not freak them out."

"Query: And this is preferable?"

"Not freaking people out is preferable, yes," I answered.

"Feedback: This Unit will take that under consideration."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You can just say that you don't want to."

"Query: Elaborate."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I had a tiny voice in my head telling me that she was messing with me, but I couldn't be sure.

I was just about to respond when I felt something in my chest. I stood up immediately. "The skill is ready."

Saia tilted her head, and I smiled. I wanted to try it out immediately.

I took a step and turned to mist. Using the skill was intuitive, I felt as if I had always known how to use it, even though I didn't quite understand how it worked. For the duration of a single step, I was a vaguely human, or rather vampire, shaped mist. While I was mist, I still could see, though the color of the world turned monochrome, muted. The sound became muffled, and scents disappeared, while my sense of touch became a sensation that I didn't quite know how to describe. If I had to, it would probably be something like saying that I was feeling stretched. I did some limited tests, though Shadow had already told me all that he knew of the skill. The skill worked for a single step, there was a minimum distance that would be considered a step, as well as a maximum one. A half step was still considered a step, but anything below that wasn't. That meant that I could do a few shorter steps in quick succession in order to get it off cooldown, though I had to actually move some distance and not just attempt to run in place.

On the other side, taking a leap still counted, allowing me to extend the duration I was in the mist form. That had its own disadvantages, of course. Anyone could see the mist and know where I would land. The speed of the mist was equal to the speed I had when I used it, and since vampire's were able to move extremely fast from standstill position that gave me a bit of an advantage. Another important thing to know was that the skill took everything that I carried with me. My clothes, my weapon, and Saia as well. There were limits to it, but Shadow didn't know them exactly, though he was certain that I wouldn't be able to grab someone's hand and pull them with me too. Not at my Investment tier at least.

As I reformed after my step, I felt a gentle breeze expand out of my landing point. Dust and dirt flew away in an expanding circle. I frowned, I had not seen anything like this when the okolon used it, but then remembered that I had added a green gemstone to the skill.

“Wind,” I whispered to myself.

“I see that your skill is ready,” I turned to see that Shadow had woken up.

I winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“It is fine, I am as rested as I can be under the circumstances,” Shadow said. “Did you test out the cooldown yet?”

I shook my head, then started making steps, counting them as I went. On my eight step I felt the skill become available again. “Eight,” I told him.

“Base version, not surprising,” he said.

I leapt across the room, turning to mist and flashing across the several meters distance in less than a second. It was such a great skill, I couldn’t help the smile on my face. I played around with it for a few more minutes, Shadow watching me from his cot.

Then, finally, I decided that we should finish our conversation. I walked closer, taking a seat on one of the stones next to the fire. My eyes were drawn to the flames as they danced across the logs.

“What will happen to Earth?” I asked finally.

I didn’t look at him, but I heard him shuffle. “I already told you. Your world will be integrated, flooded with Source, changed forever.”

I shook my head. “That’s not what I mean. You said that we will have a year of being isolated, that six months into that year, portals will open that will allow small parties from the rest of Kirios through. You said that they will try to take advantage of us.”

“Yes,” Shadow just said.

“What will happen afterward? Once the isolation is over, once anyone can reach us?” I turned my eyes from the fire and met his.

Shadow’s ears twitched and his gaze held mine for a few seconds. “You misunderstand, your population will be reduced greatly, it always happens. It is not that they will come into direct contact with you. It is just that you will be so weakened that they will just claim land that is empty, or that has few survivors. The nations of the world will send expeditions. They are forbidden from waging an all-out war of extermination by the Shadow’s Peace, but there will be conflict, even among themselves. Your world’s survivors, then they will bully, they will exploit, they will bribe. In the end they will split your world amongst themselves. Your kind will fight for a time, but ultimately they will lose. There are individuals on Kirios who hold more power than you can imagine, skills that can level mountains. And there are more of us than there will be of you. You will lose. Some of you will be accepted as citizens, a gesture meant to show that you can live in harmony and peace, most will accept the life of the second-class citizens in hope that their children or their children’s children will rise to be equal—and they will. Some will adapt and make a new life in the untamed places of your world, delaying the inevitable. Eventually, some hundreds of years from now, maybe a thousand. A nation of your own will arise with enough power that you will try and take back what you lost. Perhaps you will succeed for a time, in the end, your lands will be as those of other continents. Split amongst all races.”

“That happened to other races too?” I asked him.

“The elves were the first,” Shadow answered. “They were uncontested for a long time. The dwarves arrived later, and while history talks of conflicts, the elven kingdoms and them found a balance. The dwarven republics care little for the surface world, and the elves hate their halls of

stone and fire. They each have kingdoms on the other's land. The YoKaini, my kind, are the most warlike of us. The Shadow's Peace is the consequence of the war they caused and the wars that followed. Those who remain on the home continent often raid other nations. But there are some nations that had adopted other races, who have lands on Elvaros with the elves, and Du'vir with the dwarves. The Naga-shan live underwater and don't care for anything above. They hold little of their own continent's land, as their land was settled by other races and they pushed into the oceans. The last to arrive were the Harpiem, the ones that we call the Wandering People. But they weren't the wanderers when they arrived. They are, the weakest of the races, they did not hold nearly as well as the other races did. Their land was taken from them and now they are a nomadic people. We drove them from their cities and made them into what they are now. The conquest of your world will not be filled with an ocean of blood, though some rivers might flow. Instead, they will take through word and power that you cannot match, through numbers and just being there when you cannot. They will claim it by taming the wilderness that will rise. There is just not enough of you to be a real threat. Perhaps once, if you had arrived long ago when there were less of us on Kirios. If you fought with all you had..." He shook his head. "Conflict and blood accelerate Investment, it might have been enough. But now? One race against hundreds of nations? Even united, you would still be outnumbered and overpowered."

Shadow's eyes seemed sad, he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it as if he had thought better of it. Finally, he added. "I am sorry."

I nodded, it wasn't his fault. "Can I stop it?" I asked, I wanted to do good.

His eyes narrowed at me. "Stop everything? No," he shook his head. "But there are ways. If you make it too costly for them, perhaps you could carve a place for your people. A place that could be strong enough to resist, give your people a safe haven to grow and adapt to the new world."

“The message, the vision,” I started. “If they knew, could they be persuaded not to come? Can you unite the world?”

He looked at me with a sadness in his eyes. “I know of only a few people in the world who would believe me. Even if they see it with their own eyes, they will not trust it. To them, a real seer does not exist. If the threat still exists, if it even is real, I will need to work from the shadows and prepare. Discover what the Blight Curtain really is.”

I glanced at my palms. I could still see faint traces of blood on them. I was made to kill, to destroy. I was a vampire.

I remembered a quote from an old vampire, Sikkemeh, living in the times of Rome.

“Woe to the conquered, for might is all that matters. I find it resonates with me, and I wish I was there when that Gaul cur uttered it. Perhaps I would’ve turned him. As it stands, his words speak to the nature of the world. Strength is paramount for a leader. And so it is the right of the vampire to stand above the mortal, for we have the power and foresight needed to ensure the prosperity of all. Perhaps one day they will realize that.”

It was one of the quotes that Khalil would often point to when we were debating whether vampires could be benevolent. The more I look back at those times, the more I realized that I knew nothing. It had taken experiencing the change for me to understand the power that a vampire could wield. That it so often corrupts was no surprise to me now, and yet... they had done good, they had built monuments that stood the test

of time. They had inspired greatness and when it was necessary stood against evil.

And now we will be faced with people who held even greater might. It was the natural order of things, the vampires were right. Shadow knew it too, this world had people that were too strong. Earth will be conquered.

“Woe to the conquered,” I whispered to myself.

Shadow tilted his head and frowned. “Woe to the conquered?” He repeated, questioningly.

I didn’t respond. Earth needed power, it needed champions that could stand and help us hold off what was coming. It needed people who could survive this threat to live and stand against the greater one yet to come. Thirty of us were sent here, and I wondered just how many would see the dangerous avalanche rolling down the hill straight at us.

I hadn’t seen it either. Not until the rift, not until I realized just how alien our new reality was. I glanced at Saia, a tiny dragon, but also an achievement that made Earth’s look so small. And I had seen the remains of that world. I was not someone great, I was not a good person, though I did want to be. I was arrogant to think that I could do anything to help. But the memories of my sire came to me, his teachings, his kind eyes from before. Khalil and the skepticism that he used as a shield. Stories of great people who made the world a better place. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had something unique to just me. I wasn’t just one young vampire among hundreds, I had a Mask, I had my own power. I could feel the **thirst** pulse inside of me, almost in beat with my Mask. I could tell myself so many lies, but in the end I was just as flawed as the vampires that Khalil often warned about. I was arrogant, and I was greedy, but Shadow’s words echoed in my mind, it was what we did with that power that mattered.

He was right, I wanted to do good, and for that I needed power.

I held Shadow's eyes, feeling determination seep into my expression, my Mask and the thirst thrummed in rhythm. "Can you teach me how to do it? How to keep that from happening to my world?" It was such an arrogant thing to ask, but I was a vampire, it was in our nature.

Shadow's orange eyes narrowed, and he walked over to me, towering over my sitting form.

"You said that you wanted to do good," his eyes held mine, looking almost sad for a moment. Then they changed, and an expression I had never seen on his face appeared. It was a terrifying look of someone filled with more emotion than they could express. Almost a grimace of rage and hate that burned out from his eyes, sadness and happiness that twisted his mouth into a grin that was both mocking and pitying in the same breath. His tails spread out behind him like a fan, swaying as if they were in the wind. "If you want to walk down this path, I can teach you. You will suffer, you will endeavor to take their pain on your back, I can see it in your eyes. They will not thank you for it, but that is the price we pay. If you want to do this, you will spill blood in the name of protecting, in the name of good. You will face evil, and be branded a tyrant, a conqueror, they will call you evil to justify tearing you and what you try to build down. It is in their nature. You need to be stronger than them, to be a ruthless monument that will not bend or break in the face of everything that they throw at you. You will need to understand the **Heart of Azure and Scarlet.**"

I stood up and spoke, giving voice to what I felt inside.

"*Vae Victis,*" *woe to the conquered.*