

The other side of the coin

As the day dawned, the sun's rays illuminated and warmed the valley. Despite what the world had endured, it was an idyllic scene. Birds chirped on the trees and the grass bent as the spring wind blew. A river ran through the woods, ending up in a small but suggestively beautiful waterfall. No human being was around, as if the place was part of a primeval, natural paradise forbidden to mankind.

The flow under the waterfall became irregular as a woman emerged from the water. Her beauty was breathtaking: she wore no clothes at all and the light warmed her finely chiseled body, still covered with little water drops. Her brown hair was long enough to cover her back completely, and made her resemble a modern day nymph. However, her face irradiated a distinct aura of evilness, and a glance at her yellow, cat-like eyes would show a murderous intelligence.

The woman glanced at her reflection in the water, satisfied. Once she had been known as Yumiko Hasegawa, but that name was only part of relics of a forgotten past. Since then she had elevated herself from humanity into a new level of power and consciousness. Now she was truly *free*... and able to satisfy her killing instinct whenever she wanted. She did not have any need to do so, because she did not suffer from hunger and thirst, but she *enjoyed* it.

However, she was getting bored of the place she had been roaming for the past eight months. People avoided the areas when she had been sighted, so hunting prey was getting increasingly difficult. Perhaps she should have moved westward...

Thought became action as Yumiko ran into the woods and disappeared.

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Three days later, Yumiko walked inside an anonymous and nearly deserted forest. Aside the trees themselves, life had disappeared completely. The ground looked charred and sterile, and most leaves were already brown despite the season. No birds flew from the branches, no animals walked on the ground, not even insects flew around. There was just an eerie silence.

Yumiko knew the reason, as she overheard some conversations from her victims. There had been strange happenings in the area and everyone was fleeing

from there, talking about "monsters" and creatures not from this world. She found the thought thrilling, as that would mean even bigger prey to catch.

She jumped on a tree and gave a look at the surroundings. There was a large clearing ahead of her, and a village stood in the middle. Or, better, what had been once a village. The houses were burnt and charred, and many of them did not have roofs anymore. The windows were broken, and the ground was littered with many abandoned household items. Despite all the ruin and the signs of blood and violence over the buildings, there were no corpses. The crows had already flown away, disappointed.

Is this... civilization? Yumiko thought with a note of disgust. *It was born out of nothing and will return to nothingness.*

As she got nearer, she noticed traces of recent human passage: a ragged knapsack lay on the ground next to a derelict house, and she could sense the familiar scent of human food coming from it. Focusing her view, she also noticed a rudimentary trap next to it, which would have shot a can full of nails and scrap metal at anyone who would have picked the backpack up.

Yumiko smiled. It was definitely getting interesting. Surely who had placed the bait would come back to check on it... and that would be a perfect opportunity for her! She set herself on a roof of a neighboring building and waited patiently.

It was only when the sun set that she became aware of another lifeform in the area. She glanced down in the street and noticed a man, probably on his twenties, meddling with the trap. Judging from his exclamations, he was clearly disappointed. He was trying to move around as quietly as possible, but he could not hide from the woman's supernatural senses.

Yumiko stood up and suddenly the man looked in her direction. Had he discovered her presence? The suspicion became certainty as he pointed a double-barrelled shotgun and fired, grazing Yumiko on the left arm. Blood flowed out, but in a matter of seconds the wound closed.

Finally someone more challenging than those weaklings! she thought as she jumped off the building, landing in front of the man.

There was a movement in the air, and Yumiko punched forward, smashing a small object that had been thrown at her into pieces. A second later she had to cover her eyes as lightning arched around her.

What is going on?

"I see through your facade, creature!" the man exclaimed. "I know you are not from this world, and that's why I used my Seal of Command. You are under my power now."

In the darkness, he could not see Yumiko smile. That spell had had no effect

on her at all, but she decided to play along: it would make the kill far more entertaining. Now that she was close, she could see that the person before her was probably not much more than eighteen years old, and was dressed with sturdy but disreputable clothes which resembled a worker's attire. His hair was brown, but unkempt and was long up to his shoulders. His two green eyes showed strong determination. Along with his shotgun, he carried many other strange items related to the occult.

"Let's see who we have here..." the man said as he pointed his flashlight towards Yumiko.

A second later, he immediately moved the beam away from her. "I didn't expect to see something like *this*."

"Am I really that frightening?" Yumiko asked sarcastically. "I thought I was attractive for your kind..."

"Are you a creature from the forest?"

Yumiko shrugged. "So what if I am?"

"You aren't a common being, not even a common supernatural being. All the seals I put around the forest burnt when you passed through them. Unfortunately for you, I had my Seal of Command. Now that you're under my power, you could help me."

"Be wary of playing with the scorpion, because it might sting you."

"My spell has bound you to my will. You can't escape unless I say to."

How arrogant, Yumiko thought. I could kill him straight away, but I'm curious...

"What do I have to do?" she said.

"I am the son of a German clergyman. My father had a church in a village not far from here. He was scrupulous and rigorous, but people called him 'fanatic' and even the higher authorities looked at him in suspect. About two years ago an American man came to his place... I don't remember his name clearly, it was something like 'Mas'... but it doesn't matter. He offered a deal to my father... to be the bearer of a new order in the world, after cleansing it from the sinners.

My father accepted, and he gained a great, non natural power. However the American man did not trust him fully, and planted a seed of something inside his body. It was a guardian spirit, to make sure he did not stray from the objective, or claim that power as his own.

Eight months ago my father had a sudden epileptic seizure, then the other creature inside him became insane and controlled him completely. He killed everyone in our village, and even people from nearby settlements. Only I escaped, because I had joined the Militia of the Light, which helped me. But I want to stop him.

Soon people will return to their homes, and they will be in danger. With your aid, this goal will be possible at last! Once I have done that, the Militia will make its first step to bring order in this chaotic world..."

The man had a strange light in his eyes as he told Yumiko everything about the Militia. The woman found the situation highly ironic: he wanted to save his father from the products of his fanaticism, but he wasn't any better himself.

"And so we will set off immediately," he concluded. "My name is Jon. What is yours, spirit?"

Yumiko gave him a cold stare. "Death is what people call me."

She savored the moment when she would take his life. However, she had to wait... perhaps she would find more to slay.

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Yumiko and Jon arrived at their destination the following morning. The journey proved to be hard, as the place was infested with hideous and vile creatures. Jon had quite an arsenal of weapons and spells, but many times he would have died, if it had not been for the woman. No one of opponents had been a match for her. Thus, the belief he had her in his power strengthened.

The man's village had been almost razed to the ground: broken and burnt wooden planks were often the only remains of the houses. Only two churches were still standing, apparently unscathed by the catastrophe that had affected the place. The terrain was dry and sterile, completely devoid of life. Not even grass had grown.

Despite the hard look on his face, Jon let a remark slip. "How terrible..."

"Terrible?" Yumiko sneered. "I find it wonderful."

"Silence, spirit! You don't want me to destroy you, do you?"

She did not answer and the two resumed their walk, headed for the biggest of the two churches.

"It's deconsecrated," Jon explained. "And that's where my father usually stays."

He had just completed the sentence when a freezing, hair-raising shriek pierced the silence.

Yumiko smiled. "It's coming, I can sense it."

A man appeared on the doorstep of the church. He was on his sixties, almost bald and with a short white beard. He was bare-chested, with signs of wrinkling and decay showing over his excessively thin body. His hands were contorted in agony and his eyes were completely black. However, the attention of the two was immediately directed at what was on his back: a creature similar to a malformed

baby, who lashed at the air with misshapen appendages resembling the legs of a spider.

"Father..." Jon muttered.

"You sinners!" the other man shouted, foaming at his mouth. "You will be purified now!"

In response to his words, the ground next to him shook and broke as something emerged from below. It was a being made out of stone, tall as the church itself. His limbs were roughly shaped, as if he were a model for an unfinished sculpture. He had no face or head. As soon as the colossus rose completely from the ground, Yumiko jumped at him, leaving Jon in front of his father.

"Daniel, it's going to end here." Jon declared.

"Foolish sinner!" the man replied. "Hell awaits you!"

The creature on Daniel's back pointed its limbs in Jon's direction, and they shot out like needles. The boy rolled sideways, but one of the appendages grazed his left side. Suppressing a scream of pain, he got on his feet after placing a smooth, discoidal item on the ground.

"Light is on my side! I cannot lose!" Jon said as he rose his shotgun and fired.

Daniel was hit in the chest but he did not even flinch. Instead he swung his hand in the air, and a strong shockwave hit his son, throwing him several meters away. Jon struggled to get up: from the pain he felt while breathing, he probably had one or two broken ribs. However, he was still clear headed. Unnoticed, he dropped another object next to him.

"Die now." Daniel whispered as he strode towards him.

Suddenly, a victorious smile appeared on the boy's face. "I have been waiting for this moment for a long time..."

As soon as Daniel found himself between the two discs, he found himself unable to advance further. He tried several times, but despite his strength and the aid of his unearthly companion he was unable to break the invisible chains that held him. He cried in frustration, incapable of understanding what had happened.

"You are inside the Cage of Confinement, evil spirit." Jon continued, pointing at the creature on his father's back. "I must say it was easier than I thought. Now, it's time for you to leave this world!"

He slammed his palms together and the monster screamed as it began to shrink and wizen while Daniel stood still like a lifeless statue. With a sound of lacerated skin, the abomination detached from the man and tried to crawl away, but its flight was short lived: Jon's right foot landed on its limbs, crushing them. The creature let out a cry of desperation and terror.

There was no compassion in Jon's voice. "No mercy for evil."

He fired at point blank range, tearing the monster apart. Just as its screams faded away, the colossus disappeared.

A moment later Daniel staggered and shook his head as if he had woken up from a long sleep.

"What has happened?" he muttered.

Jon ran to him. "It's over, Father. "

"Jon?"

"Yes, it's me, Father. I freed you from the evil spirit. Thanks to the Militia of the Light I found a way to kill it without harming you."

"Militia of the Light? What did you do..."

Jon was beaming with joy. "I joined them, Father. They are our allies! We can really cleanse the world... not with the tricks of the demons of the abyss, but with our own radiant power!"

"No..." Daniel looked at his son disapprovingly. "I've been a fool..."

Blood spurted out of his mouth as an arm covered with grey fur pierced his chest from side to side. Without even realizing what had happened, he fell into the darkness of death.

Jon trembled, paralyzed by horror. What had just happened?

He then noticed that someone was in front of him: a creature that was a mixture of a man and a wolf. Without a sound, the werewolf's shape changed into the one of Yumiko. Jon stared at her in disbelief.

"Indeed, he was a fool, like you." Yumiko commented coldly. "I told you: be wary of playing with the scorpion, because it might sting you."

The boy's face grimaced in anger. "You did this... I will destroy you!"

Jon pulled out a wooden tablet from one of his pockets and threw into the air as he shouted a curse in an ancient, depraved language. Dark clouds covered the sky and lightning shot from above, engulfing the figure of Yumiko. But when the light faded away, she was still there.

He took a step back. "What the..."

Yumiko broke into laughter. "I thought you had realized it by now. With your stupid and limited knowledge of the Planes, there is no way you could restrain me."

"You... tricked me!"

"Yes. I just wanted to kill more people. You thought you could control a being far superior to you: it's time for you to see the other side of the coin!"

Jon rose his shotgun, but Yumiko moved with inhuman speed and jumped on him before he could fire, breaking his left arm with a single blow of her elbow.

Her teeth dug into the man's right shoulder, making him scream in pain. Then, she kicked him away.

"Suffer, suffer!" she exclaimed. "It will be more pleasant for me when I will end your life."

"I will not let you get what you want." Jon muttered as he tried to stand up. "I will not die like a dog... I am a soldier of the Militia of the Light."

Yumiko's right arm grew and fur covered it completely. "Oh, you want to be stoical? It won't change anything."

Jon gave her a cold stare as she brought her arm down on him. Just a fraction of a second before it hit him, his face turned into a mask of terror as he let out a last, desperate cry for life.

* * *

Nice.

Yumiko looked at her own bloodstained hands, satisfied. It had been a great hunt. At her feet, all that was left of Jon was a reddish pulp.

She was about to walk away when she realized her cheeks were wet, but it did not feel like blood to the touch. What could it be? She had noticed a broken mirror inside the church: moved by curiosity, she hurried there and gazed at her own reflection. Outside, thunder rolled around and rain started to fall.

Yumiko's amazement was great. She was *crying*! But why? It wasn't the first time she had killed someone in cold blood. She felt no remorse at all, but then, why was her body reacting like that? A sudden, unexplainable anger got hold of her and she ran around breaking everything she could find. Then she headed for the woods, intent on killing everyone on her path.

That night many people died. She rejoiced, but the anguish of that face did not leave her mind.

