

## 181 – Silver Soul

I felt groggy and sore, when I woke up. I was lying on my back in a leaning chair at the beach and my friends were nearby, with an inactive Jules parked by my side. My robe-coat, bags, and such lay next to the wooden Knight, but my Singing Branch was nowhere to be seen.

Waves lapped against the shore and white sand dotted with palm trees along the banks filled my view. The sky above was a perfect blue and the sun was warm.

*This is surreal...*

With a groan, I pulled myself upright.

Armen immediately came over, his dark armour gone and his grey-skinned body wearing...

“Is this what the afterlife looks like?” I asked him. “A beach party?”

He was not happy about wearing simple linen shorts. **“The Dullahan changed everything again. I do not understand why she took my equipment away and gave me *this*.”**

I looked around. I hadn’t even realised this was the interior of her carriage until he said so. There were random ‘windows’ hovering in the air on the border of the beach area that showed the outside, as well as a door just standing impossibly atop the sand between two palm trees.

Renji was wearing shorts as well, with his muscular body on full display, and stood next to one of the tall trees. Nearby, Elye and Emily were playing with the sand closer to the shore, both wearing summer dresses, blue and white respectively. By the water, Ludwig’s Succubus was splashing around like a kid, while he was buried in the sand a few metres away, with only his face poking out. But the Dullahan was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is she?” I asked, noticing that I was also wearing shorts, for some reason. They were blue with dozens of prints of a monkey holding a surfboard on them.

**“Driving. She seems disinclined to talk, but she helped carry you back after your spell succeeded.”**

I blinked, taking a second to comprehend his words.

Then I spun around to look at the figure that I’d completely overlooked. Next to Renji stood a woman in a yellow summer dress. A woman who was at once familiar to me, but also not.

Silky and glossy black hair, a prominent jawline, a narrow and pointed chin, soft apple cheeks, a mole under her left ear... but not *everything* was as it had been. Her ears were longer and pointed, and from her brow grew three small horns like an antler tiara. The eyes that’d once been dark-brown

and shone with the luring warmth of amber when sunlight hit them; they were now mercurial ponds surrounding a black pupil.

She noticed me looking at her and, at Renji’s urging, approached me carefully.

Then I realised that her aura was of a kind I had never seen before: bluish-silver.

“Kumi?” I asked, trying to stand.

**“I have mended your broken bones, but you yet require more healing,”** Armen advised.

I ignored him and pushed through the pain, managing to stand up, though I had to anchor my bare feet in the sand to avoid falling.

“Why do you look like *that*?” I asked her.

“I thought you would know,” she said. Her voice washed over me. It was the same voice that I’d known from high school, but it was more mature. Within it were a mix of apprehension, dread, exhaustion, and confusion, but also kindness and familiarity.

“I’m not really sure what happened,” I admitted. “I brought all the fragments together into my staff and then used a new ability of mine on it, hoping it would recombine them into... *you*.”

“Is it true that my soul changed?” she asked. “The Incarnate said that my aura is silver. None of the others have Spirit Sight so they can’t tell and I can’t observe my own.”

“It’s more like blue-ish silver.”

She reached up for the horns emerging from her brow, then touched her ears. “They say I’m like an Elfin now as well. Even my teeth have changed.”

I suddenly lost the strength to stand and began falling backwards, until Armen caught me.

“Thank you,” I told him, as he lowered me to sit on the armrest of the leaning chair.

Wracking my brain, I came up with the best possible guess I could manage.

“It’s possible that, since your soul was within the Singing Branch, the staff’s nature altered the outcome. I’m guessing the staff disappeared with your arrival, since I don’t see it amongst my belongings.”

**“It is indeed gone,”** Armen confirmed.

“A Singing Branch? I have heard of them, but how did you come to possess one?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We aren’t in a hurry, I don’t think,” she said, sitting down on the sand in front of me.

I swallowed.

“Are you really okay?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. It feels as though I was asleep for so long, moving between nostalgic dreams and ruinous nightmares. You gave me a second chance to be human.”

She prodded her horns. “Or well, an approximation of ‘human’.”

“I had to tie your life to my own, else Saoirse wouldn’t let go of her desire to deliver your Promised Death,” I told her, apologetically.

“I’m surprised she showed you such leniency, especially concerning me. I cheated her once after all.”

In truth, I was also surprised that Saoirse hadn’t just dealt with Kumi while I was knocked out. It was possible that she either respected our deals more than I thought, or that she somehow, despite it all, didn’t resent Kumi.

“One of the fragments told me how you did it,” I admitted. “You promised to be her friend.”

“That much wasn’t a lie, but it was more complex than that,” she replied. She seemed slightly regretful. “I had no friends. Everybody I put my trust in betrayed me. I tried to form Pacts with Demons, but even they despised me and refused my companionship...” As she said it, she was looking at Ludwig who was grumbling as Liw the Succubus splashed water in his face, his whole body still buried in the sand.

“But I learnt how to live past my due-date thanks to one of those Demons, and, as a result, the Reaper found me in the Redoubt, where I should’ve died to the hands of the Witch Hunters that stalked me.

“I managed to survive one of the Dullahan’s attacks, a feat apparently impossible, at least in her eyes, and she wanted to know how I did it, before delivering the final blow. Instead of telling her, I pleaded for her to spare me. It was really pathetic. I’m not even sure why I wanted to go on living. This world was only ever awful to me.”

I frowned. I couldn’t imagine what she’d gone through, as I’d been fortunate to have friends and familiars to support me through the hardships I’d endured.

“I promised to be her friend, if she would just give me a bit more time. Somehow, for reasons that escape me, she accepted my proposal. Before she returned for the Promised Death I was owed, I found the means to split my soul and become a Lich. Through the ritual, I gained the ability to exert my will onto reality and create walls of illusion and deception. When she came riding for me, I cowered behind these walls, but quickly learnt that she could not reach the depths of my domain.”

“I wonder why she then let you live now.”

“You tied our fates together, which means that I will perish along with you. I think she believes that I cannot escape Death this time as a result, and will live up to my promise of being her friend. Like me, the Dullahan was made friendless by the cruelty of her fate, so perhaps she thinks we share a kinship.”

“**She seems to be enjoying living amongst humans,**” Armen commented.

Kumi smiled a tiny smile. “Perhaps it is thanks to being in your company that she learnt to forgive my trespasses.”

“I don’t think we had so grand an effect on her,” I replied.

“She seems different now than back then,” she asserted.

“I guess that maybe seeing the world through a human perspective has helped,” I conceded, before switching topic, “One thing I have been wondering...”

“Yes?”

“I think your misfortune has been altered by my Reforging of your soul.”

Armen nodded. “**I believe the same,**” he said. “**Unlike with Ryūta’s old Mentor, who had the same misfortune of distrust as you, I don’t feel a sense of repulsion towards you.**”

Kumi’s expression changed into one of pain and relief, while tears welled forth in the corners of her eyes. “Are you sure? I was wondering why everyone was so nice towards me, but I thought perhaps it was the Succubus’ guile at play. If I’m...”

She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes.

“Have I become a normal person again?”

I looked at her horns and ears, as well as her mercury-silver irises. “I don’t think ‘normal human’ is apt,” I replied with a smile.

She laughed, while tears ran down her face. “I can endure some funny looks, so long as that’s all they are.”

Perhaps sensing that everything was alright, Renji, Elye, and Emily came over, and before long they were talking with Kumi in a welcoming manner. Especially the Elfin, who mistook her for one of her own kind, speaking animatedly and asking her about her favourite types of meat.

I had a brief thought that, if the Singing Branch had indeed made her into an Elfin, then I might’ve cursed her with the inability to eat anything except meat...

The carriage and the beach within its impossible space rolled towards Evergreen in no particular hurry, taking about a week for us to cross the distance that we’d covered in a single day on the way to the

Redoubt. It gave me plenty of time to recover from my injuries thanks to Armen’s healing touch, while also allowing Kumi to get used to being around people again, before entering the biggest city on the continent.

We all enjoyed our time together in the beach’s fake sunlight, playing around in the warm sand and water, and eating the meals made from whatever Elye and Emily caught in the breaks of our travel, when Saoirse brought the carriage to a halt.

After the Dullahan joined us within the beach party realm, it was revealed to us that she had dug the concept for the theme from the depths of my mind, while making a facsimile of a beach she’d seen while riding across Asra. I had to endure some guilt-tripping by Armen, who blamed me for his wardrobe circumstances and the incessant lewd remarks the Succubus made about his body, but everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Eventually, like all good things, it came to an end when we arrived by the gates of Evergreen and Saoirse promptly kicked us out of the carriage.

“I will travel on my own for a while,” she told us, before looking at Kumi and I. “Do not perish while I am gone, it would be an inconvenience.”

“When will you return?” I asked her.

“When you decide to head for the new Realm Gate on the southern continent of Crescent.”

Then she was off, with not so much as an explanation.

Ludwig cast me a glance, before saying, “I will relay the information about the Realm Gate to Mortl.” Then he left as well.

The rest of us headed for the Guild District together.

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She walked into the Guild Hall, which thronged with Otherworlders. It was not so different from when last she was here, but this time people didn’t look at her with scorn and hostility in their eyes. It was an unusual feeling to have her new horns and long ears be the object of people’s focus and fascination, but she welcomed it over the judging glares of the past.

Kumi wasn’t ready to accept people back into her life as willingly as she once would have been, though in time she might learn to open herself up more. But scars took long to heal, especially those that were left on one’s soul.

With her new acquaintances and old friends by her side, she got into the line that was queued before one of the counters in the Hall. There were not many newcomers here, which made sense,

given that most of the unregistered Otherworlders left on the continent were all the way south in Arley.

Amusingly, there were several Natives in the queue, but a couple of them looked as though they possessed a strong enough soul to be Role Assigned. In the past, such a thing had been unheard of, but perhaps times were changing.

The one who had saved her from her own prison of eternity moved into a different queue, while holding a battered-looking Quest flier for the very Haunting that she’d caused. His Guild Rank was too low to actually complete it, but he’d said it didn’t matter. He was so much different than she remembered him. He’d been such an innocent boy back then, but now he carried himself with a sense of purpose and conviction.

She wondered if he still thought about their time together, and if he still waited for the answer she had never given him.

But some things were meant to be left in the past, and they were no longer the people they had been back then. Kumi doubted she would ever know what it meant to love someone again. It was a level of trust she was certain she’d never feel comfortable with. Although she was no longer beholden to the misfortune of distrust and scorn, the scars of that time still felt fresh.

“Next!” said the female Clerk by the counter and Kumi moved forward.

As the Native who’d been in front of her moved out of the queue with a disappointed look on his face, the Guild Clerk did a double-take upon seeing Kumi’s new appearance.

“An Elfin?”

“I’m not an Elfin,” she wanted to reply, but she’d seen her own reflection in a mirror and knew that her words would hardly be convincing. Instead she said, “I’d like to perform the Role Assignment.”

The Clerk nodded wearily.

“Of course you are, you are in the Role Assignment queue after all,” Kumi figured she was probably thinking, based on the way her weak green aura moved. Still, it was better than open hostility.

“I must inform you that Natives and Elfin do not have a high success rate with the Role Assignment. If the soul-stone does not respond to your touch, it means you cannot become an Adventurer.”

“I understand,” Kumi said.

The energetic Elye grabbed her left hand and squeezed it tightly, perhaps in an attempt to reassure her. She had been clinging to Kumi a lot, perhaps thinking that their similar appearance made them

kindred. Although being touched so casually brought back uncomfortable memories, Kumi tried her best to not let it show.

“Very well,” replied the Clerk. “Name, please.”

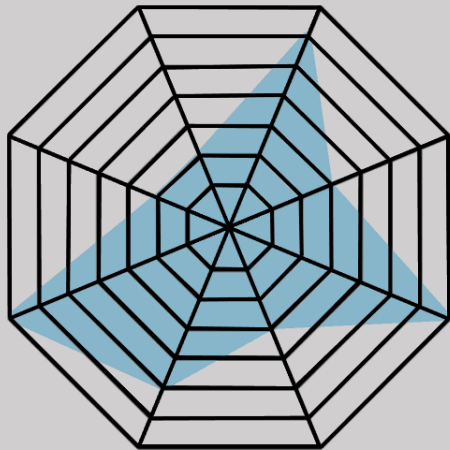
“Inoue Kumi.”

The Clerk brought out the soul-stone tablet and Kumi placed her right hand on it. It was cold, just like she remembered from the first time she did this ritual, back when she originally arrived to Mondus. It immediately began to light up with the various sigils around her hand, but the Clerk seemed confused by the results.

As it finished, she took the new Guild Card it had produced into her hand and stared at it, her confusion only growing stronger.

“Please wait here,” she told Kumi, leaving the Card on the counter behind the soul-stone tablet as she went to fetch a manager.

Kumi had just assumed that she would still be a Necromancer, even if her soul and aura had changed, but when she reached over and picked up the new Guild Card, she realised she’d been wrong.

<i>‘INOUE KUMI’</i>			
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Soul Singer</i>		<b>RANK:</b> <i>Novitiate</i>	
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Female</i>		<b>AGE:</b> <i>27</i>	
<b>ACUMEN:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>DEXTERITY:</b> <i>D</i>	<b>INTELLIGENCE:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>LUCK:</b> <i>D</i>
<b>PACT:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>SOUL:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>STRENGTH:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>VITALITY:</b> <i>E</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist V’</i> <i>‘Soul Singer I’</i> <i>‘Soul-Bound’</i>			

She had no idea what a Soul Singer was, but what surprised her most was that her Luck was no longer F-tier. She felt on the verge of crying, squeezing the Card in her hand so tightly that it might split in half.

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Renji and Emily helped clear the way out of the Guild Hall, as the announcement of Kumi’s Role, one which was entirely new to the Adventurers’ Guild and all the people within, had sparked a frenzy of interest.

I pulled her along after me, while grasping her wrist to not lose her in the crowd that threatened to overwhelm us. The Spellhand surrounded us with a barrier of air and Armen held up the rear, ready to block anyone who tried to get to us by force. He was once again wearing the black armour that Saoirse had created, which was good, since no one would’ve taken him seriously if he’d still only been wearing shorts.

When we managed to get out of the Hall, all of us ran together, with Renji and Elye laughing like mad.

“What the hell is a Soul Singer?” the Spellfist shouted, sounding ecstatic.

“I don’t know!” I yelled back to him.

I let go of Kumi’s wrist, so she could run without restraint alongside the rest of us, with Emily’s wind at our back propelling us forward helpfully.

Kumi joined in with the Elfin beside her, laughing so hard that I feared she might trip over her own feet.

Then, realising the absurdity of what had happened, I joined them as well.

I’d somehow created a new type of Exorcist through my actions and saved her from the F-tier Luck that devastated the lives of all others of her kind.

Just when I thought that I had a handle on things, this world threw a curveball unexpectedly. But somehow, all I felt in that moment was relief and joy.

For once I wasn’t dreading what the future might bring.