The sun was fading in an orange red glow behind the trees. Their blackened spears shot into the blood sky, impaling it mercilessly. The celestial body, as if responding to the assault radiated mercilessly, as if attempting to, in its last hours, even seconds of existence, drown the trees for their affront in a hazy putrid heat.

Not a blade of grass nor animal could escape the orb's radiance, and it was as if in disappearing below the horizon, the body were crushing the earth with its decline rather than passing it by. The weight was palpable. No creature stirred. They knew to wait out the long struggle and that behind its oppressive throes was the sweet embrace of the death night, for only then, when the final bout has ceased, and the pines had tasted their kill would the cool winds come back to the land.

Yet amid this sweltering existence, there was movement. The creatures of the place seemed to know better than to move in the heat, but that intelligence seemed to be lost upon the human inhabitants. For their own reasons they dared to move in the death of the sun, and paid the price for it. Sweat ran rivulets down lacquered armor, padding soaked with a days worth of work.

And one in particular defied the heat, his dark form moving furtively from tree to tree. No sound came from his footsteps, nor did he even so much as breath heavily. He was as the shadows and the dark, and like the trees, all that stood in the way of blessed death was the sun.

The figure looked upwards. Before him lay the walls of the outer courtyard, all manned even in the heat. They had not seen him yet. And they never would.

Training, temple doctrine and even common sense dictated that a proper attack on the walls should wait for dark. But the figure was not motivated training, and he had not been sent on this mission by his temple. And any common sense that he once exhibited was so far buried under another emotion, that it might not have even existed at all.

A hand tightened around a knife, and clutched it till the blackened veins in his arm ran in crazed patterns, the white of the fingers at contrast with the darkness in the figure.

In his other hand he held a small blackened hook attached to a silken rope, carefully braided by his own hand.

From behind the tree his arm flashed, and the small hook at once was airborne, a speck of dark against the sun. It arced high, impossibly high into the air, mocking the oppressive heat with its weightlessness, before coming to a rest on the tall walls.

The figure in the trees waited for the guards to notice the sound of the impact against the background silence of the forest, but after a moment of quiet, he became convinced that they had not seen nor heard it.

Emboldened, and having executed the most important and riskiest part of his plan, his mind allowed itself to sink deeper into the hollow recesses which had forced its body here in the first place, namely, hatred.

A person seeing upon seeings the man's face at this very moment would no doubt, in his own heart feel a sudden and almost animalistic fear, for the eyes and facial expression of the figure were gruesome and evil. Lines ran in poisonous creases out from his eyes and mouth forming a grotesque mask full of torment and rage.

In the moment before the figure cut down this unfortunate hypothetical observer, the observer would note, as his life blood ran before him, that in fact the face of the figure was not of a man at all, and it would then, with ease, have explained how the figure had cut his path through the desert beyond the mountain, through the forgotten back passes of the mountain and through the forest with nothing but a hook, a knife and a small empty jar attached to his waist. For although such a feat, without water, without food and in the murderous heat of the dying sun was clearly impossible, such an observer would see at once how suddenly, and clearly, all the above tasks were not only possible but trivial for the figure. The face of the man was not of a man, but of a demon.

A shadow demon. A creature of the blackest night, a thing which should not, could not, exist in the light.

Yet here it was.

The figure pulled the rope taut and felt the small hook find purchase against the edge of the wall.

Half of the figure's face betrayed its inner form and twitched as hideously strong arms clenched the rope. The twitch ran across the twisted face, perverting it even further. The figure let out a small growl through blood stained teeth as enormous pain spiked through his body, even as he climbed the rope, feet walking slowly up the wall.

The twitch on the face took hold, and would not let go, and after a moment, after the figure had all but submitted the edge of the wall, it froze horribly into a half formed grin.

Atop the wall, the figure slithered slowly. It extended one foot furtively towards the nearest guard, ready, at any second to contort its body in the desired pose to send the razor sharp and poisoned knife into the guards throat.

But the heat of the afternoon had taken its toll on even the normally admirable discipline of the guards, for as the figure stalked towards its unknowing opponent, the guard let out a small sound.

The figure had to clutch his mouth, for the grotesque smile threatened to spread, trembling, like a cancer across its visage.

The guard was asleep.

Where had this demon sprung forth? The hatred in the man was an all engulfing torrent, an unstoppable force which smashed its way through the years of culture and training that the man had accrued.

A fateful day; was late last month when he had arrived back to his ancestral home after yet crushing diplomatic encounter with the Grand Visage. His mood was the lowest in a time, the longest he could remember. Month after month had shown itself to be an exercise in frustration. He had been humbled and degraded, far past the point where even his honor had allowed.

His family was not the wealthiest. It was not the most prestigious. It did not have the most trained soldiers. In fact because the last of funds, it had precious few men at all, barely a handful of guards. But it was old, and no upstart family, no matter how wealthy, could take that prestige from him.

Or at least so he had thought. Before his father had died, the old man had, through a master stroke of negotiation, subtle diplomacy, and possibly intimidation, secured the hand of the daughter of the highest caliber for his son.

Even now his shame at failing his father cut through him like a red hot knife. To imagine the fury his father would have expressed at finding another man in his own bed, made from his own hands.

To be sure, the event was a momentous and irrevocable change in his life. From that point he had known no rest. Where once sorrowful miserable nights spent moaning the loss of his fortune and power, the quiet of the time under the moon had been poured into plots and preparation. Knifes were tested, techniques were honed, equipment was gathered. There could be only one outcome, ramifications be damned. By the time the sun rose again, that other bastard upstart's head would be strewn longwise on the cold bloody floor. Beyond that, he had no sight or thought.

And with these poisonous thoughts in mind, he advanced on the poor sleeping guard.

As quick as a fox, his hand shot out, seeking that ki point right below the nape of the neck. The guard had no gorget, and the secret technique passed down through his family performed admirably.

There was a sudden rush of air from the guard's shocked lungs and the body collapsed to the floor of the wall. He did not spend time to determine whether or not the man was still alive. The final political ramifications of this night would be unbelievably destructive, so the life of one guard was nothing.

In fact, this thought was somewhat freeing.

The second guard possessed a much heightened intuition and had the misfortune of turning around. Yet the normal events which he was expecting, and the training which had proceeded his taking this job would not have come close to matching the training and fury of the thing rushing towards him.

A subtle twisting of the wrist freed the small grapple from its resting place on the wall, and the silver chain which he had wrought himself in his great uncle's forge sprung forward like a snake striking. It lashed itself around the hapless soldier before he could even yelp in surprise. His eyes bulged in his face as the demon wrapped one inexorable hand around the chain. Silently they pleaded with it. Silently they wailed in sorrow for mercy. Yet none was forthcoming.

A muscled hand gripped the chain tightly and jerked violently. The guard lost his balance and fell forward. Yet as he fell, a hand shot out, catching him with incredible force in the front of his neck. The guard let out a surprised cough, wet with spittle.

The demon took half a second to pull the chain one last time. He let it fall from his hand and almost stopped a second, staring at the screaming eyes of the man before him, as if in puzzlement.

But deep within the body of the demon, the hatred stirred again unbidden and with a soft clink, the chain collapsed to the ground.

He leapt down from his petch atop the wall and rolled along the crisscrossed wood and dirt floor of the inner fort. None of the other guards had seen him, and although the fort itself was not that large, it was likely by the time they discovered the fate of their friends, it would be too late.

He peered around the courtyard. His hatred had allowed him less time to plan than he would have liked, and although he had studied the interior of the fort, now in the moment of things, with his eyes running red with blood, either his or his enemies, he could not, at this second understand the direction towards which to channel his rage.

While in this state, a shrine appeared in his peripheral vision. In a fleeting moment he glanced to this side.

It was built into the wall of the fort, most likely for good luck. Curles of gold rand around a tall mirror of incredible value made out of some polished metal. At the bottom of this was a bowl or offerings, fill to the overflowing with trinkets, flowers and boubles. It was a shrine to a family god. A peace god by the look of it.

A sudden and unstoppable surge of violence over came him. A hand shot out and nails raked themselves onto the silvered material of the mirror. Somehow, blackened clawmarks appeared where his attack had landed.

He stared at the mirror, his stare narrowing as the blood red film made its way more and more over his eyesight.

Cracks appeared at the corners of the etched marks, blackness working its way within the shrine mirror.

A word came to his mind, a foul thing which no voice had ever uttered to him, yet unbidden it came, as if by its own volition to his tongue.

It leaped, or perhaps… oozed from his mouth. For a moment it hung invisably in the air in front of him, heavy and evil.

Then, directed with his rage, issued forth and hit the mirror.

The shrine shuddered and vibrated once, then with a resounding crack, tore completely asunder. The silver shards of the mirror flew into the air, the offerings erupted into vile black flame, melting into sludge and a soot appeared on the rest of the wall and into the air around the former shrine, muffling the sound of the shattering. Shadows covered the wall as the sun continued to set.

Not even sure what had just happened, he spat on the ground and turned his head towards what he now had remembered to be the main household. He had one goal.

He stole across the courtyard, slipping from shadow to shadow, keeping an eye on the remaining guards.

He waited for the last two, which were walking back and forth atop the left had section of the wall to begin their trek away from him, before he stole forwards towards the side door.

Small metal tools leaped to his hands; tools which in the past years he would have discarded as the filthy accoutrements of a theif. Yet now, they might serve his purpose.

However, as his hands went to explore the lock governing the side door, he found he could not steady them. They shook so with anger, that he could not set the tools in their proper place.

To have gotten so far yet be stopped by a pathetic door? Unthinkable! He swore and slammed his fist into the wood of the portal. It exploded into splinters.

He looked down at his bloody hand, veins running mad across it. The smile from before made its way to his face and he tore out the mechanism. Such a thing was fitting, his revenge had really never meant to be a stealthy affair. There would be no escaping the judgement of his final actions, so what purpose was their to his his traces?

A voice called out wondering what the distrubance was. The face of a house guard came into view.

His hand shot out and he pulled the man close, straight off the guard's feet.

“Silence” he growled into the man's face, the first words he had uttered in a month.

The man squirmed in terror, apparently seeing something terrible in the eyes or face in front of him.

He clenched his fist closed and held until the man slipped into unconsciousness. Or perhaps he had held to long, changing the sleep into a more final one, he could not tell. He let the man slip to the ground and looked up at the hallway.

Choosing his way carefully, he made his way to the site of his vengence, the bedroom of the upstart. As he approached, he became more and more certain of his actions, so that, when he planted a foot into the door, splitting it open with a sudden crash, he could not have cared less.

His former wife looked up in terror at him. The upstart also got to his feet. His former wife searched quickly for clothing.

“What is the meaning of this Akiyama?” She cried. Yet her surprise quickly turned into fear. “W-why are you covered with blood?”

The upstart regained his composure and slipped a hand behind the bed, pulling towards him a weapon.

“So you've finally lost it have you? The disgrace of the century, the untold shame you have brought upon your family; you realize that this unlawful entry, and attack on my guards will only make matters worse for you? You've dug your own grave Akiyama. Its no surprise Usami chose...”

He leapt for the man.

“Ah!” The upstart said, quickly drawing his blade. A fist slammed its way into his face, sending him reeling backwards, blood running from his face. Yet in his stagger, he lashed out his sword, forcing Akiyama backwards.

Usami screamed despite herself. “Stop this Akiyama!”

He turned one blood shot eye in her direction and gave a stare so venomous she silenced, understanding now what a monster he had become.

Yet there was no regret in her eyes, none that Akiyama could see. He launched himself towards the other man once again.

The lord grinned and slashed out with his sword. Yet he had not been prepared, and had not understood the hatred that burned in Akiyama's heart. All his life, the lord had dealt in the world of diplomacy, words, and the art of concealed violence. Therefore, as the man rushed towards him yet again, it was with horror that he realized that the demon before him was not expecting to truly win. He wasn't sane. He wasn't making rationale decisions like so many of the other foes the lord had fought. Akiyama was not planning on making it of the fort alive.

Sword cut true across the demon's chest, but propelled with anger he smashed into the younger lord, and tackled him into the floor, smashing his head against the corner of the bed.

“Wait, I can explain!” He cried, suddenly understanding how precarious his position was. “You can have Usami!”

Akiyama reached out with his blackened fingers, and gripped the side of the other man's face.

“No!” Usami screamed.

Faintly, as if from very far away, more of an intuition than a true worry, the demon felt a burning sensation in his back. He continued his attack, forcing his fingers into the eyesockets of the other man until the deed was done.

Only then did he come to realize what Usami had done to him.

“You seek to kill me?” He growled, feeling the blade cut into him once more. He went to rise, but the anger was flowing out of him. His task had been completed. His goal was achieved. His pact was complete. And he had been stabbed several times in the back with a dagger.

He faltered as he rose, but managed to do so.

But now it was his turn for shock.

“That… that is the knife I once gave you… on top of the hill overlooking our house. It was supposed to keep you safe...”

Usami backed up in horror, perhaps realizing herself what she had done.

The anger flowed out of his eyes and was slowly replaced by sadness, the sadness and regret of a man who has not long for this world.

“The blossoms were so pretty in your hair… why Usami?” he staggered forward, then faltered once again.

“I-” She tried to justify her actions, but no words came to her at the moment.

Akiyama's leg gave away from him and he fell to his knees, the light running from his eyes. From his back, dark blood covered the floor. He then toppled forward

“Oh gods. What have I done?” She said, her confidence faltering. She took a step forward. The Lord was likely dead, but it was possible that Akiyama was still alive.

She knelt beside his body feeling for a pulse. It might still be possible to recover something here, and if not, she would have to act quickly. With enough cunning and persuasion, both houses might yet be hers.

She reached forward to touch Akiyama's neck.

Quicker than was possible, a hand shot forward, twisted the wrong way around in its shoulder and grabbed her hand before she could react.

“We're almost done here.” A voice said from Akiyama's mouth.

“The shrine is gone; murder has been committed in the center of the compound, the pact has been fulfilled. There is only one last thing missing.”

Usami tried to wrench free from the grasp, but the hand clung on with otherworldy strength.

Struggling, she tried to reach at her dagger.

“That thing won't help you. Whatever power it once had had been destroyed forever by your own actions. See?”

The corpse head twisted on its neck and stared with dead eyes at the weapon. A darkness passed in the room and the silver knife burst into flame until it was scarred black.

“P-perhaps we can reach some sort of agreement.” She said, fear rattling her teeth, staring in horror at the dead arm still gripping her.

The dead head rotated upwards until it could stare at her with unblinking eyes.

“And what are the terms of the deal?” It asked her in a strange echoing voice, which disturbingly sounded somewhat like her late husbands.

She thought about her own position carefully before speaking.

“That these two houses be joined.” A child born to the Noble in their indiscretions would have a hard time with the other holders of the household, but if one existed, because no other heir existed, the Grand Visage would be held by law. And in addition, and more importantly, because she would be the one to birth that child, the demon would have no choice but to let her free.

It was the perfect ending to her work. The child would be young for many years and who better than her to be regent?

The demon let out a grating, laugh.

“Agreed. The houses will be combined.”

“And in return?” She asked, with a hint of fear in her voice.

“With that request, both sides of the deal will be. Your goal seems to help my own.”

Usami knew better, but rattled by such violence, shaken from what had been just moments before a peaceful evening, and confronted by the possibility of everything she had ever dreamed of being handed to her, she did not think of how strange such a statement was.

“Agreed.” She said.

The hand let free its grasp and presented itself to her to shake.

She did in spite of her misgivings.

“Perfect.” It said. “Now join your lovely husband here.”

A surprised yelp came from her mouth as the blackened knife stabbed her in the back.

“What?” She cried out, blood leaking from her mouth. “You have violated the terms!” She spat a the demon, life drain from her quickly.

“Oh, Usami, did you really think you were the only maiden that the Lord approached with his lust? Things will be much easier with you gone. Plus, you've provided that last thing I needed, the blood of a maiden fair.”

It chuckled as she fell to the ground.

The guards burst into the room a moment later, only to find all three dead, and although the house guards were veterans of many wars, and had seen much death in their time, they could not shake the feeling of horrible wrongness in the room.