



Blessed are the Content

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The mists closed behind the final Mantis ship, sealing them in. Lady Sun was finally visible again now that they had cleared the mists and it felt so very warm. How long had it taken them to clear the mist? Minutes? Hours? Nothing made sense in there. He only knew he had to keep following the Empress's fleet or be rejected like so many others from the mist and his prize would be lost to him forever.

Eiso brought his spyglass to his eye. The fleet was breaking up. The Crab, Crane, Dragon, Unicorn, and Imperial ships headed north. The Lion, Phoenix, and Scorpion south to a large bay.

"Where to, my brother?" Yuta called from her dais.

Eiso scanned the shoreline. Much of this island was lined with cliffs, making it difficult to land. The Great Clans ships were spreading out and headed for what shoreline they could.

"We split the fleet to explore the lands and find the riches. We will land there," he pointed, "we make landfall on that barren peninsula south of the inlet to which the detestable Crane are headed."

Yuta nodded and slid her foot. Wind filled the sails of *The Wave's Blade* and they headed towards the peninsula. A signalman waved a flag and the ships in the fleet broke formation, spreading across the waters within the mists.

As *The Wave's Blade* neared the peninsula Eiso could see that it was not land like he had expected but instead mangrove trees grew straight out of the water. They laid anchor and took small, shallow-draft tsuchibune boats into the swamp. They rowed silently through the trees. Branches stretched out, choking the sun until only the odd beam of light could pierce the canopy. The trees' gray-brown bark terminated in tendril roots that snakes their way beneath the inky waters. Birds' calls could be heard from every direction but not a feather could be seen. A splash. Waves rocked the boats. A bizarre creature could be seen entering the water. Its back was white but its legs and head were black. Its boar-like snout hung flaccid from its face. It reminded Eiso of a woodblock he had once seen of a yokai: the dream eating baku.

"What in Osano Wo no Mikoto's name is that?" Yuta gasped.

Eiso looked at where his twin sister was pointing. There, in the branches, sat a large ape-like creature. Fiery orange hair hung like moss from its too long arms, black leathery skin covered its hands and face and two all too human-like eyes stared back at Eiso.

"Only the kami know," Eiso muttered, "the hour grows late. We must press on and find somewhere to moor our boats before this swamp turns to night."

As the boats neared the creature it swung away through the branches, moving as freely as Eiso would aboard the deck of *The Wave's Blade*.

Day turned to twilight and twilight turned to night. The sun sank behind the mists surrounding the island. An angry red spot staring at them from below the canopy cover, bathing them in a sakura light before turning dark. In the distance balls of light illuminated the darkness.

"A settlement?" Eiso said under his breath before announcing, "We head towards those lights."

Onibi, balls of fire floated above the swamp, leading the Mantis to an island clearing. A void in the trees opening to the endless night sky.

"We will make camp here and continue on in the morning," Eiso said, mooring the boat to land.

"Are you certain?" Yuta asked, "this place feels unnaturally calm, as if a storm were about to hit."

"We have little choice. It is late and we have not seen suitable land since entering this swamp. I, for one, do not wish to sleep in these boats."

"Very well," Yuta conceded. She didn't want to sleep in a tsuchibune either.

The ground was covered in soft short grass and the Mantis fell asleep. The moon was making its slow descent from the sky when Eiso awoke. It was not uncommon for him to rise from slumber at the odd hours of night. The

onibi were gone and the only light came from the moon and stars above. He began to walk along the mound staying within sight of the sleeping Mantis. About twenty-five paces away he discovered an opening in the earth, leading underground. The steps were carved of stone, the edges curving as if tread upon by many feet. Eiso felt drawn to these steps. Waves of an unknown, unspeakable force urged him onward. Its singular intent to pull him within the earth. His feet moved on their own and he descended into the hideous darkness.

As Eiso went further into the accursed darkness his eyes adjusted to the pale green glow of the bioluminescent mushrooms growing out off the antiquarian walls. The edges of the walls seemed to slip from Eiso's eyes. He could not focus on any one area for long, becoming lightheaded and faint.

"What makes you content?" A multitude of voices echoed.

Who's voice is that?

"Being secure, safe. For me, my sister, and my crew," Eiso's voice sounded distorted in his own ears.

Why am I responding?

"Who or what am I speaking with?" Eiso's question went unanswered.

The walls narrowed and the roof lowered at an almost imperceptible rate until Eiso's top knot brushed the ceiling.

"What do you mean by 'secure' and 'safe'?" The voices sang in a cacophony of disharmony.

"I would have the power to stop those who would infringe upon us. To have the respect of others throughout Rokugan. To have the wealth that can buy that respect or create the fear that demands it." Eiso didn't know why he was speaking, the words just poured out of his mouth unbidden.

The hallway opened up into a cavernous chamber lined with grotesque anthropomorphic terracotta statues. Their arms writhing in agony and ecstasy. Rivulets of water ran down the walls and coallesed in a small puddle at the room's center.

"Are you content now?" The voices seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

"No," he admitted, "we are not respected by the other Clans. They see us as lesser than. They didn't invite us to this island so we followed them in and will claim our riches here."

"Would that make you content?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then claim your contentment."

Eiso's eyes continued to adjust to the darkness, he could make out an alcove on the other side of the room. Within rested a delicate white flower with a broad green leaf, the lily of the valley. How had this flower survived living in the darkness? What eldritch thing had tended to its care?

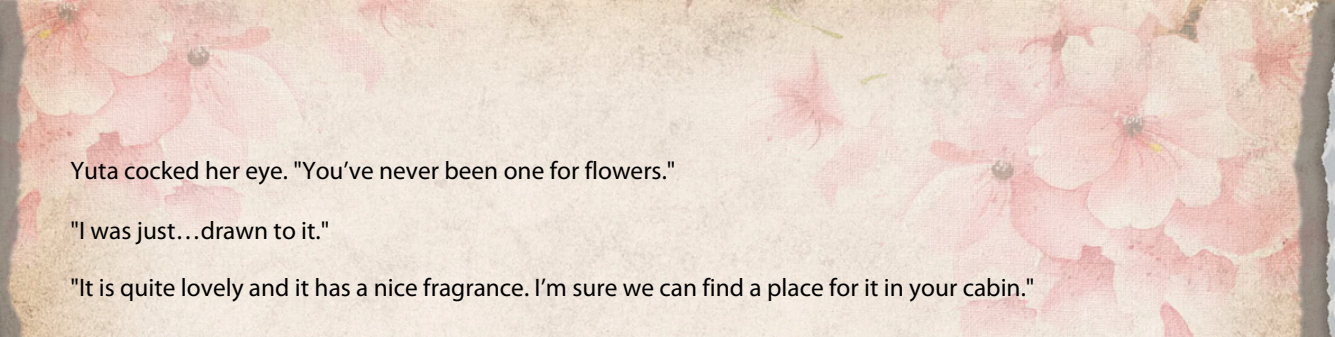
Eiso splashed through the room, entranced by the flower. The delicate white petals were soft to the touch and its aroma was heavenly as if from Tengoku. It filled his nose and soothed him. Never had he smelled something like this before. Around the base of the flower lay numerous, bright red seed pods. Eiso scooped these up and placed them into a pouch. He then dug his fingers into the loamy soil and lifted the lily in his hands.

"Brother?" Yuta called.

Eiso found himself atop the island in the swamp. A passionate red sunrise flooded the sky. He turned around to face his sister. "Yes?"

"What are you doing away from camp and what is that?"

Eiso looked down to see his dirt covered hands holding a lily of the valley. "Just a flower I found."



Yuta cocked her eye. "You've never been one for flowers."

"I was just...drawn to it."

"It is quite lovely and it has a nice fragrance. I'm sure we can find a place for it in your cabin."

"Yes...in my cabin," Eiso stammered.

"Are you alright?"

"It's nothing. I just feel...content."

