
A Pale Moon Reverie
KUJI FURUMIYA illustration: TERUKO ARAI


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Reverie
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A Pale Moon Reverie: Volume 1 [Complete]

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First Tale

1. Myth

Long ago, in the distant past, when the continent was ruled by a single nation, there lived a titanic snake that resided in the rocky mountains to the north.

Its body was covered in steely blue scales and was so long that it could encircle half the continent with ease. When it opened its jaws, it could have swallowed a small castle whole. When humanity came to know of the snake's existence, it was already deep in slumber. Yet, despite this, its occasional light stirrings caused terrible earthquakes which rocked towns and villages, killing a great many people.

Fearing the snake's awakening, the king of that ancient nation decreed that entry into the northern mountains was forbidden with no exceptions. But his efforts proved to be in vain, for one day, the snake woke up, ravenous with hunger. It raised its enormous head, intent on gobbling up the sun shining in the sky. The moment the king found out, he ordered his army to march north, but not a single one of their thousand swords or countless arrows could even scratch the snake's scales.

Humanity had been made to discover its own powerlessness. And so, the king turned to his final resort: the gods.

Only a single deity answered the summons. In exchange for slaying the snake, they demanded that the king provide an adequate offering.

The god's price had three parts—fine drink, music, and the warmth of human touch.

The king expressed his gratitude and delivered on his promise by building the town of Irede at the base of the northern mountains.

Even to this day, long after the time of that ancient nation, Irede prospers. It remains famous across the continent for its drink, performing arts, and holy courtesans.

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“So this is Irede...”

After having crossed the great, vermillion-lacquered bridge, the young man in traveling clothes dismounted from his horse. Before his eyes was the continent’s most storied town.

Irede had been founded at the dawn of the new era and was still deeply colored by the vestiges of mythology. Beyond its two-storied roumon gates lay a townscape of old wooden houses and streets populated by people wearing kimonos. It was early in the evening, and many of the lanterns hanging from the eaves of shop roofs had been lit. Courtesans watched the streets from second-story windows, letting crimson paper in the shape of flower petals drop from their hands. They drifted and danced upon the winds. He could hear a flute being played in the distance.

The black-haired young man breathed a sigh of admiration. It was as though he’d stepped into another country.

“The town of fine drink, performing arts, and holy courtesans...”

As the young man wasn’t particularly interested in any of those things, he’d never expected to visit Irede in his lifetime.

With the reins of his horse in hand, he studied the continent’s oldest pleasure town. Irede housed approximately five hundred entertainment establishments —courtesan houses included—and it was said that although the town was home to several thousand people, those numbers were dwarfed by the number of visitors it received each year.

He had long since overheard stories of the town’s bustle of activity, and he couldn’t help but admire the spectacle. Suddenly, a cheerful voice called out to him from behind.

“First time in Irede, lad? The stables are through the gates and to the left.”

The young man turned around and saw a merchant carrying a hamper on his back. From the cut of his clothes, which contrasted with the fashion of Irede, he may have been from the capital.

Before the young man could respond, the merchant continued. “Beautiful, isn’t it? A town of myth, unchanged for a millennium. It’s no wonder everyone stops here to stare on their first visit.”

“It’s no wonder they do,” the young man agreed.

“I could point you the way of some excellent establishments if you’d like. With a pretty face like yours, the courtesans will be all over you.”

“No, I came here because I have business with the town militia. But thank you.”

Despite Irede having changed hands between different nations throughout its history, the town had always maintained a loose form of autonomy thanks to the hefty tax revenue it sent to the capital. As such, its long-standing protectors had been its militia.

Parting ways with the merchant, the young man walked over to the side of the town gates. There stood a militiaman wearing a navy blue uniform conversing with a man of tall stature. The young man, upon seeing the two men take notice of him, produced a letter from out of his breast pocket.

“My name is Xixu Zacktor. I’ve come from the royal capital on a referral to fill your shadeslayer vacancy.”

“Indeed? May I?” The militiaman, with a glance at the military sword affixed to Xixu’s side, took the proffered letter of introduction and opened it. While the man was reading, Xixu idly studied the town. Twilight was leisurely making way for night, and the streets were astir with life. Then, his gaze came to a stop on a certain point.

There, within the crowds, he saw a tiny gap that looked as though the moon had chosen it as the only place upon which to shine its light.

The true form of the break in the crowd was a single girl. She looked to be in her mid-teens. Her glossy silver hair was neatly tied up, and she was dressed in a pure white kimono bound with a blue sash. Viewed from the side, she was as beautiful as a delicate work of art, and Xixu noticed that those who passed her by occasionally turned their heads to catch another glimpse.

Continuing on her way, the girl folded into the crowd. For some reason he

couldn't quite grasp, Xixu's gaze followed her small, retreating figure as it went.

"Catch your eye, did she?"

The question had come from the man who had been speaking with the militiaman earlier. Upon closer inspection, Xixu noticed he seemed to be a little older than himself.

"No, she just seemed...odd, somehow. I couldn't help myself."

The girl had indeed possessed a strange presence. It was as though, there in the midst of twilight, she had been the only person Xixu could see clearly. He attributed it to the air she'd had about her. It had felt like the same faint ambience of mystery that was drifting about the town itself.

Watching Xixu contemplate, the tall man smiled cheerfully. "You have good instincts. No wonder you're a shadeslayer. That girl is Irede's only maiden."

"*Only* maiden?" Xixu repeated. "The town doesn't have any others?"

Throughout the continent, most of the people who possessed supernatural abilities were unmarried women, and they were known by the general term "maidens." From indistinct visions of the future to the power to exorcise bad luck, abilities varied from maiden to maiden. That a large town would only have a single one, though, was unusual.

The tall man gave a simple nod, as though Xixu's question was quite a common one. "No, it's just her. Well, to be more precise, she's the only maiden in Irede that we actually call "maiden." She's the inheritor of "warmth," one of the three sacred offerings. That makes her the strangest person in this town."

"Warmth..."

Xixu had looked into the story of Irede before he came here. The god's three demands had been "fine drink," "music," and "the warmth of human touch." The descendants of those who had provided those offerings existed today in the form of the three sacred houses—entities that still held influence over the town's politics.

House Radi, the providers of fine drink.

The Midiridos Troupe, purveyors of the performing arts.

And the courtesan house Pale Moon, those who inherited the name of “holy courtesans.”

That meant the girl Xixu had seen was both a holy courtesan and a maiden. He thought something about that felt out of place—it was a feeling he was unable to shake.

The tall man took Xixu’s letter of introduction from the militiaman and casually opened it. “It’s rather lucky I met you here,” he said. “I imagine that, as our new shadeslayer, you’ll be needing somebody to show you around.”

Xixu was taken aback. The man wasn’t wearing a militia uniform, nor was he carrying a weapon. Instead, he was dressed in an ordinary shirt and slacks. With his attire in mind, it was strange how he’d nonchalantly cut into their conversation.

After some thought, Xixu decided to just ask the question directly. “Who are you?”

“Thoma Radi. I’m a member of one of the three sacred houses, and I was the one who put out a call for a new shadeslayer. Welcome to Irede.”

Xixu’s dark eyes widened as they stared at Thoma’s proffered hand. To begin with, he had never expected to have anything to do with Irede, that pleasure town from the age of gods.

He enjoyed alcohol, but not overly so, and only partook in moderation. His knowledge of the performing arts was shallow, and purchasing a woman’s company was just something he didn’t do. His peers had often called him “uptight” and “boring.”

And yet, on a day like any other, he had been told he was to transfer to Irede.

“Thank you for having me,” Xixu said. “Your guidance would be appreciated—I’m afraid I’m completely unfamiliar with your town.”

“*We* should be thanking *you.* Our shadeslayer shortage really has us in a bind,” Thoma replied. “Oh, the stable’s inside and to the left, by the way.”

“That happens to be the one thing I do know,” Xixu said, expression neutral as he shook Thoma’s hand.

It was from that moment that Xixu's fate would change, straying from its original path as he came to learn more about the myth and that one particular girl.

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"What do you know about the town of Irede?"

That was the question the king posed to Xixu one day after having summoned him without word or warning.

Xixu, down on one knee in the audience chamber, considered his answer briefly before raising his head. "Irede is a town at the foot of the mountains in the northern region of our country of Torlonia. It was founded in the age of mythology by an ancient nation which it has outlasted, as it still exists today."

"Correct," the king said. "It is the most famous pleasure town on the continent, known for its drink, arts, and holy courtesans."

It was said that everybody should visit Irede at least once before they died. As rumor had it, the town was so steeped in ancient history that its beauty captured people's hearts, making them never want to leave.

However, that was the extent of Xixu's knowledge. Since he was an officer of Torlonia, and since Irede had a tacit autonomy—so long as there were no incidents requiring government or military intervention—he would never need to set foot into the town.

The king leaned to one side of his throne, resting his chin on his hand. He wore a cheerful grin. "The thing is, I'd like you to go and see the sights there."

"Me, Your Majesty?" Xixu asked. "May I ask why?"

"It's nothing particularly complicated. I just want you to tell me what you see and what you feel there. Not only will that information benefit me, it'll benefit Torlonia as well." The king glanced to one side of the chamber. Standing there was a blind maiden, the upper half of her face concealed by cloth. She served the king and possessed an aptitude for both foresight and farsight. Any future she saw was certain to occur...and at the king's glance, she nodded.

That was Xixu's cue that these orders must have had some deeper

significance to them. He bowed his head low. “As you command, Your Majesty. I shall go to the town of myth as your eyes.”

“Ah, about that. A simple holiday would only show you what’s on the surface, so you’ll spend a while living there as a resident instead. As luck would have it, their militia is looking for more shadeslayers right now, so I’ve prepared a letter of recommendation. I’m sure the role is well within the capabilities of a man of your talents. Since you’re going anyway, you might as well prove yourself useful.”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Xixu replied, “As you wish, Your Majesty.”

Was it just his imagination, or did the king sound like he was having fun?

While the king of Torlonia was known throughout the continent for being both youthful and brilliant, he also had more than a little fondness for mischief. Ever since being discovered by his liege, Xixu’s life had been a whirlwind of changes. After graduating from the military academy, he’d expected to live an unassuming life as an officer. However, it had instead turned into a rush of troublesome affairs, big and small, that had all been dumped into his lap. He wasn’t ungrateful, but he *did* keenly regret the loss of his former, ordinary life.

And while Xixu hoped that the king’s newest orders hadn’t been borne from a desire for mischief, he had neither the means to discern the truth nor the position to object. He kept his head lowered, and the king continued happily.

“I want to hear your unbiased opinion, so don’t do any research before you go. If you turn up at the gates clueless, I’m sure they’ll teach you what you need to know. Besides, it’ll be more fun that way.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty... I shall endeavor to not appear rude.”

He now had confirmation that the king was messing with him. It wasn’t Xixu’s first encounter with such orders; he’d once been thrown into the midst of a banquet of nobles. At the time, it had made him both resentful of his liege’s penchant for mischief and keenly aware of his own boorishness. But this time, he would be going on a long-term mission. He could not allow himself to be an inconvenience, especially since he was to work for the town’s militia. He’d heard that Irede had a unique culture based strongly upon tradition, so he’d have to respect that and do his best to learn without coming off as arrogant.

The king smiled as though he could read Xixu's thoughts. "You'd have people fawning over you no matter where you went. Just be yourself."

Xixu had no idea what his liege meant.

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After leaving his horse in the care of the stables, Xixu set off on a tour of the town, guided by the man who had introduced himself as Thoma Radi.

Thoma revealed that he was twenty-seven—which made him Xixu's senior by six years—and the next head of House Radi, which also held peerage in the royal capital. The man was handsome, well-dressed, friendly, and he served as the perfect guide. He had both the friendliness of a merchant, the civility of a noble, and told Xixu quite matter-of-factly to drop his respectful tone and speak plainly with him, because "things will go smoother that way."

Xixu promptly did so, and asked bluntly, "So, why is a noble from the capital here in Irede?"

Of the town's three sacred houses, House Radi was the only one Xixu had known of prior to receiving the king's orders. Unlike the other two houses that stayed contained within Irede, House Radi, being brewers of alcohol, had proactively pursued outside relations, earning themselves wealth and rank throughout Torlonia. Apparently, it had been Thoma who'd made the arrangements to recruit a new shadeslayer, as it was his house that possessed the most connections over in the capital.

Thoma laughed loudly. "House Radi's peerage is more or less something we picked up in order to benefit Irede. We've always been a family of craftsmen, and that hasn't changed. All our breweries are here, so I only pop over to our estate in the capital every once in a while to put in an appearance. With my father and mother there, there's not much need for me too."

While he listened to Thoma's cheery explanation, Xixu suddenly jerked his gaze up toward the sky. He'd seen a bird flying across the edge of his vision, its large wings spread wide. Reflexively, he placed his hand on the hilt of his military sword, but Thoma interrupted him.

"That's not a shade. Just a bird."

Xixu paused to examine it more closely. “You’re right.”

Upon closer inspection, the bird had a physical form. He let go of his sword hilt, and Thoma smiled.

“I *did* ask for a shadeslayer, but I never expected one to be referred to me from so high up. You must be quite talented.”

“No more than anyone else. I was sent here because I just happen to be able to see shades.”

On this continent, there existed supernatural entities collectively referred to as “shades.” They took the form of red-eyed animals with faint, shadowy bodies that most humans couldn’t see, and they seemed to spring forth into existence wherever people congregated. Being in the proximity of a shade warped a human’s nature, prompting them to commit dreadful deeds. As such, shades were to be killed on sight—a duty that fell on the shoulders of shadeslayers.

Xixu just happened to possess the ability to see shades, which is why his mission from the king had taken this form. He had no professional experience as a shadeslayer, but the letter of introduction had probably sung his praises regardless.

“‘Able to see shades,’ huh?” Thoma repeated. “We’re not really wanting for that here, to be honest. It’s combat skills we need. How much do you know about Irede?”

“Only what’s written in history books. Sorry.”

Xixu had wanted to be polite and do as much research as possible before he came, but it wasn’t as though he could’ve disobeyed royal orders. If he had to guess, the king probably found his floundering to be entertaining, but that would be of no consolation to the people of Irede, to whom he could only feel apologetic.

Guilt aside, however, his current impression of the town was that it had come straight out of a dream.

The evening streets were so busy, one would think it was a festival day. Wherever the eye could see, lights of all colors sprang to life, and the hustle and bustle of people roared like the crashes of ocean waves. Courtesans dressed in

elegant kimonos stood at the second-floor balconies of courtesan houses that had opened for business early, giggling and beckoning at male passersby. The canals winding about the town rippled with the reflected light from hanging paper lanterns.

“Is tonight some kind of special occasion?” Xixu asked.

“No, it’s always like this,” Thoma replied. “That’s just how Irede is.”

“Is that right...? Then I think I understand why people travel so far to come here.”

The otherworldly scenery was beautiful. Even the uncultured Xixu understood that the town possessed a certain mysterious charm—an otherworldly air about it that one couldn’t find anywhere else. It was no wonder so many people wished to come to bask in Irede’s pleasures, even if only once.

Seeing Xixu survey the town with curious eyes, Thoma gave a slight nod. “It’s fine if you don’t know anything about what it’s like here. We have a lot of unwritten rules that only the residents know anyway. If a situation ever comes up, just ask.”

“I’ll do that,” Xixu said gravely. “I look forward to working with you, although I must apologize in advance for my rudeness.”

Thoma studied Xixu curiously. “The thought’s tickled at me for a while now, but has anyone ever told you that you’re a little odd?”

“Yes. Although I consider myself to be quite ordinary.”

Xixu searched his memories and found that he vaguely recalled a number of criticisms he’d received from his contemporaries at the military academy. “You’re a once-in-a-decade killjoy,” “That you don’t get any jokes is a joke in itself,” and “Actually, don’t change. I think it’d be funny to see how long you can live like that.” Still, those had been said to him by the comrades he’d eaten and slept with, and were nothing compared to being called “odd” by Thoma after having just met.

Despite thinking this, Xixu simply took the comment in stride. “I apologize for my ignorance. I’ll do my best to improve.”

“That’s not really what I meant...but I suppose it doesn’t matter.” Thoma smiled, slapped Xixu on the back, and then continued with his tour of the town, making remarks such as “If you want cheap *and* tasty, go there,” and “Down that alley’s the store where we townsfolk pick up our daily necessities.”

Their final destination was a militia garrison to the town’s west. It had high walls, a dormitory, and a training ground. It was where Xixu completed the formalities associated with taking up his new post.

One such formality was that he had to spar against another shadeslayer. Although the procedure was supposed to involve a set of three bouts held in the outdoor training ground, Xixu was declared qualified by his opponent right after the very first. And so, he was officially a shadeslayer.

Thoma, who had been leaning against the outer wall watching, called out in admiration. “You’re better than I thought! Why did you come to Irede? With your skills, you could’ve landed a cushy job in the royal castle.”

The shrewd question almost made Xixu flinch in surprise, but instead he simply pulled his handsome face into a slight frown. “I’m afraid I don’t have a good answer for you. Things just ended up this way.”

“You won’t hurt for wages here, but there’s not much room for promotion compared to the royal castle.”

“I have no interest in promotions. I prefer being somewhere that needs the manpower.”

Xixu wasn’t lying; he’d given his honest opinion. Neither status nor wealth held much sway over him. And although he’d come to Irede on his liege’s orders, the town’s lack of shadeslayers made this trip worthwhile to him.

He tied the decorative cord that he’d received as proof of his new title around his military sword. It was scarlet, and there was a piece of black quartz attached. From what he’d been told, the type of gem differed depending on the shadeslayer, of which Irede now had five. One often took time off due to old age, but the other three were on active duty—this involved patrolling the town as a member of the militia, collecting eyewitness reports of shades, and slaying them.

“If it’s okay with you, then all the better for us,” Thoma said. “Oh, by the way, I’ve been told your room won’t be ready until tomorrow, so you’ll have to stay somewhere else tonight. Sorry about that.”

“I don’t mind. A night spent patrolling will make tomorrow come all the sooner.”

Irede officials hadn’t been informed that he’d be coming, so it was no wonder his lodgings weren’t ready. In response to Xixu’s acceptance, however, Thoma shook his head.

“I’ll take care of your lodgings for tonight, of course. There’s one more place I want to take you anyway, so it works out perfectly.”

“One more place?” Xixu repeated.

Thoma grinned meaningfully. “The world’s oldest courtesan house. I’ll introduce you to the girl from earlier.”

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Among Irede’s many courtesan houses, Pale Moon was the only one known as a house of a mythical bloodline. It was regarded as such because it had been built for the purpose of offering “warmth” to the god who’d asked for it, and the blood of its original owners still ran in the veins of its proprietress today.

As he walked north through the town’s streets, Xixu surveyed his surroundings, which had become thoroughly dim. “There are less and less people passing by. Are we taking a shortcut?”

“No, this is the way,” Thoma replied. “Pale Moon is at the northern edge of town.”

The small path they were taking was enclosed by thickets of bamboo on both sides, stone lanterns lighting their way through the night. Although they still encountered the occasional passerby, it was a stark difference to the crowds in the central part of town.

Xixu looked up at the waning moon through a gap in the bamboo stalks. “For such a busy town, I haven’t seen a single shade.”

In the capital, it was practically guaranteed that at least one shade would be

present wherever people gathered, especially in the market districts. It wasn't particularly rare to spot shadowy dogs prowling around in back alleys or translucent birds flying across the sunset sky. Xixu himself had once become embroiled in a case to the south of Torlonia, during which he'd killed a shade with the ability to move through walls that took the form of a tiger. But shades, no matter how many of them were purged, would always reappear somewhere unnoticed, as long as humans continued to live their lives.

In spite of this, and of Irede's throngs of people, Xixu hadn't seen hide nor hair of a single shade. Were the other shadeslayers just *that* thorough?

Thoma gave a wry smile. "Right. You don't know yet, do you? I forgot we kept that a secret from outsiders."

"What do you mean?"

"Well...it's hard to understand without seeing for yourself, so let's leave it for later. Come on, we're here." Thoma pointed to an arched gate that stood out against the moonlight. There was no signboard. Behind the gate was a flagstone path that paved the way to a large, two-story mansion. Hanging from its entryway was a white lantern, upon which was painted the symbol of a half-moon.

"The proprietress of this courtesan house is the girl from earlier," Thoma explained, walking the path ahead as though he'd done so many times before. "She took over from the previous maiden, her grandmother, after her death half a year ago."

Xixu, trailing slightly behind, asked, "Isn't it rude of us to come by this late just to make introductions?"

"What are you talking about? It's a courtesan house. We'd be more of a nuisance if we came in the morning. Look, the lantern is lit. That means it's open for business."

"Now that you mention it, I saw those hanging from the eaves of other places..."

Thoma stepped into the entryway, smiling at somebody within. "Hey, Sari. Been well?"

“As well as always, thankfully. Hello, Mr. Thoma.”

The voice belonged to a girl, and to Xixu, it sounded like the ringing of a bell. Xixu came to a stop just before the entryway, where he caught sight of Thoma energetically rustling a girl’s hair.

“Drop the ‘mister,’ would you?” the man said.

“Thoma! You’ll ruin my hair!” The girl pouted, although it soon gave way to a carefree smile that drew Xixu’s gaze.

This was indeed the girl he’d seen earlier from the town’s gates.

She was dressed in a white kimono with a blue sash, the latter of which had been dyed with the symbol of a half-moon. She looked to be around sixteen. Her neatly tied-up silver hair shone as though it had caught and held the moonlight, and her small face was so delicate that it could have been mistaken for a doll’s. Her eyes were a clear, deep blue, and the only ornamentations she wore were a slender bracelet beneath her sleeve and minimal make-up. From up close, her beauty was plain to see.

To Xixu’s eyes, however, her most striking feature was not her looks, but her smile, which perfectly suited a girl of her age. He’d heard that she was Irede’s only maiden, but as far as he could see, she seemed to be no more than an ordinary, charming girl.

“Why are you here today anyway, Thoma? I’ll call Isha over if you’re staying the night.”

“No, I actually brought somebody along with me. Come in, Xixu.”

The words brought Xixu back to his senses, and he stepped over the mansion’s threshold. Upon seeing him, the girl’s expression immediately changed. Whereas before her smile had been one of a girl in her mid-teens, it was now flawless and artificial. The switch had been as obvious as a butterfly changing the colors of its wings. The girl, standing upon the hard-packed earthen floor of the entryway, smiled and fluttered her long silver eyelashes.

“Welcome to the courtesan house, Pale Moon.”

The girl’s voice was calmer now and had lowered slightly in pitch—it was now

perfectly befitting of a proprietress.

“This is the sole place in Irede where we preserve the old, hidden myth. As we follow the traditions of the north, our practices differ slightly from those of other courtesan houses. I hope you will find that acceptable.”

“Ah, no, I...”

Xixu was at a loss for words, swept up into the flow of the girl’s greeting. Uncertain of where he should begin his explanation, he looked to Thoma...but the man simply stared back with an amused expression on his face. Despite being the one who’d brought Xixu here, it looked as though he had no intentions of stepping into the conversation. It had only been a few hours since they’d met, but Xixu was beginning to get a good idea of the man’s character.

Internally resolving to pile his complaints onto Thoma later, Xixu straightened his posture. “It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Xixu Zacktor. I arrived in this town today from the royal capital to serve as one of its shadeslayers. I came here to greet you, and to pay my respects.”

Thoma had likely brought him here either to introduce Irede’s only maiden or to introduce another one of the three sacred houses—or perhaps for both reasons. Taking that into account, Xixu bowed, and the girl’s eyes widened slightly.

Irede’s newest shadeslayer looked up at her blue eyes. He couldn’t discern what was going on behind them, but the girl’s studying gaze lasted only a moment. In the next, she was on her knees, elegantly giving him a light bow.

“Is that so? Then you must pardon my rudeness.” The girl smiled, and in it he saw a veteran proprietress drawing upon years of illustrious history. “I am Saridi of the courtesan house Pale Moon. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Her words reverberated clear through him, coming to a stop somewhere deep within.

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The first thing Xixu explained to the maiden Sari was that he knew nothing about Irede. He expressed his apologies and told her that he would likely be an inconvenience as he learned. Her response to his rough greeting had simply

been to listen to him with rapt attention and tell him to pay it no mind when he finished. Xixu, however, knew that staying ignorant would only be taking advantage of her generosity. The thought of similarly begging for people's forgiveness all over town put His Majesty's amused expression to mind, which aggravated him. He needed to learn as much as he could about Irede without a moment's delay.

"Then first, allow me to introduce you to this mansion. This way, if you please."

Following Sari's lead, Xixu removed his shoes and stepped down a corridor toward a reception room. The proprietress opened the thick double doors at the end, and Xixu couldn't help but react in surprise at how large the room beyond was. Its wide floor space and tall ceiling could comfortably host a ball. There were front-facing glass windows that looked out onto the courtyard, and the room was currently occupied by about two dozen women.

Each of them was passing the time in a way of their own choosing, whether that be reading books while sprawled out on the white carpet, painting their nails while reclining on couches, or sitting around tables, gracefully drinking tea. Some of the women noticed the newcomers and observed them curiously, while others ignored them completely.

"This is the flower room," Sari explained. "If a girl isn't currently accompanying a guest, she can generally be found here. You'll have to pardon them in advance—most are quite eccentric."

"I didn't get that impression," Xixu replied. "But this place does feel different to other courtesan houses."

Most of the establishments lining Irede's streets had courtesans at the windows, smiling hospitably. In comparison, this place seemed more like a noblewoman's salon. The women were spending their time as they wished and showed no signs that they would even attempt to appeal to guests. Roughly half of them caught Xixu's eye and smiled, waving at him, but the other half paid him no notice.

Sari led Xixu and Thoma to a table in the corner and smiled wryly. "The biggest difference between Pale Moon and other courtesan houses is that here,

the girls choose who they attend. Of course, a guest is free to select any girl he takes a liking to, but accepting that invitation is up to the courtesan herself."

"The price of their company is nothing to sneeze at either. Not many customers come here." Thoma sat down, smiling. The man took a drinking cup from a maidservant, who made to place one in front of Xixu too, but he declined.

"Is it that the girls here can choose because they're holy courtesans?" Xixu asked.

"No," Sari replied. "With the exception of myself, all the girls here are quite ordinary. It's simply that, as Pale Moon is a house of a mythical bloodline, we have greater respect for mutual accord. After all, what the god wished for most of all was joy."

Upon glancing at Xixu's empty hands, Sari ordered a maidservant to bring tea. Sari seemed to have no intentions of sitting with him and Thoma, instead choosing to stand gracefully at the other side of the table.

Although Xixu felt guilty about it, he knew that she would likely refuse an invitation to sit. As such, it was probably best that he ask the question that had been bothering him and excuse himself as soon as possible.

"I was told that you're Irede's only maiden."

"To be precise, while we see maidens from other towns, I am the only one the residents here call 'maiden.' In Irede, the word refers solely to the proprietress of Pale Moon."

Sari raised her hand and lightly flicked a finger upward. Xixu could swear that he saw a fleeting spray of light shoot forth from it—that couldn't have just been his imagination.

"One of the primary duties of Irede's maiden," Sari continued, "is to prevent the town's shades from escaping into the outside world by maintaining a boundary around its outskirts. In addition, we provide combat assistance to shadeslayers. If you should ever have the need, please call for me, and I will come."

"Combat assistance?" Xixu repeated.

“Chasing shades alone is quite difficult, is it not? They have a tendency to flee the moment they realize they’re no match for a shadeslayer. I, however, can bind their movements.”

“You’re right, that would be helpful.”

Xixu could only remember too well the difficulties that had arisen during his chance encounters with shades in the capital. Some had fled to the skies, while others had gone straight through walls. In situations such as those, Irede’s maiden was sure to come in handy.

Hearing Xixu agree, a wry smile flickered across Sari’s face. For the briefest moment, her expression spoke of youthful self-deprecation.

“Only, as I am still inexperienced as a maiden, I cannot wield my powers without this bracelet.” The girl raised the sleeve of her left arm. Beneath it lay a slender silver bracelet. “Also, from half-moon to full, I will be unable to assist you. Please do keep that in mind.”

As Sari politely inclined her head toward him, the maidservant arrived with the tea. After expressing his thanks, Xixu closed his eyes and enjoyed the tea’s pleasant aroma. It was one he’d never smelled in the capital. Perhaps Irede’s status as the continent’s greatest pleasure town afforded it a greater diversity of leaves? He needed to stop by a teahouse some time in the future.

Sari gazed fixedly at Xixu. “You’re—”

But just as she’d begun to speak, the doors to the reception room opened to reveal another guest—a middle-aged man escorted by a maidservant. He was apparently a regular customer, because one of the courtesans smiled and rose to greet him—something that was evidently required of the proprietress as well, because after a quick whisper to Xixu of “I’ll be right back,” Sari left the table.

Thoma, drinking cup in hand, smiled at Xixu. “Well? What do you think of Irede’s maiden?”

After a brief pause, Xixu responded, “She looks like an ordinary girl.”

Sari seemed like a sweet young girl with no flaws. He saw no faults in her conduct as a proprietress, but that had likely been the fruit of her strong will

and labor. Nothing about her reminded him of Thoma's earlier description of "the strangest person in Irede." And although her beauty was exceptional, it was also immature.

If there was anything strange about her, it would've been the air that surrounded the girl when he first saw her—but that could be explained by her being a maiden. Maidens' powers, and their sources, varied from individual to individual. That Sari seemed to be wrapped in a faint aura of moonlight must have had something to do with her being a maiden.

Which was why, as far as Xixu could see, she looked to be nothing more than an ordinary young girl who was dedicated to her duties.

"Ordinary, huh?" Thoma said. "You don't say."

"Do you think I'm mistaken?" Xixu asked.

"No, you're right, more or less. Isn't it adorable how hard she works at being the proprietress?"

"Adorable?"

If Xixu had to choose, he'd say "beautiful" described Sari better. He looked across the reception room to where she was greeting the new guest.

"I've known her since she was a kid," Thoma explained. "She's basically my adorable little sister. Either way, if you keep being the way you are, you'll see what I mean soon enough."

"That's a rude thing to say about a proprietress..." Sari said lightheartedly. She had returned soon after the middle-aged man and his accompanying courtesan had left the flower room.

"Sari, the militia dorm isn't ready yet, so could you let this guy stay here tonight?" Thoma asked.

"Certainly," Sari said, looking around at the courtesans in the room. "Then who—"

Xixu hurriedly cut her off. "Thank you, but no. I can't impose upon you that much." He hadn't come here in search of a place to stay in the first place. If he let Thoma continue to do as he liked, Xixu would come off as terribly rude.

Sari inclined her slender neck to the side. “We wouldn’t charge you the price of the girl’s company, of course, and with you as the guest, I’m certain somebody would be happy to receive you.”

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t buy women. I know I’m being tactless, and I’m sorry for that. Thank you for the offer, though.”

As Xixu hurriedly made excuses, Sari stared at him in blank puzzlement. Then, after a short pause, she abruptly spoke.

“Then...would my room be acceptable?”

“Wouldn’t that be even ruder of me?”

Seeing Xixu’s completely straight face, Thoma let out a roar of laughter—he looked as though he had never heard anything funnier in his life. As Xixu glared at him, Sari corrected herself.

“I’m afraid I didn’t explain clearly enough. Although I have a room here in which I receive guests, I live in a separate building out back. Since it’s currently vacant right now, please feel free to use it.”

“You receive customers?” Xixu asked, surprised. “But you’re a maiden...”

Then, coming to his senses, he immediately apologized for the impolite question.

Sari, however, giggled as though she’d expected his reaction. “While many other maidens lose their abilities after consorting with men, the abilities of Irede’s maidens are passed down through our bloodline. The previous proprietress, my grandmother, was a maiden too, and so were the generations before her. Whether or not we lose our innocence has no bearing on our powers. On the other hand, we *are* affected by the waxing and waning of the moon.”

“A maiden bloodline...? Is that something that manifests after you receive a guest and become a holy courtesan?”

It was said that in the older days of the continent, there existed prostitutes who had been able to divine the fates of men after accompanying them for a night—which is why Xixu had wondered if Sari’s abilities worked similarly.

Sari shook her head. “No. Though I have yet to accompany a guest, I am still capable of using my maiden abilities. They are, so to speak, innate.” The girl’s voice sounded as though she were telling him a tale as old as time. It sounded pleasant to the ears and had a power to it that refused to be ignored. “Be that as it may, I have a duty to continue my bloodline. One day, I shall receive a guest and bear a child of my own. As such, I am both the proprietress of this house, *and* one of its courtesans.”

The young girl who embodied a mythical bloodline looked at Xixu with her clear blue eyes.

He matched her gaze and saw that the mystery within reminded him of a cold lake.

“However,” Sari continued, “the proprietress of Pale Moon only chooses a single guest to accompany in her lifetime.”

To Xixu, her words almost sounded as though she was making a secret vow.

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Although Pale Moon's proprietress' room had not seen use in quite a while, it was kept well-ventilated and cared for. It was located on the second floor and was the furthest room at the back.

Sari closed the sliding paper window and fastened the latch. She turned her head to face the young man behind her. He seemed uncomfortable.

"A maidservant will bring you an evening meal," she said. "I've prepared hot water in the bathroom, so please feel free to use it. I will leave you a change of clothes here."

"I'm sorry to make you go through all this trouble. Truly..."

The look on his face was pained and apologetic. Sari turned away so he couldn't see and smiled. He'd only just arrived in Irede, so he had likely spent the entire day running all over town, being baptized in its way of life. She assumed that was largely Thoma's fault. Sari had known him since before she could remember, and although he excelled at watching out for others, he took just as much enjoyment from watching their reactions. She had no doubt this young outsider made for his perfect victim.

The young man removed his jacket, and Sari flashed him a glance. His features stood out as a little cold and sharp, but that didn't mean he wasn't good-looking. If anything, his appearance was rather fair. She imagined that the severe expression he wore made him difficult to approach, but on the other hand, his overserious personality was quite amusing. It wasn't hard to tell that he was trying to treat her respectfully as an equal. Far too much so, in fact, considering she was younger than him.

"Should you need anything, please inform either a maidservant or myself. Feel free to sleep in as late as you wish tomorrow morning."

"Thank you." The young man looked strained as he continued. "And, ah...there's really no need to be so polite with me."

"I've been no more polite than I usually would be."

The young man didn't reply, and a delicate silence settled over the conversation. Before it could become truly awkward, Sari gave him a flawless smile, excused herself with a "Then I shall take my leave," and left the room.

“What a funny man,” she whispered to herself as she walked back down the long hallway. Although guests from the royal capital were common, and Sari had been born there herself, she had never met anyone quite like the young man before.

He was likely the type of person that people would call “stubborn” or “grim”—probably considered a rare breed in the capital, but here in Irede, they were practically nonexistent. Since he’d said he didn’t purchase the company of women, she imagined that, if not for the shadeslayer vacancy, he would never have come to Irede, let alone Pale Moon.

And yet here he was, trying to adapt to the unfamiliar town in his own way. With all of his blunt questions and subsequent apologies for asking, his earnest nature was entertaining. Sari could see that in how he thanked the maidservants for their every service too. She liked that quality about him, which was why she’d thought it would be fine to lend him her room.

“I just hope my explanation wasn’t too strange.” After letting a light giggle slip, Sari looked up. Her own pale face gazed back at her from a window that looked out onto the night.

There was a touch of color overlaid on its porcelain-white skin, shadow around its eyelids, and rouge applied to its cheeks. The lips were reminiscent of flower petals and had been colored with a modest light pink. Glancing a little upwards, she saw neatly tied-up, bright silver hair. The reflection captured both the sweet charm of a young girl and the quiet composure of a proprietress. Sari was relieved to see that nothing in her appearance was in disarray.

The sixteen-year-old Sari had inherited Pale Moon half a year prior. Her birth had determined her future as Pale Moon’s maiden, and from an early age she’d visited the courtesan house regularly, where she’d watched her grandmother work. Sari had been raised among the women of Pale Moon. As such, despite her young age, she was able to handle her work without any difficulties. However, it also had her constantly on her toes, and she couldn’t deny that she occasionally felt lonely. She would doubt her own conduct at every turn, and it always made her want to look back over her shoulder to her now-absent grandmother for reassurance.

“If only I actually could...”

Still, even if she was uneasy, she couldn’t let it show. At the end of the day, Sari was the proprietress of the oldest courtesan house in existence. She had to remain calm and resolute.

The door to the flower room came into view. Thoma and a courtesan were standing in front of it, and the former beckoned Sari over.

“How was he?” Thoma asked.

“I won’t satisfy you with an answer,” Sari replied. “You shouldn’t tease outsiders so much.”

“He’s not an outsider anymore. He’s a shadeslayer of Irede.”

“Maybe so, but...”

“Besides, you’ve never greeted a new shadeslayer before, right? I figured a straitlaced guy like him would make for the perfect opportunity.”

Sari frowned slightly. It wasn’t that she was dissatisfied—rather, she thought Thoma actually had a point.

This was the first time Irede had gained a new shadeslayer ever since she’d become Pale Moon’s proprietress. What’s more, it was rare for the role to be filled by somebody who hadn’t come from the town itself. Learning how to conduct herself toward a person like that would be educational for her, and Xixu had proved himself to be somebody who would sincerely listen to what she had to say.

“He *is* rather earnest,” Sari said. “So much so that I’m worried it will cost him. He might fall prey to somebody’s scam.”

“Well, if that happens, he’s an adult. He’ll figure something out.”

“Thoma!” Sari pulled a face.

The courtesan chimed in soothingly. “Don’t be too harsh, Sari. Thoma wouldn’t have brought him here if he hadn’t taken a liking to him. He’ll watch out for him, despite what he says.”

Thoma gave a wry smile. “Did you have to say it out loud, Isha?”

Isha was not her real name—it was actually Lydia Lars, and she was the daughter of a ruined noble house that once hailed from the south. After her father's death, she had made use of her personal connections to come to Pale Moon nine years ago, where she'd met Thoma, who was in his late teens at the time. He had purchased her company ever since, and she had never accompanied any other guest.

Pale Moon had five other courtesans who, like Isha, only ever received a single guest. There were also courtesans who received anybody they took a liking to, some who had several guests they were close with, and some who chose nobody at all. The women of Pale Moon were diverse, and all of them had their own quirks. Among them, Sari thought of Isha as an older sister. Despite the fact that Isha had taken less of an active role ever since Sari became the proprietress, that hadn't changed the trust Sari had in her.

The proprietress raised her hands in defeat. "I don't mind if you do it to me, but try not to make others the source of your entertainment, okay? I'm not sure why, but we've had a lot of first-timers visiting recently."

"Hmm? Isn't that the usual for Irede?" Thoma asked.

"Yes, but they don't make it all the way to Pale Moon. You know how out of the way we are."

"Ah, now that you mention it... You're right."

Pale Moon stood at the northern tip of town. It was rare for anybody to reach it without prior knowledge. The majority of people who arrived at its doors did so thanks to a recommendation from another guest. Despite this, there had been a strange increase in first-time visitors lately. Unaware of Pale Moon's practices, they had been indignant upon finding out that its courtesans had the right to choose their guests and had troubled the maidservants with their unpleasant behavior.

Even today, before Thoma had arrived with Xixu, two ex-soldiers hailing from the east had kicked up a fuss at the entryway. Sari had explained Pale Moon's practices herself and had led them through the flower room after ensuring they understood. In the end, none of the courtesans had chosen them, so she wrote them both letters of introduction and showed them to another courtesan

house.

Such visitors usually came once a month or so, but recently, it had become a daily occurrence. Many had been drunk, spouted caustic words, or were quick to raise their voices.

“I thought it was odd, so I’ve been asking them what made them decide to come here,” Sari said. “According to them, the staff from other courtesan houses have been recommending us.”

“What?” Thoma said. “Did they just want to check out the whole mythical bloodline thing?”

“No, nothing like that. They weren’t picky about which courtesan house they went to, but they said the one they did go to refused them, told them to go to one in the ‘north,’ and gave them directions to Pale Moon.”

Thoma made a troubled face. “What? Are they trying to harass you?”

“Hmm. I’ve been asking them which house they went to, but from what they’ve been saying, it’s not just one culprit. A number of the courtesan houses that open early have been telling guests to come here.”

“That’s how they do things in the south,” Isha murmured. The southern part of the continent was her birthplace. “The sun sets earlier there.”

Sari and Thoma looked at each other.

“I *have* noticed more and more places like that recently,” Sari said. “New establishments backed by Marquess Bughnan, I think. I was wondering whether it was a southern practice since he’s southern nobility.”

“Lighting their lanterns early is up to them, but they can’t treat Pale Moon like that,” Thoma said. “And it’s not like they don’t know how the north does things.”

When the residents of this town used the word “north” on its own, it meant they were talking about Pale Moon, the ancient house of myth. Furthermore, it should have been common knowledge to everybody in Irede that Pale Moon’s courtesans had the right to choose their guests.

Isha placed her pale hand on her cheek. “Marquess Bughnan has had a

vacation home here in Irede since forever. He used to only come occasionally for leisure, but he's recently settled down and started opening businesses here. It's been on my mind because, even though he's the timid type, he can get obsessively greedy. If there's something he wants, he won't be satisfied until he gets it."

"Is that really how he is?" Sari asked. "I've never spoken to him before, so..."

If she remembered correctly, Marquess Bughnan had invited the town's influential figures to the opening of his first business half a year ago. She had been too busy to go since she had only just become Pale Moon's proprietress, so she'd simply sent him a congratulatory gift. She'd spoken to Thoma about it later, and he'd said that not only had he also been absent, but the representative from the Midiridos Troupe—the third of the three sacred houses—had been as well.

In Irede, one's social status in the outside world didn't hold much meaning. However, Marquess Bughnan hadn't known this and had apparently been offended when they and the representatives of several other businesses hadn't made an appearance.

"Still, 'obsessively greedy'?" Sari asked. "You don't think he means to expand his influence in Irede, do you?"

It was true that the number of businesses in Irede under the patronage of Marquess Bughnan had been slowly increasing. She'd heard that he'd not only bought up courtesan houses but playhouses and breweries too. His extravagant use of outside money even made Sari frown. If those southern-owned establishments were intentionally harassing Pale Moon, then she couldn't stay silent. Even though she was young, and even though it had only been a short time since she'd succeeded the role, she was its proprietress.

And yet, Thoma placed his hand on her shoulder. "I'll look into it as well, so you don't have to worry alone. If he takes things too far, there are ways of dealing with him."

From the time of Irede's founding, the three sacred houses had always been the symbols of the town of myth. House Radi was the one that handled the majority of negotiations with the outside world. As Pale Moon was the most

reclusive of the three, there was likely an unspoken implication in Thoma's words: *We'll make the first move.* Despite being somewhat dissatisfied, Sari nodded.

Thoma smiled gently. "That's my cue to leave then. Don't get into any trouble, okay?"

"Huh? You're leaving?" Sari asked. She looked to the side and saw Isha smiling wryly. From the room tag in the woman's hand, she could tell that while Thoma had been intending to stay the night, he had likely changed his plans because of their conversation. She looked up at the man who she'd known for over a decade. "I'm sorry. And thank you, Thoma."

"Just doing my job. Oh, and if anyone fishy comes by, just call Xixu. He's *really* strong."

"I can't exactly make him slay our guests."

Even so, she couldn't deny that the shadeslayer's presence reassured her somewhat. Sari walked with Isha to see Thoma off.

Shortly after he strolled through the gate and disappeared into the night, two young men came through. They were holding what appeared to be letters of introduction and were examining their surroundings with curious eyes as they approached along the flagstone path.

Sari stepped out of the entryway to greet them. "Welcome. This is the courtesan house Pale Moon, unique in all of Irede and successor to the hidden myth. Here, the women reserve the right to choose their guests."

Her voice was dignified. Her countenance, though pretty, wore a penetrating quality that made those who saw it straighten their backs. Below her long eyelashes, her glistening blue eyes watched the two men.

"As such...please understand that you may not be chosen."

Roughly a thousand years had passed since the god had been summoned. The young girl, inheritor of a forgotten tradition, spoke softly. Her words were entrancing.

"Please, do come in. As long as wine still flows and music still plays, I will

welcome you.”

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The proprietress’ guest receiving room was far too large.

It had three tatami mat rooms and one bathroom, all of which were well-arranged and possessed a subdued beauty. The bathtub, which was made of plain wood, was large enough that even a tall man like him could stretch his legs out and still not reach halfway along its length. Although it had certainly been comfortable, it had also made him extremely restless. Unable to calm himself, he went ahead and used the hot water to wash the bathroom after he was done.

Hair still damp and dressed in a yukata—a type of kimono akin to a bathrobe—Xixu returned to one of the tatami mat rooms, where he would find a low table. Since his room was so impressive, he was curious about the outside scenery, but he had seen Sari purposefully latch the paper sliding window closed. He wasn’t a guest—at least not in that sense—so it was likely for the best if he refrained from doing anything unnecessary.

“A mythical bloodline...”

His first day in Irede had been very eventful. Of the three sacred houses, he had yet to meet somebody from the Midiridos Troupe, but Thoma had told him that most of the music he’d heard throughout town was played by their musicians, so he’d likely get that opportunity eventually.

The problem at hand was that Xixu had no idea what kind of information his liege wanted. But since the king had expressly chosen him instead of an intelligence specialist, he had no choice but to do things his own way.

Xixu retrieved a notebook from his personal effects and began writing down what he’d observed that day. He would make a clean copy later on and send it to the royal castle as part of his report. Although he hadn’t received any specific instruction regarding the form those should take, nor their frequency, he imagined that at least one letter a month was the bare minimum he should strive for.

While he wrote, he looked across the low table and found a teapot and

teacup, as well as three small tea caddies which Sari had brought when she'd led him to the room. Apparently, the young proprietress had noticed his fondness for tea in the flower room. He opened the tea caddies and found that they each contained fragrant tea leaves of excellent quality. Nearby was a note, which said: *Please don't hesitate to request hot water. We will bring some right away.*

"I feel like staying here will make me lose track of myself..."

Receiving perfect hospitality was surely comfortable for some, but Xixu simply felt restless. He got the hunch that if he were to become used to being treated like this, he'd lose the ability to do anything for himself.

That was why he had told Sari she didn't have to be polite toward him, but it didn't seem like he'd quite gotten his intention across. Then again, it may have been impertinent of him to ask that of somebody he'd only just met. Since she would be cooperating in his shadeslayer duties as a maiden, perhaps giving each other the due amount of respect and distance was the way to proceed. In which case, he'd have to demonstrate his own capabilities.

"I guess I'll brew some tea..."

Xixu loved tea and owned roughly a dozen or so varieties of leaves himself. He'd long since become familiar with the process of brewing it. Deciding to head to the kitchens to request some hot water so that he could do the rest on his own, he picked up one of the tea caddies and headed toward the door.

It was at that exact moment he heard the faint scream of a young girl.

Xixu put the tea caddy down, quickly grabbed his military sword, and ran out of his room down the long hallway.

The proprietress' room was deep at the back of the mansion, but he remembered the path he'd been led down on the way there. The scream sounded like it had come from outside. He ran toward the entryway, passing a startled courtesan accompanying a male guest. The hallway opened up as he reached a landing, and he descended the stairs. There was a group of courtesans below—had they heard the scream as well?

The women were all looking out beyond the entryway. Sari wasn't among

them. Driven by an unpleasant premonition, Xixu pushed his way through and stepped outside, barefoot. As soon as he did, he saw the figure of a girl with her back to him, standing outside the gate.

The maiden's silver hair shimmered a pale white as it caught the moonlight.

"Stop this."

Sari's voice was icier than he'd ever heard it, and it resounded through the surrounding darkness. Xixu, caught off guard, turned his gaze toward where she was looking.

Standing in the dimly lit gloom was a woman. She was tall for her gender, had disheveled black hair, and was restraining a girl with her left arm. The girl, who had frozen in obvious terror, wore the uniform of Pale Moon's maidservants.

Perhaps to reassure the girl, Sari gave her a small nod. "Let her go. What you're doing is meaningless."

"Shut up!" The hoarse voice could have belonged to a man or a woman. Bright red eyes shone through the darkness.

"Those eyes..."

At Xixu's involuntary mutter, Sari looked back over her shoulder. Upon seeing him, she gave the shadeslayer a strained smile.

"I assume you heard all the commotion. The fact that you can see those eyes for what they are must mean you do indeed possess the qualities of a shadeslayer."

"A shade...?"

Xixu looked back toward the woman who was holding the maidservant captive. Although her dull green kimono was in disarray, she looked like an ordinary woman. The only things setting her apart were her display of violence and the flickering red light deep within her eyes.

"She's a shade?" Xixu asked. "She looks human...and everybody can see her, can't they?"

Shades took the form of shadowy animals, and could not be seen nor touched by ordinary people. He'd never seen one in the shape of a human. And even if

she was a shade, it should have been impossible for a regular person to see her. Despite that, everybody present was staring at the woman lit by the moonlight with bated breath. What's more, she was even restraining the maidservant. Xixu couldn't make heads or tails of the situation.

Sari smiled at him, although it didn't reach her eyes. "In this town, shades possess physical form and borrow the guises of people, not animals."

"Physical people? Shades?"

"Yes. You can see the red eyes that prove it's a shade, can't you? That's because you're a shadeslayer. Most people don't have that ability. To them, those red eyes just look black."

The girl's gaze remained fixed on the shade as she spoke. The shade drew back before it, as though the proprietress's stare were a tangible force.

Sari glanced up at Xixu, who was now standing at her side. "It's understandable that you didn't know before you came to Irede, since it's a secret from the outside world...but didn't Thoma tell you?"

"No..." Xixu replied. "He said it was hard to understand without seeing for myself."

"That does sound like his brand of mischief."

"Mischief..."

Thoma had been right though—Xixu had the feeling that he might not have accepted it without seeing it for himself. Shades possessing physical bodies and taking on the forms of people seemed too unbelievable of a tale to swallow on word alone.

"Whatever the case, it's a shade, yes?" Xixu asked. "So there's no issue with me killing it?"

"Yes. Even though they may look like people, the town cannot persist if they are not slain."

Upon hearing the maiden's firm answer, Xixu unsheathed his military sword. "Stay back, please. I'll do something about the hostage."

Maiden or not, he doubted she possessed the capability to face a shade in

direct combat. The shade, upon seeing Xixu step forward to cover Sari, twisted its red eyes in hatred and glared at him.

“Shadeslayer, are you?” it asked.

“Let her go,” Xixu replied.

The captive girl had gone pale, and her breathing was ragged. But, perhaps understanding that letting her go would put it in an unfavorable position, the shade only clutched her tighter. It scoffed at Xixu in a low voice.

“I haven’t seen you before. Are you new? You should have picked another town and stayed out of trouble. Do you think seeing me will be enough to kill me, outsider?”

In other towns, the requirement for becoming a shadeslayer was being able to see shades, and one’s ability with a sword wasn’t particularly important. However, Irede had no need for that requirement. That the shade was looking down on him for being an outsider was understandable.

That being said, Xixu had no intention of letting it do so forever.

“You can be the judge of that when I’m done.” Xixu held his sword low and took a step forward. The shade backed away, perhaps because it couldn’t see any openings in his stance. The girl let out a small scream as she was dragged back.

It would be troublesome if he let it escape. He was confident that he wouldn’t lose to it in a fight but wasn’t sure what he’d do if it decided to run. As Xixu was considering his next move, a delicate white hand touched his arm.

The silver-haired girl stepped forward and stood at his side. “This may just be the perfect opportunity.”

“Saridi?”

“Allow me to show you what the maiden’s role entails.”

Before he could ask her what she was going to do, Sari stretched her right hand toward his chest. Her slender, graceful finger and its light pink nail touched the overlapping hems of his kimono.

No, her finger passed *through* the kimono and sunk into his body.

Xixu let out a silent cry of surprise. An intense, unknown force struck his heart. The shock was incomparable. A shudder passed through his entire body in an instant. Reflexively, he leaped back, creating some distance between himself and Sari.

However, when he shifted his eyes away from her wry smile to look down at his chest, he saw that there were no traces of any kind of wound.

“What was that...?”

“Everybody hates it before they get used to it.” Sari turned her gaze back to the shade. She held her hand out toward its glaring red eyes—the same hand she’d pierced Xixu’s chest with.

Under the moon’s illumination, her pale hand appeared to be light itself. Her features were reminiscent of a beautiful sculpture. Her silver hair, loosely tied up, swayed in a fashion that didn’t seem real. Xixu gazed at the sight of her for a few brief moments. It was like a painting had come to life.

Sari pointed at the shade with her elegant finger and spoke.

“By the old contract, I command you...”

It was a brief spell. Upon hearing it, a gentle numb sensation passed through Xixu’s heart. Its more obvious effect, however, had been to the shade.

The inhuman entity in human form screamed as though it had been physically struck. It tossed its hostage away and fell to all fours on the ground.

Xixu didn’t know what was happening. Sari smiled sweetly at the shade and called out to it as it tried to escape.

“But we’ve only just begun!”

She turned to look at Xixu, who had remained at a distance, and beckoned him over.

“I’ve sewed the shade to you,” Sari explained. “It won’t be able to get far now.”

“Is this your maiden ability?” Xixu asked.

“Yes. Once I’ve sewed something to you, you’ll be able to search for it as well,

by compelling it. Try an order. Say, ‘bind.’”

That was probably another spell. Still perplexed, Xixu nonetheless muttered “Bind” under his breath. The shade, still in the form of a woman, let loose a grating scream. Its body violently jerked up off the ground. At the same time, Xixu’s heart throbbed in pain.

Sari gave him a faint, wry smile. “Although you can compel it, it will take a toll on you as well.”

“You could’ve mentioned that earlier,” Xixu said.

“I thought it would be easier to understand if you tried it first, so...”

“Is that how everybody in this town does things?”

“Of course not. I’ll be more careful next time.”

“Please do. If I still prove to be incapable of understanding, then I don’t mind if you just leave me to reap what I sow.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m not like Thoma.” Sari, with a calm look on her face, returned her gaze to the shade. “Still, now the shade cannot run away from you. It is tied to you like a lover and bound by your spell... Such is the way of things now.”

The girl closed her eyes and smiled. She looked captivating in a way that simply seemed wrong—so much so that the idea of touching her seemed too terrible to consider.

A courtesan waiting for the arrival of a single person—that was the thought that came to Xixu’s mind. His heart, still feeling the aftereffects of the shock from earlier, spasmed erratically.

Sari, perhaps noticing that he hadn’t moved, urged him on, her eyes still closed.

“Go ahead.”

The maiden’s voice was neither kind nor cruel—it simply was. It was so level that the girl could have been mistaken for neutrality itself. Drawn by its pull, Xixu stepped forward.

The hostage had already run away. The shade was crawling along the street, headed for a nearby thicket to make its escape. Xixu, still barefoot, approached its back, step by step. Sari's voice called out from behind.

"You can't run."

Upon hearing the clear verdict, the shade trembled violently. Red eyes looked back at Xixu bitterly.

"Shadeslayer. If only you..."

What followed were not words. The shade, its hair disheveled, sprang up off its four limbs high into the air, obstructing the light of the moon as it flew toward the young man holding his sword at the ready. Its hand flashed out, seeking to rid Xixu of his head.

But Xixu simply looked up at it, heart devoid of emotion.

"I see. So their physical ability surpasses that of humans."

He avoided its frighteningly fast attack by taking a step to the right. Then, without any pause, he slashed his sword upward.

It felt just like cutting through a person. Xixu ignored the severed arm as it thudded onto the ground, instead approaching the screaming, thrashing shade. Its face, smeared with blood and grit, looked up at him pleadingly.

"Wait. Don't kill me."

Its piteous voice sounded like that of a child's. The blood flowing from the stump of the woman's arm stained her kimono. Xixu looked at the blood, then at her trembling body.

The barest moment passed. A girl's voice rang in his ears. *The town cannot persist if they are not slain.* Pale moonlight slid over his blood-stained sword. Xixu drew a shallow breath.

"Shades must return to the earth."

The woman's face contorted in despair. The next moment, her head flew off and disappeared into the darkness of the night.

With the shade's death, its body vanished too, along with its blood and

severed arm. Xixu noticed that his blade was now clean, and after a gentle flick, he returned it to its scabbard.

Upon turning around, he saw that Sari was looking at him with a slightly apologetic expression.

“I’m afraid I may have left you with an unpleasant memory.”

“I don’t mind. This is my job.”

The girl gave a faint, bitter smile and lowered her head, but when she caught sight of Xixu’s feet, she turned back toward the mansion. A maidservant soon came running, holding a pair of wooden clogs intended for guests. Sari took them, walked over to the young man, and knelt down on the street. Xixu had stretched out his hand to take them, but he was left staring in surprise.

“My apologies for not noticing,” Sari said.

“Wait, you don’t—”

The girl grabbed his foot, placed it on her knee, and began brushing it free of dirt. Her pale fingers carefully plucked away gravel and brushed off grains of sand. Xixu averted his eyes from the captivating sight. When she’d finished and placed the clogs on his feet, he felt a restlessness that he couldn’t put into words.

Sari stood up, and he bit back his discomfort and spoke.

“I’m not a guest. Don’t treat me like one. I can do that much myself.”

Sari paused briefly before replying. “This is simply how I am. I don’t mean to patronize you.”

“I don’t have a taste for making maidens kneel to me. You and I are equals. Treat me as one of your collea— Treat me normally. That is...if you don’t mind.”

“Normally?” Sari tilted her head as though in contemplation. Then, in a childish gesture that could have been either bafflement or hesitation, she looked up at Xixu. “Is that okay?”

“It is.”

She laughed, covering her mouth as she did so. It was a happy expression, and

it suited a girl of her age. Xixu thought it was adorable.



2. Anomaly

“You *can* do it, right?”

The voice of his employer, a nobleman, was laced with fear and greed. Standing in the spacious storehouse he’d been provided with to use as a workshop and tormented by an intense headache, he gave his answer. “As I said before, yes. I’ll fulfill my assignment to the letter.”

As a shaman, he had completed every job he’d ever been hired for. There had been that one time when he’d narrowly avoided being apprehended by the authorities, but even then he had successfully accomplished the commission itself. Although his client *had* died, unfortunately.

To distract himself from his unending headache, he clutched a loop of black quartz prayer beads tightly. The storehouse had a bare earthen floor and was filled with the reek of death. The scent was no surprise—there were two corpses piled in the corner: the “materials” provided by his employer for this job. They weren’t residents or visitors to Irede, just people his employer had brought in from the outside for this sole purpose.

Sourcing materials locally at the current stage of their plan could have led to the town’s residents catching wind of the shaman’s activities. Since shades possessed physical forms here, he needed to complete the bare minimum of experimentation before considering acting with any less discretion.

His employer was throwing intermittent looks at the cage beside the corpses. “Can... Can you really control those things?”

Behind the bars were two shades, barefoot and dressed in kimonos. What truly set them apart from others of their kind, however, were the red symbols etched into their foreheads and cheeks—the words of a spell. The shaman glanced at the shades that he’d created from the provided materials.

“I can. That’s what the spell is for.”

His confidence in his ability to create and control shades was unshakeable. There were still some issues with commanding those he’d created in Irede—

perhaps because of their physical bodies—but eventually, he would overcome them. This was how he had completed his commissions so many times before, sowing chaos wherever his jobs took him.

If too many shades occupied a town, the minds of its people would begin to go askew, causing them to doubt and quarrel with one another. Or rather, that was the case elsewhere. Here in Irede, where they could possess physical forms, the changes would be even more apparent.

“However, rousing shades is the extent of my assignment,” he said. “Whether you are able to seize control of Irede in the aftermath is entirely up to you.”

“I-I know that! I’ll figure something out—I just need those arrogant sacred houses out of my way! The Pale Moon maiden’s just a little girl. I already have some ideas on how to topple her from her high horse.”

The cowardice in his employer’s voice was plain to hear, but behind it was an inseparable layer of greed—a greed that refused to relent until it was sated. It spoke of wanting to rip away this beautiful town’s traditions—its very pillars—and reduce it to being a simple possession. His employer had accused others of arrogance, but anybody listening would have been astounded at the hypocrisy.

Be that as it may, the shaman himself had no particular opinion on the matter. Work was work. The only thing was...*his head had been killing him ever since he’d come here.* It felt like the inside of his skull was being chewed at by worms, and it only worsened each time he used his spells. Each pang was accompanied by the premonition that he was being drawn downward, somewhere deep beneath the earth. It almost felt like there was a shadow at his back, whispering in his ear, telling him to stain this place with blood. And was something there, slithering at his feet, or was he just—?

He let out a silent cry of shock and jumped back. He could’ve sworn he’d just seen a black snake underfoot...but upon closer inspection, it was nothing. Nothing but the dark, blood-stained soil. His entire body broke into a cold sweat, and he wiped his brow with a trembling hand.

“What’s wrong?” his employer asked.

“N-Nothing...”

There was something wrong with this town—but he stopped himself from pursuing that line of thought any further, almost clicking his tongue at his own paranoia. His headache had worsened. He could hardly think straight. He had to pull himself together. If a practitioner's will faltered, the leash on the shades they created would slip from their grasp. He clenched his fist tightly to distract from the pain in his head.

"Fear not. I will grant you the chaos you wish for, here in this town of myth. No matter how beautiful its pleasure districts are, I'm sure its establishments will plummet in value once sullied with a little blood—ripe for a cheap buyout, I'd say."

And in compensation, he would be rewarded with the means to live luxuriously for several years without needing to practice his trade.

If all went well, that would be all there was to this transaction—and nothing more.

※

The two weeks since Xixu had arrived in Irede had passed by in the blink of an eye. Within that time, he'd encountered three shades. Two of them were thanks to reports sent in by those with the ability to see their red eyes, and the third was one he'd discovered during his patrols. The shades truly looked no different from people and possessed an impressively threatening degree of physical ability, but for Xixu, defeating them was hardly any trouble.

That was, however, *if* he could manage to get them to fight him like he had with the one he'd met on his first day. The unfortunate truth of the matter was that shades came in all kinds of temperaments.

"You should have just called for me."

The young maiden looked at him with wide blue eyes as she spoke. The surprise and commiseration within them were no doubt a result of seeing Xixu dripping wet from head to toe.

It was early evening, and the young man had just climbed out of one of Irede's canals. He combed his soaked bangs back. "A shade in the form of a woman grabbed a child and jumped into the canals."

Xixu had spotted its red eyes during his patrol, but when he chased after it, it snatched up a nearby child and suddenly leaped into one of the town's canals. While he'd hastily pursued it and managed to rescue the child, he'd then been stuck with the task of chasing the shade as it escaped through the waterways. Once he finally caught up to and slayed it, he'd then climbed out only to chance across Sari on her way home from shopping. And since, for one reason or another, he still hadn't asked for her assistance yet, it was rather awkward that she was seeing him like this.

The girl wiped the water from Xixu's face with a handkerchief. "Irede's shades come in all kinds. Their physical forms are born from the minds of people—how we perceive ourselves and others. Those thoughts are what affect their behavior."

"From how we perceive others? So they're reflections of people...imagined by people?"

"Yes. Which is why some take the forms of individuals who actually exist. They can also look like somebody's ideal woman. Records even tell of shades who blended in with courtesans to receive their own guests."

"That's kind of incredible..."

It was surprising enough that shades could take on physical forms. He couldn't even begin to imagine them living among people.

As Xixu made to remove his soaked, heavy jacket, the young maiden spoke. "Will you come to Pale Moon? I'll draw you a bath."

"No, I'm fine... I'll return to my lodgings. I need to write a report for the militia anyway."

He could hardly track water all over their mansion. It was best that he just continued through these back streets—where there would be no tourists—to return to his dormitory. He began walking along the canal, and Sari hurried over to join him at his side.

"Militia uniform or not, you'll seem awfully strange looking like that. I'll accompany you back; you'll draw less suspicion that way."

"I'd consider a drenched person walking next to a maiden to be more

suspicious, personally...”

“That’s because you’re the wary type, Xixu.”

The girl smiled happily. Xixu, though, didn’t forget who he was looking at—she was the town’s very own princess. He’d chanced across her several times in the last two weeks, and he’d already seen how the town’s residents both acknowledged and cherished her, although that was only to be expected given that she was the proprietress of the most noteworthy courtesan house in Irede. Truth be told, he reckoned a person could get away with looking as odd as they wished, so long as she was standing by their side, smiling. That was simply how much weight her presence carried.

He’d already sent a report to the king, but his liege’s only response had been: “Make yourself useful to her.” He had no idea what that meant—if anything, based on their roles of maiden and shadeslayer, she was technically supposed to help him. Still, expressing as much would have been insubordinate, so he’d simply accepted it.

Sari looked up at the twilight sky, a red cloth bag in her hand. “Are you more comfortable with this town now?”

“I have a rough understanding of all the main roads. The back streets too.”

In addition to the roads used by visitors, the town had a complicated network of alleyways that only its residents used. It was only there that one would find wide canals like the one Xixu was now looking down at.

“These are deeper than I thought they would be. I’d guess it’s around five times the size of the ones I’ve seen before.”

“Ah. It’s because a lot of snow on the northern mountain melts and flows down to Irede. House Radi's breweries are based here so that they can use the water.”

“Is that so...?”

The water was definitely on the cleaner side, but it was so deep he couldn’t see the bottom. He might have wondered whether it posed a danger to the town’s children if not for the fact that they appeared to be quite used to it. Indeed, two of them were up ahead now, running around with sticks in their

hands. Upon hearing their cheerful laughter, Xixu smiled slightly.

“Were you like that as a child as well?” he asked.

“No. I was born in the capital. We had an estate there, though I visited Pale Moon from time to time.”

“The capital?”

That was unexpected. He’d assumed she’d been born in Irede since she was descended from the town’s maidens.

“It was originally intended for me to live at Pale Moon, but when I happened to encounter a shade here as a child, I wasn’t able to use my powers as a maiden against it. As a result, a shadeslayer was forced to retire, and I was returned to our estate in the capital. That’s where I studied from then on, making occasional visits to Pale Moon. So I never had the chance to explore the rest of the town all that much.”

Sari smiled, causing her long eyelashes to flicker. “And now that I’m the proprietress, I live in Irede. I like it better here; the town’s disposition suits me more. How about you, Xixu? Is Irede to your liking?”

“I have no complaints. And every person I’ve met has been more than helpful.”

The many unwritten rules had him floundering on occasion, but his fellow militia members and the residents he encountered during his patrols had all been kind to him. He’d since met with Thoma a number of times too and was now on good enough terms with the man to call him a friend. He’d likely gone out of his way to check in on the town’s newest shadeslayer and make sure he was doing okay.

Xixu told Sari as much, and her face lit up into a beaming smile. The bright, carefree air about her made her expression seem like a blossoming flower. As a maiden and a proprietress, she had a different face for every occasion, but this smile was the least embellished of them all, and for that, it was lovely.

Her large eyes, like light trapped within the cleanest shard of ice, looked up at Xixu. “They’re kind because you show such sincerity when trying to learn about Irede. You weren’t even that bothered when I told you shades take physical

form here.”

“I was surprised though. Why is that the case, anyway? I haven’t heard of them doing so anywhere else.”

“Hmm... You know how this town was established, don’t you?”

“You mean the story of the ancient king and the god?”

“Yes, exactly. Not only is the story true, but much of the power of that age still lingers in Irede today.”

“What? The god’s power? You’re saying that’s why Irede shades are different?”

The idea sounded outrageous. The children on the opposite bank of the canal ran by, waving at Sari and calling out, “It’s Miss Pale Moon!” Sari smiled and waved back.

“It also might be because this is a pleasure town; emotions run thick here. To be honest, there are some shades I wouldn’t mind leaving in peace—the ones who wish no harm upon those around them. But I know that even if their natures aren’t violent, their presence still invites wickedness and sorrow.”

“In that sense, they’re the same as regular shades.”

“Yes. But unlike the ones in other towns, having physical bodies means they can’t pass through walls or shift their shape. If you happen to spot one, please do call for me.”

“Ah, I see. That makes sense.”

She was right that having actual bodies would mean certain restrictions for shades. Since some ran the moment they saw a shadeslayer, perhaps it *would* be better if he called for Sari whenever he received a report about one.

“Be that as it may, Saridi, you have your work as a proprietress to take care of.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. The other shadeslayers don’t. In fact, I went into town just yesterday after one of them called for me. Somebody who could see red eyes made a report, so we searched the neighborhood and I sewed it to the shadeslayer.”

“You...have a point.”

Irede had five shadeslayers in total. Xixu had only met one of the others so far, but all of them were receiving reports and carrying on with their work. Even if he was refraining from calling on Sari, she would be going out to help the others anyway. She’d likely already accounted for her work as a maiden in her daily schedule.

“And, in the end, Irede is my town. I need to do my part in keeping it safe.”

Her gaze was directed straight ahead, resolute. It spoke of how a girl of only sixteen lived her life. Whether she considered that way of life lacking in freedom or not, Xixu did not yet know enough about her to tell.

When the militia garrison came into view ahead, Xixu spoke. “Could you wait outside for me? I’ll quickly change and escort you back to Pale Moon.”

“What? No, that’s okay. I came because I was escorting *you.*”

“It’s getting dark. I can’t let you walk home alone.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m a person of the night anyway.”

“Even so.”

At his repeated insistence, her blank look made way for a slight narrowing of her blue eyes. Suddenly, they took on a deeper, meaningful shine. Her scarlet lips twitched up into a faint smile.

“You think me a child, don’t you, Xixu?”

“I...”

It was a difficult question. At the very least, Xixu did not consider the girl—who was five years his junior—to be an adult. However, neither did he look down on her as a child. He thought of her as somewhere in between, a few steps away from being an adult. Just like how the deep twilight around them barely preceded the night.

“Whether you were a child or an adult, I would still escort you back,” Xixu said. “This is for my own peace of mind. I’d appreciate it if you indulged me.”

Even if this town was her home, it was a home visited by a never-ending

stream of outsiders. Sari looked at him curiously. Her eyes surveyed the drenched young man from head to toe. Just as he prepared himself for whatever she had to say, she gave him a broad smile.

“Okay then. Please escort me.”

“Are you sure?”

He’d expected a scolding—not for her to agree quite so readily.

“Yes. You’ll catch a cold at this rate otherwise. Oh, but in exchange...”

A pale finger poked Xixu in the chest. The maiden of a mythical bloodline smiled sweetly and spoke in a soft tone.

“Next time, please make sure you call for me.”

Xixu paused before eventually saying, “Understood.” He couldn’t really argue with that at all, so he simply raised his hands in surrender.

She burst into delighted laughter. Far above her, he could see the newly waxing moon.

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The duties of Pale Moon’s proprietress mainly consisted of behind-the-scenes routine work—checking in with the courtesans, supervising the maidservants, ordering food and alcohol from their regular suppliers, and recording those orders in her ledger. Once the sun set, she would light the hanging lantern and greet guests at the entryway up until the house closed its doors. Certain guests preferred to simply talk, so occasionally she would also serve as their conversation partner in the reception room.

Shopping for miscellaneous supplies was another one of the proprietress’s many duties, and it was no less important for it. Sari, note in hand, walked down a main street, studying the nearby stores. It was early afternoon, the weather was bright and clear, and she could hear the sound of somebody playing a flute.

She sighed. “Everybody’s so picky...”

Most of Pale Moon’s women disliked venturing outdoors, instead choosing to hole up inside. Taking their orders and purchasing face powders, lipstick,

perfume, and the like was also Sari's job. Her own supplies were periodically sent to her from her family's estate in the capital, and while she wore whatever cosmetics had been chosen for her, the courtesans of Pale Moon were very particular. She'd even occasionally receive vague orders such as "get me something new," and sometimes a courtesan wouldn't be able to decide on anything at all.

Sari was currently on one such shopping trip, and the scent of an unfamiliar perfume had drawn her to peer into a certain shop. The mark dyed onto its entryway curtain denoted its southern origins, and she started to walk over to it.

It was at that moment somebody grabbed her from behind by the shoulder. "Out shopping, Sari?"

She jumped. "Don't scare me like that..."

Upon turning around, she was met with the face of an old friend. The man was dressed not in the navy blue uniform of the militia, but in an ink-black kimono. His blond hair and blue eyes were typical features of a person hailing from the south, but he himself had been born in Irede.

The man smiled warmly and pulled her into his arms.



“Long time no see. I’ve missed you.”

“Please let go of me. It’s uncomfortably warm...”

They may have been in Irede, but being pulled into an embrace in broad daylight on the street could only draw the wrong kind of attention. Sari twisted out of the man’s arms to make her escape. Her pale hand brushed against the sword at his waist—a katana—and caused the piece of yellow quartz hanging from its decorative cord to rattle.

Sari stared up at his face. He could have passed for a nobleman’s son if only he ever drew it into a serious expression. “I didn’t think you’d return so soon.”

“I only just got back. Seeing you was my first priority.”

“I’d hoped you would stay away for longer.”

His reaction to hearing that was to reach his arms out toward her a second time. She hurriedly jumped back to avoid being caught.

Eid Rukud. Until Xixu had arrived, he had been the shadeslayer closest in age to Sari. Her reaction prompted a dissatisfied grumble from him.

“How cold. I went all that way just for you, and this is what I get?”

“*I* didn’t tell you to go anywhere. Pale Moon’s signature wasn’t on your assignment.”

The truth only made Eid’s grin grow wider. Perhaps it was because of his easygoing features, but such expressions made him look oddly childish.

However, Sari knew that he was one of the best swordsmen in Irede’s militia. That was why, after a wealthy merchant who was a regular customer had placed a request with the long-established businesses of Irede, they had chosen him to be the one to make the trip to a town in the south.

The merchant hadn’t been a guest of Pale Moon, which was why Sari’s name hadn’t joined the other signatures on the proposal documents. However, if asked, she wouldn’t have minded signing it at all, for the simple reason that whenever Eid was in town, he would always seek her out like this.

“If you’ve only just returned, why don’t you go get some rest?”

“Sounds great,” Eid said. “I’ll see you at Pale Moon tonight?”

“I’ll make sure to write you a letter of introduction for somewhere else. Actually, how about I do that right now?”

Whenever Eid came to Pale Moon, he’d be his usual clingy self, and she would never be able to get any work done. That shadeslayers were always busy was her saving grace—it meant that he could never stay for long.

Pursuing that line of thought brought Xixu to mind.

“By the way, Eid...”

“What’s up? Finally decided to choose me as your guest?

“Absolutely not. Have you met the new shadeslayer yet?”

“The *what*?”

The displeasure in Eid’s voice was almost tangible. Sari, realizing her mistake, made to say something else, but the man’s hand swiftly grabbed her by the chin before she could. He forced her to look up and brought his face in close.

“Have you met him, Sari?”

“O-Of course. He’s a shadeslayer. He’d run into trouble later on if I didn’t meet with him.”

“Then let him. You shouldn’t be meeting with anybody fishy.”

“He’s *not* fishy. Thoma brought him.”

Thoma was one of the very few people Sari had complete trust in. She’d known him since her time living in the capital. He would never have brought anybody untoward to her, and she was already well aware of just how overly serious Xixu’s personality was.

Eid, however, narrowed his pale blue eyes and stared back at her. “Sari, you can’t let your guard down for just anybody. Haven’t you heard about the strange rumors going around the capital recently?”

“Rumors?”

Sari had spent all her time at Pale Moon recently; she hadn’t returned to the capital in over a month. Thoma hadn’t mentioned anything to her either. Upon

reading her confused expression, Eid sighed.

“Not here. Come with me, Sari.”

“Come where?”

After he let go of her chin, she stepped back and made a little distance. Looking around, she saw that some passing tourists were sending inquisitive looks at them—likely because they’d seen two attractive people arguing—but the people of Irede seemed entirely indifferent, at least on the surface. She didn’t know whether that was because they were used to seeing quarrels between a man and a woman or if they were just feigning disinterest while they eavesdropped.

While Sari was considering whether she should use this opportunity to escape, he held a hand out toward her.

“A teahouse. Or anywhere we can get a private room, really.”

“But...I shouldn’t be alone with you, Eid.”

“Who told you that?”

“Thoma.”

The frown on Eid’s face grew larger. The overly familiar shadeslayer had always been on bad terms with Thoma. More precisely, Thoma didn’t bother to give Eid the time of day, and Eid openly hated the very sight of the man, despite Thoma being her surrogate older brother. If pushed, Sari personally would have sided with Thoma, but more relevant was her desire to not have her work interrupted.

Eid was a childhood friend nine years her elder, but she considered him to be more of a close relative. She prioritized almost everything else above him though, and outside of her work as a maiden, generally treated him coldly.

Eid looked sulkily at the girl who was maintaining a distance just barely out of his reach. “Sari...”

“Hey, don’t— Oh, right. I need to buy some tea candies. Will you come with me?”

If their standoff continued, there was a chance he would pull her into a hug

again. Her attempt to placate him was blatant, but upon seeing her press her hands together as she made her request, Eid's expression relaxed into a smile.

"When you ask like that, how can I refuse?"

"Thank you, Eid."

The two of them turned a nearby corner and left the main street. As they passed through the back alleyways on their way to the tea candy shop, Sari looked up at the man walking beside her.

"So, what did you mean by 'rumors'?"

"They say the king's thinking of dissolving Irede."

"Whuh?"

Sari couldn't have given a more vacant reply if she'd tried.

"Dissolve? Why?" she asked.

"You know how the new king's been making all those reforms ever since he came into power last year, right?"

"I do. It's impressive, considering his young age. He's still thirty-three or so, isn't he?"

"You're talking like none of this concerns you, Sari. His next target is this very town."

"It's— What?" Her reply came out even more confused than her previous one. Sari tilted her head to look up at Eid. "But this town is..."

"It's been held sacred since the age of myth, yeah. But it's not as if that's an actual written law. Just an understanding that carried over when this country was founded—nothing more than an old privilege we've been able to keep."

Irede held tacit autonomy in exchange for the taxes it paid, but this wasn't so much an attempt to curry favor with the king as it was an investment into the country that owned it. In fact, the nations that had owned and supported Irede —a town famed across the entire continent—had often been able to leverage the town's significant taxes and human connections to bring about eras of prosperity.

Establishing this semi-equal footing was how the town of myth had flourished to this day.

To Sari, a resident of the town herself, the news that the new king wished to dismantle this state of affairs came as such a shock that she couldn't wrap her head around it. Seeing her unhappy expression, Eid made a sour face and continued.

"It's hard to understand, I know, but who are we to judge the king's plans? All those other places that got hit with his reforms thought they were safe with their unwritten agreements too. Just goes to show Irede's not an exception."

"But to dissolve *this* town, of all places?"

She swallowed her next words. *That's just plain ignorant.* Instead, she let loose a small sigh.

Perhaps she looked dejected to Eid because he gently rubbed her downcast head. "Irede can get you a lot of money and power if you use it well. The king probably wants to put a check on people like that. House Radi have maintained their nobility no matter what country was in power at the time, and the Midiridos Troupe has connections with *everybody* via their master performers. There's no shortage of people who'd like to buddy up to either house. Even the king can't ignore the influence of traditions that have been around since the age of myth. There's no wonder why he's being cautious."

"But that's..."

Eid was speaking the truth. The god of myth had asked for three offerings, and the descendants of those who had provided two of them—fine drink and music—still enjoyed a loosely-policed prosperity today. Because of this, there were many who wished to establish ties with them for their own gain. But be that as it may, Irede was still a sacred town.

Seeing her despondent expression, Eid replied with a wry smile. "It must be rough from Pale Moon's perspective. You're in charge of the third sacred offering, but you've always quietly kept to yourselves. The rumors *are* true. Best you keep an ear to the ground."

Sari's reply came delayed. "I will..."

“So don’t go trusting anyone from the capital, okay? Especially people like Thoma.”

“Don’t tell me you just wanted to say *that*?”

She suddenly felt as though the entirety of their serious conversation had all been for the sake of Eid bringing up his personal grudge. She fixed the shameless man with a cold stare, but he simply looked back with his blue eyes and beamed at her.

The two of them turned right, down a twisting alleyway. A short while before they would reach her usual tea candy shop, Eid took her hand. She came to a stop, and he placed a kiss on her soft palm.

“I’ve gotta go now, Sari, but don’t forget what I just told you.”

“I won’t.”

“Be especially careful around the shadeslayer from the capital. He could be in the king’s pocket, for all we know.”

Eid said no more and soon disappeared around a corner. Now alone, she muttered a reply to herself.

“In the king’s pocket? Xixu’s not like that...”

If anything, she thought he was the capable and diligent type who nevertheless did all their work behind the scenes and was never appreciated enough for it. Shadeslayers didn’t work under a commission system or anything remotely similar, but he went on patrols to hunt down and kill shades of his own volition. She was actually worried that somebody would take advantage of *him* at this rate.

But that wasn’t the only thing weighing on her mind.

“Dissolve Irede...?” she murmured to herself.

How much of that was true? Eid had an irritating, twisted personality, so it was possible that he’d exaggerated the story to paint Thoma in a bad light. But even if that was the case, the idea of the town being dissolved couldn’t have sprung up from nowhere, could it?

Sari stayed deep in thought as she entered the tea candy shop and finished

with her purchases. By the time she'd finished making her rounds at the other stores, the afternoon had all but passed into evening.

There wasn't much time left before she had to go back and light the lantern. After realizing this, Sari quickened her pace home. Maybe it was because it was dusk, but the paths along the canals, away from the main streets, were empty of people. Sari looked at the reflections of the red lantern lights on the dark surface of the water.

From the time of her birth until now, the town had gone unchanged. People had come and gone, and buildings had been replaced, of course, but the character and ambience of the town had been eternally preserved. Sari had thought that was the natural way of things here. But the thought of the king dissolving it made her wonder—would Irede meet its end in her lifetime?

"If it does, what will become of me?"

She couldn't imagine a future after the town and Pale Moon were gone, no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps returning to the capital was an option for her, but that wasn't a true solution.

Sari breathed a small sigh but raised her gaze. Several figures had come running around the corner up ahead. Leading them was a man who looked to be surveying his surroundings, and upon noticing Sari, he gave a start and drew back. She couldn't see his face; it was too dark. The group of figures, carrying something large, hurriedly ran off into the night.

"What was that about...?"

As Sari approached the corner of the alleyway they had from, she noticed a murky puddle of liquid. An unpleasant reek assaulted her nose as she drew nearer. What she saw shocked her speechless.

It was a huge pool of blood. But whoever it belonged to was gone.

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It depended on the area you were in, but almost all of the buildings in the back streets had their shutters down during the day, indulging in a deep sleep to prepare for the night. Here and there, their faded paint threatened to peel off. The stone walls of the alleyways cast dark shadows onto their intricate

network of paths. On the heels of a young man, Sari ran down them as though she were sewn to him.

Xixu glanced back at her. She was dressed in her white kimono, and her brow and nape were drenched with sweat. Her pace was unsteady too, her shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath. He held his hand up to stop her.

“I’ll go on ahead. Take your time catching up.”

“But...I...”

Before she could finish, Xixu ran ahead, increasing the speed of his stride. She realized he had likely been holding back because of her. Not a moment passed before he disappeared from sight. Conceding the issue, Sari relaxed her pace.

“Can’t...breathe...”

She had worked with shadeslayers many times before, but this was the first time it had ever been so demanding. Despite her already having cast a spell on him, she thought *her* heart would burst before his.

That wasn’t Xixu’s fault, however—it was simply that the number of shades had increased.

They had already slain the first shade he’d called her out for today, but then they’d just kept coming across one after the other. The one they were chasing now was the fourth, and the child’s form it’d taken had given it the agility to evade them with ease.

Sari walked after Xixu, trying to catch her breath. She hadn’t quite managed to sew this particular shade to him, but she *had* marked it, and this meant they could track it through the twisting alleyways. Only she could see the red beads occasionally strewn about, however. After following them past her third corner, she finally caught sight of Xixu’s back.

“Oh...”

She didn’t have a clear view from the angle she was at. But she did see the young man bring his military sword down upon something at his feet.

A muffled sound rang out, and then the red beads vanished as though they had melted into the ground. Sari, knowing that meant the shade had been

ended, took a breath. The young man turned around, and, upon noticing her, his eyes widened.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m...”

“I’m?”

“I’m useless...”

She was only holding him back, chasing after him like this. She hung her head, and he stared at her in surprise.

“Not at all. You sewed the last three to me just fine.”

Sari let out a brief whine. She was grateful for his words, but she’d wanted to do *more.* She hurried over to begin unraveling the half-cast spell she’d applied. Upon touching the chest of his uniform, she heard a short, choked exclamation drift down from above her head. She looked up and saw that Xixu had turned his face to the side, expression drawn into a grimace.

“Are you still not used to the spell?” she asked.

“That’s...not it,” he replied. “Fix your kimono first.”

“What?”

She looked down and saw that her white kimono was hopelessly askew with the chest area wide open. Even a cheap courtesan wouldn’t have dressed so shamelessly. Sari hurriedly pulled the hems closed.

“I-I can’t believe I was running around like that!”

“I don’t think anybody saw you.”

“What about you?”

“I saw nothing.”

“Is that so?”

If Xixu was saying it, then it must have been true. Sari quickly readjusted her kimono and pulled her ornate hairpin out of her disheveled hair. A long cascade of silver slid down her back, some of it sticking to the damp nape of her neck.

After she unraveled the spell she'd cast on Xixu, the two began to walk along the alleyway side by side.

"I've never encountered four in a single day before," Sari said.

"Really? I was thinking this is usual for Irede."

"That would be ridiculous... We usually only get around five to ten every half-month."

That meant that today's numbers were abnormal. Sari looked up at the young man beside her and studied him closely.

"Maybe shades just really like you, Xixu."

"I doubt that."

"Right, of course..."

She'd been joking, but if such a person actually existed, it would mean no end of trouble. For one thing, they'd obviously be an ill match for Irede.

Xixu gave her an exasperated look. "More importantly, you should be more careful. I'm sure you haven't forgotten the incident from the other day."

"Yes..."

In the end, they hadn't found out who that pool of blood belonged to. However, they could assume that it was human blood, and there had been talk of a maidservant from a certain courtesan house going missing during a shopping trip. There had been track marks near the puddle too, as though something had been dragged. The current theory was that the bleeding person had been taken away by somebody—the group Sari had seen, in all likelihood. The militia's investigation was ongoing, and they were patrolling the streets, but no further progress had been made so far.

"Unpleasant, isn't it?" Sari said. "Both the possibility that someone died and that nobody's been able to find them either. It makes you think there's evil intent behind it all."

"It does," Xixu replied. "I doubt the victim was able to move under their own strength, considering how much blood they lost. They were likely wrapped in something and taken away. The footprints left behind indicated multiple

people. That group you saw was carrying something large, right?”

“Yes. I couldn’t see well, but it might have been big enough to be a person.”

If only she’d been a little faster, she might have been able to stop them. Sari’s beautiful face darkened. Beside her, Xixu spoke in a murmur.

“One set of footprints was barefoot. That has to be...”

“Has to be what?”

Xixu made a face that looked as though she’d caught him red-handed. The young man blatantly averted his gaze. “No, nothing. We’re still looking into it. Nothing’s for certain yet.”

“But you were about to say something, right?”

“Just my personal conjecture. Nothing you should concern yourself over.”

“I don’t care if you’re just guessing! Say it!” Sari grabbed Xixu’s sleeve. “Tell me, tell me!”

The shadeslayer ignored her and kept walking, but even after some time had passed, she refused to give up. At last, Xixu gave in.

“Several footprints were discovered near the pool of blood, believed to have been left by someone walking about with bare feet,” he explained. “But unlike the other tracks, they showed no signs of leaving. Considering their position, it’s doubtful they came from the victim. This is only a guess, but I believe this barefoot person attacked the victim, and then both of them were taken away.”

“Taken away? The attacker *and* the victim? But why?”

“Likely because the culprits wanted to delay the incident from being discovered. I believe they didn’t expect the barefoot person to attack someone else, and that if the act came to light, multiple people would have been inconvenienced. But this is just conjecture.” Xixu emphasized that last part. “Please don’t put too much faith in it.”

Then, he continued with a question. “Incidentally, how often are people killed by shades here?”

“Not often... Maybe a few times a year. Shades come in all sorts here, and

they all have their own ways of thinking. So while some bear malice toward people, it's rare for any to become excessively violent. Most are stopped before any deaths occur."

A cold light flashed within Sari's blue eyes. "And...even if shades were to kill someone, the incident would be foolishly covered up."

The girl's voice had come out lower than usual. Upon noticing Xixu's startled gaze, she quickly gave him the trace of a bitter smile. "I'm sorry. You're still investigating. It's just...I hope this is resolved soon. I don't have much time left."

Sari looked up as she spoke. The pale moon hung there in the daytime sky, waxing larger by the day.

Xixu frowned. "Right. How many more days can you work?"

"Three, I think."

In three days, it would be a half-moon. Afterward, Sari would be unable to work as a maiden for a while. It was inconvenient, but this was the restriction imposed upon her. Sari looked up at the side profile of the young man next to her.

"I'll be a burden for a little while, but things should quieten down with the full moon."

"I thought you said you wouldn't get your powers back until the next half-moon?"

"That's true of my maiden powers, yes, but shades should stop appearing as we approach the full moon. To be honest, their numbers should dwindle as the moon waxes in general, but...I wonder why they've been increasing instead?"

She was fairly certain nothing like this had happened in her grandmother's generation. If she was being honest, it gave her a bad feeling. She began to ponder a possible cause, only to be interrupted by Xixu's unadorned response.

"In other towns, the full moon is when shades appear in the largest numbers."

"Irede is the opposite. We get the most during the new moon and the least when it's full."

That was why, even though she would be unable to work as a maiden, they would only need to endure several days before calm returned to the town. She'd gone through this exact cycle many times before.

"That's convenient," Xixu said. "It's as if the cycle is attuned to you."

"Wha...?" Sari flinched, but the young man's gaze was directed at the path ahead. Xixu's words had likely been his mere thoughts on the matter—not suspicion of why Irede was different from other towns.

Sari breathed an inward sigh of relief. She didn't want him pursuing that line of questioning any further. There would only ever be one person in her lifetime to whom she would tell this town's truth to.

"Or perhaps, I..."

Was there a possibility that *he* would be the one she'd choose? Sari snuck a glance at the tall young man. There were no issues with choosing a shadeslayer as her guest. Although his personality seemed inflexible in places, he was earnest and sincere. If she told him of her circumstances, she was sure he'd accept them in good faith.

But now that she was thinking about it, she knew nothing of his personal history. All she knew was that he'd come from the royal capital—not what he'd done there, nor what kind of home he'd been raised in, nor...anything else for that matter. Now that she'd thought about it, he seemed wrapped in mystery to her. She stared at the young man intently.

After a while, Xixu noticed her gaze and recoiled. "Is...something the matter?"

"I know almost nothing about you."

"Do you need to?"

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

Which meant that in all likelihood, he wasn't the child of a noble. In Torlonia, most of the aristocracy married in their teens. The majority of such betrothals were for political reasons, but it went without saying that leaving to become a shadeslayer after one's marriage was unfeasible. There were some exceptions

such as Thoma, who was twenty-seven and hadn't married yet, but House Radi had never been much inclined to keep in step with the rest of the aristocracy in the first place. Moreover, Sari knew that Thoma wanted Isha to be his wife. She doubted if there were more than a handful of nobles like him in the entirety of the capital.

"The capital..." Sari murmured.

Were the rumors Eid had told her about true? The king was supposedly thinking of dissolving Irede, but Sari still didn't know why. She'd asked Thoma about it, but he'd said, "I haven't heard about anything like that." Yet on the other hand, if one paid close attention to the whispers, those same rumors were on people's lips throughout Irede. The unsettling topic was never talked about in the open, but it was spreading through the town as though mixed among the gloom of twilight.

Watching Xixu wholeheartedly carry out his shadeslayer duties made the idea that he was "in the king's pocket" seem absurd, but if given the chance to make sure, she'd like a definite answer for her peace of mind. While she was wondering how to pose the question, Xixu tapped her on the shoulder.

"We're here," he said. "Get some rest."

She looked up and saw that they were already in front of Pale Moon. Sari glanced at the entryway, where the lantern was yet to be lit, then suddenly turned around and grabbed the sleeve of the young man who had begun to make his departure.

"You should get some rest too," Sari said.

"I need to write my report," Xixu replied.

"We restocked on reien tea yesterday."

Upon hearing her mention the rare-to-come-by, famous tea, Xixu's expression softened. He seemed to take a moment to consider before replying.

"Fine. I'll intrude for a little while."

"Of course."

When it came to matters such as these, he was exceedingly easy to

understand. Holding back a smile, Sari guided him to the empty flower room. At this time, many of Pale Moon's courtesans would still be sleeping. Sari ordered a maidservant to bring hot water and then began brewing the tea herself.

The reien tea, which she'd had to pull strings to acquire, was a clear amber color. In the delicate white porcelain cups—which had been ordered from a western nation—it looked quite appealing, and it gave off a soothing scent. Sari served it along with some sweets from a long-standing shop.

"Please enjoy," she said.

"Thank you."

Xixu, despite his neutral expression, seemed delighted as he brought the teacup to his lips. Seeing him like that made the difficulty she had gone through to acquire the tea worth it. She prepared her own portion and sat at the table across from him. In truth, she wanted to take a bath to wash free of sweat, but if she left to do so, Xixu would surely go back to his dormitory. He wasn't the sort of man that would approach Pale Moon during the peaceful full moon period, so she couldn't let this chance slip.

Sari waited for the moment he placed his teacup down to ask her question. "Have you always been like this, Xixu?"

"Like this?" Xixu repeated.

"Overly serious. You never smile either."

She'd meant to start off with a harmless question, but the young man's face twisted into something extremely sour. Wondering whether she had chosen poorly, she waited for his answer.

"I've been called cold in the past, yes," Xixu said slowly.

"Even when you were a child?" Sari asked.

"Maybe. I can't remember. But by the time I entered the military academy, people were already telling me that."

"The military academy," she repeated.

The young man continued uncomfortably. "It's the past. It doesn't matter now."

“I think...I might know why you have such a stiff personality now...”

“Wait, wait. You’ve got it wrong... I’m not like this because of the academy—this is just how I’ve always been.”

“Really? I think it’s quite funny, you know. That personality of yours.”

“Funny...”

As Sari watched Xixu’s expression grow conflicted, she brooded over the young man’s origins. They were an even greater mystery to her now.

The military academy’s purpose was to train officers who served the king. Only those from the upper echelons of society or commoners with outstanding records could enroll. Which was Xixu? His bearing and conduct weren’t rustic but neither did they have the grace possessed by so many of the upper classes. She had no idea. Eid’s suspicion that he was “in the king’s pocket” seemed a touch more realistic now, but it still didn’t feel right.

“You became a shadeslayer after graduating from the academy?” Sari asked. “That’s a terrible waste, isn’t it?”

“Thoma said something similar, but I never intended on becoming one,” Xixu replied. “I’ve always been able to see shades, so after having those responsibilities pushed at me for a while, I somehow ended up where I am now.”

“Really? So you came all the way to Irede?”

“The militia put in a request at the capital for more shadeslayers, and that happened to come around to me. That said, I suppose it’s not really all that necessary to be able to see shades here.”

“Ah, but it’s best if they can. They wouldn’t be able to see their red eyes otherwise. It’s just that being capable in combat is an absolute necessity. You took the enlistment examination too, right?”

“Yes. I sparred against a shadeslayer called ‘Ironblade.’ It was originally meant to be three bouts, but we only went through with one.”

“And you passed? That’s impressive.”

Ironblade was a veteran shadeslayer. That he had handed Xixu a decorative

cord after a single round meant that the young man must have been considerably capable. Xixu's response to her admiration was to give her a tired look.

"Is there a point in me telling you this?" Xixu asked.

"I want to know more about you," Sari replied.

"Why...?"

Sari refilled their tea as she asked the next question."Hey, have you ever met the king?" When she looked up at Xixu, she saw that the young man had stiffened in obvious discomfort. Her eyes widened.

"What's wrong?" Sari asked. "You look like something's bothering you."

"I'm not bothered, just..." Xixu said.

"Are you in the king's pocket, Xixu?"

The young man choked on his tea, spraying some of it outward. Sari hastily stood up.

"S-Sorry!" she said. "That was a strange thing to say, wasn't it?"

"No, it's...my fault... Excuse me..."

Xixu took a cloth from her and began wiping down the table. His handsome face betrayed his discomfort, and it seemed entirely incapable of deception. Even so, Sari was troubled by his reaction to her bringing up the king. She couldn't understand it at all.

Xixu refolded the handcloth and breathed a sigh. "You asking me questions like that must mean I've been extremely clumsy with my attempts to fit in with this town."

"N-No!" Sari exclaimed. "That's not it at all! It's just, there have been rumors in the capital—"

"Rumors?"

Xixu knit his brows slightly and looked at her. His gaze stopped Sari's breath in her throat. His black eyes were honest, and piercing. They were the eyes of a person who walked under the light of day. They were different from the eyes of

the people of this pleasure town, which hid the true intentions of their owners. Xixu's eyes were completely willing to face others in good faith. Sari thought they were beautiful. She wanted to get closer to peer into them.

"Saridi? Is something the matter?" Xixu asked.

"...Oh."

He hadn't called her by her common name, but by her maiden one. The name she'd given him when they'd first met. And he had said it with complete sincerity. Even as that left her feeling ticklish, Sari returned to her senses and gave him a smile.

"Sorry," she said. "I was just thinking about how funny you are."

"Why...?

The young man looked as though the energy had been drained out of him. Sari was about to burst into laughter—but before she could, the door to the room loudly slammed open, and one of the serving girls came running in.

"M-Miss Proprietress! It's awful!"

"What's wrong?" Sari asked.

"A shade killed people! They're calling you for an emergency meeting!"

Sari and Xixu simultaneously shot to their feet.

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The site of the killings was on the opposite side of town from Pale Moon, near the southern entrance and away from the main street. Once again, Sari and Xixu ran.

There were two possible reasons why an emergency meeting would be called in response to shade-related affairs: Either three or more people had been killed at once or five or more people had been killed in succession. It had been fifteen years since the last time one of these conditions had been fulfilled.

Eight people would be summoned to attend the rare gathering: the commander of the militia, all of the town's shadeslayers, the maiden, and the chairman of an association to which the majority of Irede's businesses belonged. Aside from the chairman, everybody was present when Sari and Xixu arrived, holding some kind of discussion.

Eid had been inspecting the bodies, but he turned to glower at the two new arrivals. "Why are you together?"

"I'm sorry we're late," Sari said. "What's the situation?"

"Don't ignore me!"

Eid looked like he was about to jump at her, and Sari hurriedly dodged backward in response. Watching the exchange, Xixu frowned slightly.

Eid stepped forward to chase after the girl, but two burly arms immediately looped under his armpits and pulled him up and backward. The older shadeslayer, referred to as "Ironblade," commanded the respect and awe of the rest of the rest of the militia, and it was he who was holding Eid in place.

The large man ignored the struggling Eid and answered Sari's question. "Four dead. The shade is still loose."

"Four? But how...?"

"We're not certain. But apparently, it suddenly pulled a blade on them. We've judged it to be a shade since its red eyes were confirmed by a witness's testimony."

Xixu and Sari looked at each other. Just earlier they had been talking about the rarity of shade killings in Irede, and now this. Feeling as though an invisible,

anomalous tide was lapping at her feet, Sari swallowed.

The four victims had been left where they were killed, covered only by a simple black cloth. A vast amount of blood stained the ground, telling those who saw it of the ghastly incident that had occurred.

As Xixu crouched and lifted the cloth on one of the bodies, Sari peered under it from beside him. The victim was a middle-aged man, and he'd been slashed diagonally from his front shoulder to the opposite side of his torso. Sari followed Xixu as he examined the other corpses, and when she saw the final cloth lift, her body shook. She recognized the young victim.

"That's Thoma's..."

"Yes," Xixu said. "This man worked in House Radi's breweries."

The dead man—eyes still wide open—was the son of a family of craftsmen that had worked for House Radi for generations. He had been a close friend of Thoma's and had often dropped by Pale Moon with deliveries of wine. Sari pinched the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, holding back the hot tears borne from witnessing the death of an acquaintance. The thought of how Thoma would react upon finding out made her heart sick.

Xixu lowered the cloth and looked up. "Do we know the identities of the other three victims?"

"It appears they were just people who happened to be present at the time of the attack," Ironblade replied. "We believe one was a customer of House Radi."

"A terrible situation we've found ourselves in." The gentle voice, tinged with sorrow, had come from the association chairman, the last person to arrive. He himself was the proprietor of a renowned restaurant in Irede, and after having looked around at all those present, he gave a slight bow in greeting. Sari returned the aging man's bow, although hers was much deeper.

With everyone present, the middle-aged militia commander spoke in a grave tone. "This should never have been allowed to occur. But it has, so our only choice is to handle it as we would any other incident. This behavior is unprecedented for a shade. We should consider that it might be connected to the pool of blood discovered the other day. Whatever the case, we must act."

The commander looked at Sari. “Maiden, how long do you have?”

“Three days.”

“Hmm... This much shade activity is unheard of so close to the end of the cycle. We must solve this case within the next three days.”

The commander looked around at the shadeslayers and they all nodded, each displaying a different expression. Even Eid, who was still being held in place, looked obedient.

“I’ll increase militia patrols,” continued the commander. “Should we notice anything suspicious, we’ll inform the nearest shadeslayer. Shadeslayers: until this incident is resolved, stay active and on the lookout for shades. Maiden—”

“I’ll patrol the town as much as I can before my three days are up.”

“Understood. Choose whoever you wish to guard you.”

With his speech concluded, the commander looked to the association chairman.

The elderly proprietor of a long-established restaurant smiled wryly. “As this concerns the reputation of our town, I’d like to avoid publicly announcing this information to tourists. Instead, I propose we contact businesses individually so that we can ensure they personally warn their customers to be cautious.”

“What does the shade look like?” It had felt like the gathering was about to conclude, but Xixu’s question interrupted that. The commander furrowed his brow deeply and replied to Xixu, as well as Sari behind him. The other shadeslayers who had arrived earlier had already been told.

“It was described as having the appearance of a young man. No description of its facial features—it was wearing a mask. Only its red eyes were visible, which is why we’ve judged it to be a shade.”

“Wearing a mask...?”

Sari was astonished; she had never heard of a shade doing such a thing before. But Xixu, who had only been in Irede for a short time, seemed to take the description in stride. He raised a hand in acknowledgment, and with an “Understood,” stepped out of the circle of people.

At that, the meeting began to disperse. Members of the militia gathered and began to retrieve the bodies as Sari watched, not averting her gaze from the bundles of cloth for a second. She didn't notice the association chairman had approached her from behind until he was already whispering.

"After the half-moon, you must refrain from going out in public. I don't believe you're being targeted in particular, but it is better to be safe than sorry."

They'd all likely noticed that this incident was not like the others. Despite the waxing of the moon, shades were appearing in greater numbers, rumors were spreading of the town's dissolution, and now, there were these killings. It was as though a restless tide was steadily submerging the people of Irede from underfoot, the rising water catching them unawares.

Sari began to think of her grandmother, wondering what she would have done at a time like this, but stopped herself. Only she was here, and only she could act. The girl faced the chairman and smiled. "We'll catch it before the next three days are up."

To keep her words from seeming like a cheap jest, Sari turned her back to the bloodstains and walked away.

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In truth, Sari had intended on pursuing Xixu to ask him more of the rumors in the capital, but by the time she had finished conversing with the chairman, he had already left to patrol the town. As she watched the main street bustle with activity, ignorant of the incident that had occurred, she halfheartedly rearranged her disorderly hair and tied it back.

"For now, I need to head back and wash all this sweat off..."

"Sweat? From what?"

"What do you mean from— Wah!"

A man's hand caught Sari's wrist and she jumped reflexively. It stretched out to pull her in by the waist and half-forced her to stand on her toes as she craned her head up to find Eid behind her, looking down.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d let me go.”

“Why was your hair untied? What were you doing with him before you came?”

“It was untied because it came loose. That and the sweat were because I ran. I was with him because we met up on the way. And now I’d like to go home and change, please.”

“I’ll take you. Don’t go alone.”

Eid let go of her wrist and took her hand instead as he stepped up beside her. Sari, giving in, let him pull her along as she directed him on which path to take. She’d thought Eid had been dragged away by Ironblade earlier, but apparently he’d managed to give his captor the slip. She wished she’d managed to make it back before he caught up to her, but Eid *was* right—she shouldn’t be alone.

Eid and Sari crossed a plaza, idly watching the troupe of performers there as they passed by. The two of them spoke in hushed voices.

“What do you think of the killings, Eid? Doesn’t something seem off?”

“You’re thinking a shade wouldn’t do something like that, right?”

“I mean, it wore a mask and used a weapon. That’s never happened before. Do you really think it’s a shade?”

“Do you think it’s not?”

“I don’t know...but it feels like *people* are behind this, somehow.”

Why would a shade hide its face? Of those who sought to kill humans, there had never been one clever enough to protect its own identity. Shades that intentionally attempted to harm people tended to be impulsive and unable to consider the consequences of their actions. In contrast, the ones that tried to blend in hated anything that would draw attention to them, as well as changes in their surroundings.

But the culprit in this incident matched neither category, making Sari feel uneasy. It felt like the same lurking sense of malice she’d sensed from the group of people who had run away the other night, leaving only a pool of blood behind.

However, as she brooded over her suspicions that *something* was happening behind closed doors, Eid shook his head decisively. “The red eyes can’t be faked; it has to be a shade. *That’s* what you should be wary of—we’ve never had one this cunning before.”

“You think?”

“I do. If it doesn’t reveal its face, regular people won’t be able to recognize it unless they have the ability to see its red eyes. It can escape by blending into the crowd.”

Sari considered that for a moment. “It won’t be able to leave town.”

A barrier had been established around Irede for that sole purpose. It had existed since the town’s founding and sealed its shades in. From their first moment to their last, the shades of Irede could go nowhere *but* Irede. It was only here they could meet their end.

Sari cast her eyes back at the street, searching for the shade that was still out there, somewhere. It was a normal day with the clouds shading the townscape from the light of the sun. Yet despite the town being by any definition no different from how it always was, it seemed, in the slightest of ways, unfamiliar.

Eid tugged at her small hand. “Always be around a shadeslayer, Sari. You need someone around to sew the shade onto.”

“Okay...”

“If you want to patrol today, I’ll go with you.”

Sari hummed, considering, before giving her reply. “Okay. Please do.”

A part of her wanted to avoid spending more time with Eid, but this wasn’t the time for such thoughts. As they reached the path Pale Moon was on, Sari looked up. The colors of dusk were beginning to seep into the sky.

Tall tree branches cast eerie shadows upon the front gate. She had never told anyone that the copses that enclosed Pale Moon had always frightened her when she was small. Back then, Sari had still thought of herself as a normal child. To her, the nostalgic memory seemed to contradict the present.

“Remember when you brought me back to Pale Moon just like this, Eid?”

“I did? Oh, you mean when you got lost as a kid?”

“Mm-hmm. You were so scary back then.”

“Pure slander. I’ve never been anything but nice to you, Sari.”

His attempt at a brag made Sari giggle. The younger Eid had been willing to lash out at anyone and everyone and had been notorious for being entirely unmanageable. The courtesan who had given birth to Eid hadn’t been sure of his father and had been quite a harsh parent. Outside of his home, he’d used his surroundings as an outlet for that, which had caused others to avoid him. Of course, at the time, Sari hadn’t been aware of any of this.

To the young Sari, Eid had merely been a surly boy who’d pulled her along back to Pale Moon, grumbling all the while. Afterward, despite his apparent unwillingness, he would always make the time to play with her.

A few years later, all of the adults were shocked when the town’s famous problem child became one of its shadeslayers. But Sari had been genuinely happy for him and relieved that she’d get to work with somebody she knew in her future role as the maiden.

“But somewhere along the way, your personality turned into *this.*”

“Got a problem with me?”

“If I had to name one, it would be that you’re strangely possessive.”

The maiden accompanied any shadeslayer in their work, so long as they requested her. Being picky would result in absolutely nothing getting done, and yet Eid constantly and unabashedly told her to accompany him, and him alone.

What’s more, he did nothing to hide his displeasure whenever Sari received guests of Pale Moon as its proprietress. She didn’t know how authentic his advances actually were, considering she was nine years younger than him, but in her capacity as both maiden and proprietress, his behavior was less than reassuring. The blunt Eid of the past had been much easier to deal with.

Sari stopped before the gate and extricated her hand from the disgruntled man’s hold. “I’m going to light the lantern and take care of some work. Can you come back in two hours?”

“In that case, I’ll wait in your room.”

“Nope. Not a chance.”

If she let Eid wait inside, he’d be sure to cause some kind of hassle. Not wanting to hear any of his usual objections, Sari promptly declared, “See you later!” and ran inside.

As it was approaching the time for the lantern to be lit, the entryway was open. There was a girl in front, sweeping, and she bowed when she noticed Sari coming.

“Welcome back, Miss Proprietress.”

“Sorry, but I’ll be going out again after I open today, so let everybody know. Oh, right—try to avoid going out as much as possible for a while. And be careful when dealing with any new guests.”

Shades weren’t supposed to be able to enter Pale Moon’s grounds, but this incident was suspicious enough already. It was best to practice caution.

Sari asked a maidservant to bring her some water to cleanse her hands with and then lit the hanging lantern. She stood there for a moment, thinking, before quickly scribbling a number of lines on some paper. When she finished, she sealed it and visited Isha’s room. The woman had apparently been about to leave for the flower room. Upon seeing Sari, she smiled.

“Oh my. Look at you. What’s the occasion?”

“I’ve been running around everywhere...but more importantly, here.”

“A letter?”

“Give it to Thoma if he drops by.”

She’d much rather have spoken with him directly, but it would be difficult to arrange a meeting while she was all over the place looking for the shade. Moreover, he wouldn’t allow himself to grieve over his friend’s death in front of Sari. He’d be much more comfortable doing so if he was alone with Isha.

Isha frowned for an instant at the proffered letter, but her smile quickly returned as she accepted it. “Okay. Is there anything else you want me to pass on?”

“It’s been dangerous recently, so tell him to be careful—all the other guests too. But be subtle about it.”

“I’ll let everyone know.”

“Thank you. I’ll be going out again soon.”

“Out? Alone?”

“It’s fine, I’ll have Eid with me.”

Isha didn’t look convinced, likely because of Thoma’s influence. Before she could protest with a warning, Sari doubled down with another “I’ll be fine. I’ll be back before midnight.”

Isha’s reply came reluctantly. “Be careful.”

“I will.”

And with that, Sari’s business at Pale Moon had been taken care of for the time being. She returned to her room, where she was finally able to take a long-awaited bath. While she was at it, she tied back her newly washed hair and fixed her makeup.

She hadn’t intended on taking things slow, but when she’d finished with her preparations, it was almost the time she’d promised to meet Eid. The view from her window showed that the sun had completely set.

Looking at herself in her full-length mirror, she confirmed she’d properly raised the bottom hem of her kimono slightly to make for easier footwork. She felt like a child doing it, but it would help if she needed to run again. The kimono itself wasn’t her usual white but was instead a more faded gray dye, chosen to better blend in with the night.

Finally, she slipped her silver bracelet onto her left arm, picked up a pair of high-laced shoes, and headed for the entryway. As she entered the main building through the connecting corridor, she ran into two elderly gentlemen who were regular guests.

“Miss Proprietress. Where are you going at this late hour?”

The two men, surprise evident on their faces, must have come to have tea in the flower room. Sari bowed her head deeply.

“I apologize, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to accompany you tonight. I’m going out to patrol the town with a shadeslayer. Please, make yourselves at home while I’m away.”

“Patrol?”

The two guests looked at each other. One turned back to the young proprietress with a concerned look.

“It’s admirable that you’re working hard for the sake of the town, Maiden, but please don’t do anything reckless. Shadeslayers are soldiers, but you cannot be replaced. Be careful.”

The man had been visiting since her grandmother’s generation, and he spoke the truth. The life of a shadeslayer was by no means cheap, but Sari’s existence weighed far more regardless. It was a reality she could not deny. If she didn’t act with that in mind, the town itself would suffer.

Sari bowed to the two guests again. The constant weight she bore upon her shoulders had long since become a part of her. She escorted the two to the flower room before heading to the entryway and putting on her shoes.

Isha had come along to see her off, but when the courtesan looked outside, her head tilted in confusion. “Is that a guest?”

“What?”

Sari followed Isha’s gaze to find a figure standing outside. It was a man dressed in black. Although he stood directly in front of the gate, he showed no signs of entering the premises of Pale Moon.

The man simply stared at Sari, a smile affixed to his face like that of a doll’s. A loop of black prayer beads hung from his neck, dully reflecting the moonlight. Sensing an ill quality from deep within his eyes, Sari’s beautiful face twisted into a frown.

However, a proprietress could not wear such an expression in front of her own establishment. She constructed a smile and turned to Isha.

“I’m going now. Eid should be here any moment.”

Isha replied hesitantly. “Okay. Be careful.”

Sari exited the entryway and approached the gate, hiding her nervousness. The man was still staring at her. He hadn't moved a muscle, and just as his uncanny smile made her slow her pace, he suddenly turned to face a spot she couldn't see and beckoned with his hand. A figure emerged and stood next to the man.

Sari barely managed to hold back a shout.

The second man was wearing a mask. He had a katana affixed to his hip, his back was arched forward like a beast's, and he was barefoot. The color of his eyes, deep within the mask, wasn't discernable at the distance she was at.

The two men turned away, and Sari broke into a run. "Stop!"

The barefoot footprints left near the pool of blood. The masked shade spotted at the scene of today's killings. By all accounts, these strangers had to have some connection to both anomalies. But before she could catch up to them, the two men stepped to the left and disappeared. Sari dashed out of the gate in pursuit, looking for any sign of the suspicious figures—

"Wah!"

"Careful there, Sari."

—and almost collided with Eid.

Sari spoke to the man who'd just caught her in his arms. "Th-The people who just left! One had a mask and was barefoot!"

"Just left?"

Eid looked back. Sari, too, peered out past his body to examine the slightly meandering path through the bamboo thickets, but nobody was there.

"Huh...? Eid, did you pass by two men just now?"

"No? I didn't pass anybody. I just got here."

"What? But I swear I saw them..."

There was no fork between the gate and the path through the bamboo. Had they just vanished into thin air?

Whatever the case, the one thing Sari was certain of was that they had come

to provoke her. She hid her face with her small left hand and breathed a sigh of frustration.

“Sari? What’s wrong?”

“They’re looking *down* on me.”

Perhaps making light of the fact that she was an inexperienced maiden, they had come to belittle her knowing just how suspicious they looked. Were they taunting her because she only had three days left?

Sari pulled on Eid’s sleeve. “Let’s go! I am *not* losing to *them!*”

“I have no idea what’s going on, but you’re cute when you’re motivated.”

“Who cares about that right now? Let’s *go!*”

The maiden and the shadeslayer took the moonlit path toward town. It was now unmistakably night, and Irede bustled with a different kind of activity from what it saw during the day. Upstairs shutters, which had been closed while the sun was high, had been opened to reveal the faces of courtesans, their pale arms spilling over balconies as they lounged. A sweet scent drifted by from an unknown source—it evoked a strange sense of nostalgia, like a flower with a name that couldn’t quite be remembered.

Surrounded by scenery where nothing was amiss, Sari stepped into a plaza, looking around attentively. There, rows of small paper lanterns hung from cords like bells, and the musicians of the Midiridos Troupe, time-honored providers of a sacred offering, played a festival song of old. A man at their center, plucking a four-stringed biwa, noticed Sari in the crowd and inclined his head.

She returned the slight bow, and the man at her side, his eyes forward, spoke. “See something?”

“Just greeting an acquaintance. I haven’t seen any shades or the people from before. Maybe it’s too crowded here for them.”

“Do a round of the back streets?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Because of the incident earlier in the day, more militia members than usual could be seen around town. If anybody suspect had appeared around here, they

would have already been questioned. Sari and Eid left the plaza and moved their search to the alleyways. Paying careful attention to dark corners and shaded thickets, they eventually reached an alley that would feed into a path along the canals.

“Shades or not, in this town, they can’t just vanish like they can elsewhere. The people I saw earlier must have run off the path. Did you really not see anything, Eid?”

“I didn’t. I got to the gate exactly when the two hours were up.”

“That’s rare... Don’t you always waste time hanging around in advance?”

“Ouch. I was patrolling, I’ll have you know. Just what do you think I am, Sari?”

“Someone who’s good at what he does, but is unfortunately very fickle.”

Upon having that fact pointed out, the man took Sari’s hand. Just as she was wondering what he was about to do, he placed a gentle kiss on her fingers. It was no different from his usual mischief, except that the gesture felt as though it were holding back something almost...sullen.

But when Sari looked up at Eid, she saw that his face wore nothing but a kind smile.

“Something wrong, Sari?”

“Nothing... I just feel like something’s off.”

“That’s what happens when you’re searching for a guy that isn’t me. If you’re tired, I’ll take you back to Pale Moon.”

“I didn’t mean that I was tired...”

It was just that everything felt ever so out of place, making it difficult for her to relax. Sari breathed a heavy sigh, and Eid rubbed her head.

“Don’t overthink things. This’ll all clear up soon enough.”

“It’s kind of scary to see you being decent, Eid.”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“Be yourself?”

At that, he reached out and pulled her into a tight hug. Sari stuck her arms out to resist, but seeing him be his usual self reassured her.

“Please let go. We’re on patrol.”

While they were close, at times like these, she did find it hard to tell what Eid was thinking.

He released Sari and sighed. “Don’t play around with me so much.”

“That’s my line...”

“Do you actually think everything I say is a joke?”

“More or less.”

After giving her reply, Sari jumped back to avoid Eid’s counterattack. However, contrary to her expectations, he simply looked at her and smiled.

“Hmm...? You’re not feeling sick, are you, Eid?”

Maybe he had a fever? Worried, she walked back over to him, standing on her toes to touch his forehead, but it wasn’t particularly warm at all.

Meanwhile, in contrast to her confusion, Eid gazed at her in a way that could be described as sincere, or perhaps calm. That look, paired with his endearing features, would probably have charmed the hearts of many a girl, but to Sari, the fact that he was acting differently just worried her.

“Sari, who are you choosing as your guest?”

“My guest? Where’s this coming from? I don’t know. I haven’t seriously thought about it.”

“Why not choose me?”

“Eid?”

Eid had joked about her picking him countless times before. But that was all Sari had thought they’d been: jokes. Things he’d said to provide a refuge for the too-young proprietress, just like a guiding hand for a lost child.

But if she had been the only one who’d thought so, then matters were different. Sari swallowed the slight unrest she was feeling and looked up at Eid.

His blond hair seemed almost translucent, and the light of the nearby lanterns gave it a crimson sheen. His long eyelashes cast shadows upon the thin ice of his pupils. It was hard to tell what lay within.

Sari returned his gaze, which felt as though it might swallow her up, and answered honestly. “I don’t know yet. I might choose you, and I might not.”

“You can’t decide now?”

“That’s right. My hands are full with just my duties as maiden and proprietress. Besides, I’m still sixteen.”

“There are plenty of courtesans near your age who take guests.”

“But I—”

I’m not like them, was what Sari had been about to say, but she swallowed the words. She couldn’t tell him that yet. Shaking free from the feelings she’d lost control over, she shook her head.

“I can’t decide right now. I’ll think about it after I’m older, and after you’re more open-minded.”

“More open-minded?”

“You’re *not,* right now. Maybe that’d be okay if I were a normal courtesan, but I’m not.”

The man who would embrace the maiden of Pale Moon needed to be somebody capable of accepting a certain degree of impossibility. If Eid wished to make her his, he would have to yield that. Otherwise, it was out of the question from the very beginning. Currently, he didn’t meet that requirement...and Sari had her hands full anyway.

Eid frowned at her sincerity. The sour expression reminded Sari of a certain black-haired shadeslayer, and yet, it was still different.

Distant music crept in from afar, enlivening the silence. From around a corner, the clear rush of flowing water could be heard.

It felt as though the sounds were patching over their conflicting emotions—yet refusing to mend them. Eid closed his eyes and ran a finger over the crease in his brow, unraveling it.

“Okay.”

That was his only reply. And so all Sari could do was nod.

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Although matters between them had taken an awkward turn, work was work. The two moved on simultaneously and struck up a new conversation as though nothing had happened. Sari, chatting about newly opened courtesan houses as they walked along the canal, suddenly caught sight of a figure stepping out ahead on the path.

Black prayer beads hanging from their neck. A familiar side profile she’d only caught a glimpse of. The man with a doll-like face was unmistakably the same person she’d seen at Pale Moon earlier. Sari almost shouted reflexively but held her hands to her mouth to keep it in.

“Eid, it’s him. He brought the masked man with him,” she whispered to the shadeslayer beside her.

“He’s alone right now though. Are you sure that’s him?”

“Completely.”

Sari quickened her pace to chase after the man, but Eid held her back.

“I’ll chase him. If it’s the wrong person, it’ll hurt your reputation.”

“Oh. You’re right.”

“Follow me at a distance. Don’t go chasing any other guys, all right?”

“Okay. I’ll be careful.”

Letting the joke—*was that a joke?*—pass, she nodded, and Eid leaped into a silent run.

He stopped at a distance a dozen paces or so behind the man and maintained it as he trailed him. Sari, even further back, began walking along the canal. She breathed as little as possible, wary of the possibility that the masked shade was lurking nearby.

Perhaps it was because Eid was no longer beside her, or perhaps it was the fault of the water streaming by, but she suddenly realized that she felt slightly

chilly. It was a little late for it now, but she regretted not wearing a coat.

“Still...he really surprised me.”

She knew the question of who she would choose as her guest was one she’d have to address one day, but this was the first time somebody had ever confronted her so directly about it. Sari dropped her gaze to her pale hands.

The adults had always told her to be careful—that she was irreplaceable. As the heir to a mythical bloodline, her position was unique. House Radi brewed wine and the Midiridos played music, all in accordance with their sacred offerings. Even though the people involved had changed over time, the process had been maintained.

However, Pale Moon’s importance lay not in something created by others but in the maiden herself.

It was a responsibility that weighed upon her shoulders, but that wasn’t the extent of it. The weight was also within her, a part of her very being. It wasn’t a question of love, romantic or otherwise. Or at least, there had never been a person who had made Sari think the matter *could* be treated as a question of love.

“I’ll think about it after things settle down more...”

At the bare minimum, this incident had to be resolved first. Putting the issue behind her, Sari looked back up ahead of her.

Which was when she saw Eid suddenly break out into a run.

“What?”

She jumped to catch a glimpse of what was going on. Evidently, the man they were tailing had started running, so Eid was giving chase.

Perhaps their mark had noticed them. Sari wavered for a moment, unsure of what to do, but quickly dashed off after the two men. Fortunately, unlike earlier in the day, she had dressed for it. As she raced across stone-paved ground, she kept her eyes fixed on Eid’s back.

The man they were chasing turned a corner and disappeared out of sight. Eid, who was closing the distance, did the same, and Sari strained her eyes to

commit the corner to memory. In an attempt to avoid being left behind, she rolled up her sleeves and ran faster.

Her gaze was directed solely ahead, which was why, the next moment, she didn't see whatever it was that rammed into her side and sent her flying.

Before she knew what had happened, she slammed into the ground.

"Ngh... Ah..."

The pain prevented her from thinking straight. But what she did know was that she couldn't bring herself to move. Her vision started to dim as she searched for which way was up, but all she could see was a pair of red eyes approaching.

She couldn't make out a face. Her sight was shaky, and it was hidden behind a white mask anyway. The masked shade extended its hands out toward Sari. Although her consciousness was fading, she raised a finger and muttered under her breath.

"Bind."

The force unleashed from her pale finger made the shade's body jump. But in her current state, that was all Sari was capable of. Without a shadeslayer, she could do nothing but make it falter briefly.

Even still, Sari used that brief moment to crawl away across the stone paving. Her reeling vision focused on the canal right before her. Xixu had said they were much deeper than he'd thought. As risky as it was, it was her only chance to buy herself some time.

The shade's fingers caught onto the sash of Sari's kimono. But before it could pull her back, she threw herself down into the canal below. The sound of her impacting the water was loud. Droplets bounded up and into the night. Her consciousness sank into the cold darkness, as though it were disappearing into the faded dye of her kimono.

The masked shade gazed blankly at the rippling surface of the water, but soon it turned as if someone had called out for it, and left.

And so, the maiden went missing, her whereabouts unknown.

3. Secrets

The maiden who never left His Majesty's side possessed the ability of foresight, but how much of Irede's affairs had she truly anticipated? Had Xixu been dispatched here because she'd known that an unprecedented incident would occur?

These had been the first thoughts to occupy Xixu's mind ever since the emergency meeting. But even as he'd prepared and sent a preliminary report to his liege, he'd found himself considering one other question too: could he reveal his true directives to Pale Moon's maiden?

He wasn't sure what had tipped Sari off, but she'd directly asked him if he was backed by the king. And since he indeed was, he had the feeling that concealing it from her would give rise to unnecessary misunderstandings. If he was to make himself useful to her, then he at least wanted to disclose his allegiance to the king, if nothing else. After all, it wasn't as if he'd been sent to this town for any underhanded reasons.

So he'd included that in his letter to the capital and was now waiting for a reply.

"She's been missing for three days? You're sure she didn't run away from home?" Xixu, who had been called to Pale Moon, reconfirmed what he'd just been told.

He was taken aback. This was the first he was hearing of this. He'd been making thorough patrols of the town ever since the emergency meeting, but now that he thought about it, that *had* been the last time he'd seen Sari.

Thoma, sitting across from him at a table in the empty flower room, gave him a pained look. "She would never run from Pale Moon. She disappeared the evening of three days ago while on patrol with Eid. You didn't know?"

"I'm only finding out now. Are you certain the person she was with isn't the culprit? This...Eid, was it?"

“You should at least remember the names of your fellow shadeslayers. According to Eid, he lost sight of her while they were pursuing a suspicious man.”

“A man? Not a shade?” This was news to him. Xixu moved his cup of bitter tea aside.

Thoma nodded gravely. “Apparently, he showed up at Pale Moon’s front gate three days ago. Just stood there without coming in.”

“A timid customer?”

“Like I’d know. I was told Sari said something about him being accompanied by someone who seemed like a shade, but she was the only one who saw them. To make matters worse, Eid let the man he was chasing get away. Of all the...”

Thoma looked very much as though his patience was being tested. Xixu was a little surprised; he’d never seen the man like this before. The next head of House Radi had a reputation in the capital for being a sharp individual with an easygoing air about him, who never showed his true emotions. Evidently, Thoma cared about his surrogate little sister enough that he now found maintaining appearances impossible.

Thoma drummed his fingers on the table. “I have all my craftsmen out there looking for her. But to be honest, I don’t know if such an unfocused search is really the best option here.”

“Be that as it may, it’s the only option you have. Is there a chance she left town?”

“The militia have been keeping a close eye on who comes and goes. They would know if a person was smuggled in or out.”

“Then she must still be here.”

Xixu looked at the clock hanging from the wall. It was only when he’d returned to his room shortly before sunset that he’d noticed Thoma’s letter summoning him to Pale Moon. In the last four days, Xixu had spent all of his time patrolling, returning to his lodgings only to sleep. He hadn’t suspected for a second that something could have befallen the young maiden.

It had already been some time since Sari's disappearance. If she'd been dragged into the ongoing incident in some way, then the situation was close to being hopeless.

Xixu stood up from his seat, restlessness gradually building within him. "All right. I'll look for her while I'm out on my patrols."

"Is that it?"

"What?"

What else could he do?

Seeing his frown, Thoma looked at him apologetically. "I'm just asking if you have any other ideas."

"Ideas...? None really come to mind. What makes you ask?"

He shifted into a guarded posture; it was almost as though Thoma suspected him of being the culprit.

Thoma shook his head. "Don't get me wrong, I don't think you did it. I only wanted to ask if you knew anybody that might consider Sari an obstacle."

"An obstacle? A regular girl like her?"

While she was indeed a maiden with unique abilities, as well as the proprietress of a storied courtesan house, those weren't particularly antagonizing positions.. The only suspects he could think of who possibly wished to be rid of her were shades.

But Xixu didn't expect Thoma's reply.

"Without Sari, Irede has no meaning."

"What? What does that...?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. Whether wine still flows or music still plays, none of it matters at all without her."

According to the myth, the god requested three things from the king: fine drink, music, and finally, the warmth of human touch. Evidently, the loss of the last offering—the holy courtesan—was significant enough to impact the very existence of the town.

Xixu looked down at Thoma's pale, grim face. "Even so, I truly don't have any idea of where she might be. Why are you asking me?"

"Because you, Kilis Raxixu Zack Torlonia, share a father with the reigning king."

Xixu's only reply was stunned silence. It had been so long since he'd been called by that name that it felt as though cold water were running down his back.

Before he could muster a response, Thoma smiled wryly. "Don't bother asking me how I know. You're the one who let it slip to Sari."

"Let it slip...? Ah."

Now that Thoma had mentioned it, he had an inkling. During a conversation with her, he'd casually mentioned that he'd attended the military academy.

"I know your age, so I got my hands on a list of graduates and checked. I had some trouble to find you, with how quickly you graduated. It appears you were quite the exemplary student. Still, the name seemed to match. Although I imagine you were still a commoner at the time."

"I...didn't become royalty because I wished to."

Xixu's mother had been a lady-in-waiting at court, but she'd left the royal castle after becoming pregnant with him. He'd grown up not knowing anything about his father, but that had never particularly bothered him.

Upon his mother's departure, she was provided with a large sum of money by the queen, so she'd lived quite comfortably after returning to her family home. She'd revealed the truth about his father when Xixu enrolled into the military academy, but his only reaction at the time was to shrug and accept it. So long as it didn't create any issues for him, he was just fine either way.

In fact, if things had gone as he'd planned, it was very likely that Xixu would have lived out a full life as an entirely ordinary military officer. In the end, however, it was not his father who changed his lot in life, but his half brother.

The currently reigning king, upon discovering Xixu's existence, had directly come to him, brimming with curiosity. A short while later, Xixu had become

royalty—with all privileges and obligations included. It had all seemed very unnecessary to him, but it wasn't as though he could actually voice any objections. Before he'd been the king's little brother, he'd been loyal to his liege, and afterwards, that didn't change.

Xixu had requested that his conferral of royal status not be a major affair, and so all the relevant procedures had been carried out quietly. As such, not many people knew about him, even amongst the capital's aristocracy. The king *had* said that he was considering holding a day of grand unveiling upon Xixu's return, but Xixu dearly wished that such a day would never come.

In any case, it was true that he'd come to Irede as a shadeslayer at the behest of his liege. However, that was the extent of his secrets. He most assuredly had not been ordered to abduct Sari.

But before he could correct Thoma, the man raised his hand and interjected. "There have been strange rumors going around Irede lately."

"Rumors?"

"They say the king wants to dissolve the town."

"What?"

He hadn't heard a thing about that. The king had only asked for him to come see the town with his own eyes and to be of assistance to the maiden. But now that he thought about it, his liege hadn't given any reason *why*.

"The look on your face tells me you haven't heard. That's fine. All I want to know is if there's anybody here working to fulfill the king's wishes. Even if they're unaware of Sari's significance, it isn't difficult to conceive that ruining the three sacred offerings would help to dissolve Irede. Can you think of anybody like that?"

"No."

Xixu's response was instant and truthful. His liege had a personal interest in Irede, which was why he'd been sent instead of any other vassals. He'd departed in secrecy too, so he doubted anybody else was aware of him being here.

He stared straight at Thoma, resolute in his answer, and the man stared right back. It could not be called a standoff, exactly, but the silence lasted several seconds all the same. Finally, Thoma broke it. The man raised both his hands in a small gesture and gave an unreadable smile.

“Okay. Sorry for doubting you.”

“It’s fine. I gave you good reason to. I’m sorry for hiding the truth about who I am.”

“Water under the bridge. I mean, I’m sure we would’ve all been on edge if we’d known you were coming, Your Royal Highness.”

“Please don’t...”

Xixu sighed inwardly. Rightful status or not, he hadn’t learned a single thing about actually carrying himself with royal bearing.

Thoma chuckled briefly. “Anyway, tell me if you find anything. If we don’t find her soon, we’ll have an awful mess on our hands.”

“I’ll do that. Ah, can I ask you a question?” It wasn’t particularly important, just something he was curious about. “I told her about myself just before the emergency meeting. If she disappeared that night, does that mean you saw her after I did?”

If so, then that might provide a lead on where he could find Sari.

But Thoma simply shrugged self-deprecatingly. “I only got her letter. She wrote about you; asked me to look into you.”

“I see... Everything I told her must have made her mistrustful of me.” Xixu’s expression clouded over, brought on by a dejection he didn’t know the reason for.

Thoma, however, was quick to deny him. “Oh, no, no. She asked me to look into you because she *didn’t* want to mistrust you. Because of the rumors, you see? Besides, I’ve been doing that for a while now anyway. How else would I have the results already?”

Ordinarily, it took three days for a letter from Irede to reach the royal capital. A swift horse could deliver it in just over a day, but Thoma was right in that it

still didn’t leave enough time for an investigation.

Xixu replied with similar words to those he’d directed at the young maiden. “Was I truly so clumsy?”

“You weren’t. Really. I did it because Sari seemed to have taken an interest in you. When you stayed here in the proprietress’s room on that first night, you cleaned the bathroom, right? I thought I was going to die laughing when I heard that.”

“It’s common sense to clean what’s been lent to you...”

“Yet no man has ever done anything in that room even close to what you did.” Thoma’s expression was serious as he made his declaration, but it abruptly turned into a bitter smile. “Still, if she can only choose a single guest in her lifetime, surely you can see why I’d want to screen them as much as possible beforehand?”

“What are you...?”

The joke was in bad taste, but even more so because the safety of the girl in question was currently in doubt. Xixu wanted to protest...but it felt as though nothing he said could put him and Thoma on the same page, so instead, he silently left the room.

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Xixu thought of Irede as a strange town. Ever since he’d come here, he’d learned all kinds of new things, little by little. Yet, even if he stored them all up and considered them to be what the town saw as “common sense,” his impression of the place never changed. He could never get a good grasp on Irede at all, hence why he thought of it as being so strange.

Naturally, that strangeness included the shades which took on the physical forms of humans, and the mysterious maiden too.

But above all, the air about the town itself was peculiar. It was as though something lay hidden somewhere under its vibrant surface.

As Xixu left Pale Moon and walked through the twilight-lit streets, he ruminated upon what he’d just heard.

Sari's disappearance, her significance, and the rumors of the king wanting to dissolve Irede. This was the first he'd heard of any of it, and he felt as though something didn't quite line up. Like there was still an important piece missing—a piece that would tie all these loose fragments together.

"Should I make a visit to the capital...?"

Instead of waiting for his liege's reply, he could ask him directly about what he intended for Irede. That would let Xixu confirm whether the rumors of the town's dissolution were true. But given the current circumstances, he felt unwilling to leave. After all, the safety of a girl he personally knew was uncertain.

As Xixu walked, brooding, his eyes met those of a militiaman coming from the other direction. Traffic was sparse, so evidently the man had easily noticed him. However, the militiaman grimaced, ignored him, and turned a nearby corner. The display of emotion was rather blatant, but Xixu thought he understood.

"It must be because of the rumors."

In the first place, it was very unusual that he'd only heard about Sari's disappearance from Thoma today, despite it happening three days prior. Considering that his work involved calling upon the maiden to help with runaway shades, it should have been impossible for him *not* to find out. That could only mean that those in the know had kept it quiet, and they hadn't trusted Xixu enough to inform him.

Of course, given that he was a newcomer from the capital, their suspicion was understandable. But that was no fault of his own, and he wished he'd found out sooner.

Had he known, he could have investigated potential places she might be confined in while he searched for the shade. Three days was a significant delay. Something irreversible could have already happened.

As he followed this line of thought, Xixu realized that he was irritated. "What am I...?" He'd been fine before he talked to Thoma. Eager to find the shade behind the recent incident, yes, but certainly not restless or irritated. In what was a rare gesture from him, Xixu clicked his tongue softly.

“For the time being, I just need to search.”

Right now, that was all he could do. Xixu walked along the gradually darkening street, watching for signs of activity.

As he did so, he considered checking the vacant houses he’d seen during the last three days of his patrols. It was possible that Sari was being held in one of them. Tonight was the half-moon—a fact that Xixu hadn’t forgotten.

“Perhaps...tonight will decide this.”

After the half-moon, the maiden would lose her powers and thus could no longer answer the calls of shadeslayers. He didn’t know what kind of situation Sari was in, but didn’t that mean this was the turning point, so to speak?

If the deadline was tonight, then he would have to make haste. Xixu decided to take a shortcut straight to the nearest vacant home, entering an alley and intending to cross over a canal.

But when he reached the path alongside the channel, he stopped and frowned.

“Snakes?”

There were five thin black snakes lined up on the edge of the path closest to the canal. They looked to be about as long as a child’s arm from tip to tail and all were peering into the water. One plunged its head in but soon pulled it back. It made for quite the comical scene.

“I wonder if something’s in the water?”

Curious, Xixu stepped forward to examine the canal. But as soon as he did, the snakes hissed and slithered away, vanishing into the tall grass nearby. The sight made Xixu shiver slightly.

“Red eyes...”

He wasn’t mistaken; the black snakes’ eyes had all shined bright red. In another town, that color would have marked them as shades beyond any doubt. But no shades in animal form were supposed to exist in Irede. Xixu placed a hand on the hilt of his military sword and approached the grass the snakes had vanished into.

But they were already gone. He turned back and peered into the spot in the canal they'd been examining.

"Nothing...right?"

He was on the verge of writing it off, but then he remembered the snake that had dunked its head into the water. Perhaps what they were searching for lay deeper below. Xixu knelt, unbuttoned his left sleeve, and rolled it up to his elbow. He dipped his arm into the water, staying ready to draw his sword at any moment.

At first, all he felt was the chill. But he adapted to the temperature of the water before long. Xixu moved his arm around, unable to see what he was reaching for, but his fingers touched nothing. He pulled his arm out of the water.

"Can't see a point in diving in..."

He was hesitant to go into the canal without any solid reason to. But even so, unable to push the bizarre snakes from his mind, Xixu reached in once more. This time, he went deeper, sinking his arm in up to above his elbow.

He doubted he'd find anything. His fingers certainly wouldn't reach the bottom either. But the moment he thought that, something that felt like cloth coiled around Xixu's hand. Surprised, he almost pulled away, but then thought better of it and grabbed the object instead. Gently, he brought it to the surface.

"Is this a...sash?"

It was one end of a dark blue kimono sash with a half-moon dyed on it. As soon as he saw it for what it was, he leaped to his feet.

Then, Xixu flung off his jacket and dived straight into the water. At night, light couldn't reach the bottom of the channel. All he could see was rippling darkness.

Almost entirely blind, Xixu followed along the drifting, dark blue sash. It swayed with the water and appeared to extend down toward the floor of the canal. He swam down, squinting, until he noticed a faint white shine in the murk. His feet felt heavy, but he kicked them anyway as he headed forward.

What he saw stunned him. There, lying at the bottom of the canal, was a girl he knew all too well. Her long silver hair had come loose, billowing in the water, and her complexion was a stark, pale white. Her sash had almost completely come undone, so her faded gray kimono exposed her slender legs.

However, what stunned Xixu was not her appearance, but the thin film stretched across her skin.

That film was the source of the white shine he'd seen, and upon closer inspection, it appeared to be filled with air. The proof of that lay in how the girl herself seemed hardly damp, despite her hair and kimono, which protruded outside the film, swaying in the water. Her smooth skin lacked color, but neither was it swollen and waterlogged.

Xixu wavered—though only slightly—at the unexpected sight. It was beautiful, yet also abnormal. He couldn't take his eyes off of her, yet he felt like this was something he shouldn't be allowed to see.

The maiden's chest rose and fell as she breathed, and the sheer relief Xixu felt upon seeing that surprised even himself.

But...could he touch her, as she was now? He was unable to make up his mind. However, he was also unable to hold his breath any longer, so that made the decision for him. Determined, he reached out toward her, intending on pulling her into his arms.

The moment his finger touched the film covering her, it vanished. Perhaps reacting to the sudden influx of water, her body folded in pain. Hurriedly, Xixu held her close and kicked up off the canal floor. When they reached the surface, he pushed her onto the path first and quickly climbed up afterward, whereupon he saw that she was coughing violently.

"Cough it up! You'll be okay!"

"Ack... Ngh..."

She had only made contact with the water for a few seconds—not enough to be life-threatening. But when he placed his hand on her shoulder, Xixu was taken aback. It felt as cold as ice.

Shivering, pale hands pawed at the air. "S-So...cold..."

“Just hold on! I’ll get you back to Pale Moon!”

He retrieved his uniform jacket and wrapped Sari up in it to protect her modesty. She was shivering all over, but when he picked her up into his arms, she lost consciousness.

He hadn’t noticed any external injuries on her. All the same, he needed to have a doctor see her as soon as he could, as well as warm up her frozen body, or things could worsen.

The young man, shielding her delicate body in his arms, broke off into a run. From within the grass, red-eyed snakes stared probingly at him as he went.

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She felt as though she’d had a sad dream. Alone in the darkness, she stood in a cold chamber of stone. There was nobody else around. Naked and barefoot, she circled the chamber. Nothing was there. It was cold. Feeling terribly lonely, she wanted to call somebody’s name. Sari tried to call out the names of her family but found that she couldn’t utter a single word.

She could only walk around. She could only search. But Sari, unaware of what she was looking for, eventually grew exhausted. She crouched down and hugged her knees.

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The first thing she saw when she awoke was the soft-looking skin of a woman. Then, she noticed that she was immersed in a comfortable, lazy warmth. Sari realized that it came from the woman who was holding her, and she looked around to get her bearings, keeping the rest of herself still.

A ceiling of plain wood and paper sliding windows. The place she was in was familiar—it was Isha’s room in Pale Moon. Sari extricated herself from Isha’s arms and quietly sat up.

“Wait, why am I naked too?”

Like Isha sleeping beside her, Sari was entirely undressed. The only exception was her silver bracelet, which, as usual, was looped around her left arm. Occasionally, when she’d caught a fever as a child, she’d slept just like this, in

the warm embrace of one of Pale Moon's courtesans. Had she fallen ill again?

Sari, memories still in a jumble, slid out of the bed and stood up. A thin undershirt had been folded and placed nearby, so she slipped it on. She wanted to ask Isha what had happened but didn't want to interrupt her rest. For the time being, she decided she would borrow some of Isha's clothes and find somebody to talk to. She walked over and stepped out into the adjoining room whereupon she saw a man sitting at a low table, a number of documents spread out before him.

"Thoma..."

"Sari! You're awake! How do you feel?"

"Fine. Just a little out of it."

"If you're not feeling well yet, go back to sleep. Pale Moon will be fine."

"But I don't know anything about what—"

The door leading out to the hallway opened to reveal a young man. He seemed startled upon noticing Sari and froze in place. His face had stiffened, but not knowing why, she tilted her head at him.



“Xixu?” she asked.

“Put some clothes on, Sari,” Thoma said wryly.

Sari remembered what she was wearing. She looked down at her almost-naked body and shrieked. “Wh-What?! W-Wait, why—”

“Sorry, Xixu, could you stay outside for a moment?” Thoma seemed to be the only one still calm. Upon hearing his request, Xixu unfroze and, without a word, shut the door between them.

Sari immediately began screaming at Thoma. “Explain! *Now!*”

“I will, I promise. Just put some clothes on first, okay?”

He pointed her toward a box containing her own kimonos. After Sari hurriedly threw one on and yanked the sash together into what barely resembled a knot, Thoma called out toward the hallway.

“You can come in now.”

A little while later, Xixu entered, pointedly keeping his face looking away from Sari. She quickly stepped over to Thoma, knelt down beside him, and proceeded to freeze in place, casting her gaze directly at the floor.

“My apologies,” Xixu said.

The words only served to inflame Sari’s embarrassment even further.

Perhaps noticing that she was red all the way up to the tips of her ears and refusing to look up, Xixu spoke to Thoma.

“Please warn me beforehand of...situations like that. Don’t just leave me to walk into them.”

“Sorry, sorry. Oh, and just so you know, I’m her blood relative.”

“What? I thought you said you were just ‘like’ a brother to her?”

“That’s what we tell everyone. It’s kind of a messy situation, so we don’t make it public. But we *are* actually related. Genuine brother and sister. Just thought I should let you know.”

Her brother smiled, seemingly in a good mood. Sari wondered what he was

thinking, and why his spirits were so oddly high, but since she couldn't understand anything that was going on, she had no choice but to keep her mouth closed. They never revealed that information to anybody, so something must have happened between her brother and Xixu. Even in Irede, hardly any people knew that she and Thoma were siblings—just Isha and the head of the Midiridos Troupe.

And now, this young man was the newest exception. He looked back and forth between Thoma and Sari. Whatever he saw seemed to confuse him, because his expression seemed dissatisfied.

"You look nothing alike."

"That's because I take after our father, and Sari, our mother. In fact, she's her spitting image. That's why our mother doesn't appear in public much."

"Would it be bad if people realized two of the sacred houses had mixed?"

"Something like that. Our mother refused to become Pale Moon's maiden and married into our father's family instead. Her side of the family were very much against it, but she forced the issue through. In exchange, they set a condition that if she were to give birth to a daughter, she would have to return her, which is why Sari was raised by our mother's family from the moment she was born."

As Thoma talked, Sari listened pensively. She'd heard the story from her grandmother when she was ten, and Sari had felt the anger and disappointment in her voice. She hadn't been able to accept that her daughter had abandoned her duty as maiden.

From what Sari had heard, her grandmother had been very surprised that her mother's firstborn child was a boy. Given the origins of the lineage of Pale Moon proprietresses, among other factors, they traced their bloodline via the women in the family. Sari knew that her mother, who had married into another family and, on top of that, had given birth to a boy, must have faced harsh criticism. Even though she'd never really spent much time with her mother, she felt genuinely sorry for her in that regard—it must have been difficult.

But Sari couldn't deny that the sympathy she felt was no more than she would feel for any other stranger. She couldn't really understand why her mother had refused her duty and left Pale Moon.

After hearing Thoma's explanation, Xixu frowned slightly. "When I heard the previous maiden was her grandmother, I had been wondering. Why it skipped a generation, I mean."

"As far as most people know, Sari's mother was sickly, so she holed up in the family's estate in the capital and eventually died there. But really, she's currently the wife of the head of House Radi. We can't say a thing about it, okay?"

"Then why did you tell me? You shouldn't have."

"Well, I figured it'd be fine if *you* knew. Remember what I said about screening?"

Thoma laughed happily, and Xixu stared at him, speechless. While Sari was glancing at Xixu's expression, their eyes met, and he awkwardly jerked his gaze away.

She wasn't exactly sure why, but she was beginning to get really fed up that nobody was explaining what had happened to her. She wondered if it would be okay to start pestering them for some answers.

She looked up at her brother, and he reached a large hand out to rub her head. "So, Sari. How much do you remember? Do you know who did it to you?"

"Who...?"

"Xixu found you at the bottom of a canal. Did somebody drop you in there? Or did you dive in yourself?"

"Canal... Oh!"

Her memories returned all at once, as though they'd been unshackled. If she remembered correctly, she'd been patrolling with Eid, and then a shade had attacked her after they'd become separated. She recalled it ramming her to the ground, whereafter she'd fallen into the canal to escape.

Sari pressed her fingers to her temples. "A masked shade rammed into me. I didn't want to get captured, so I used the canal to get away."

"A masked shade? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

There was no mistaking those shining red eyes. The shade must have bided its time until she'd separated from Eid. It was entirely different from any other shade she'd encountered. None had ever directly attacked the maiden before.

Then, remembering what her brother had just told her, Sari bowed deeply to the other man in the room. "Thank you for saving me."

He paused for a moment before replying. "It's fine. Anybody would have done the same."

"Um, so what happened to the shade?"

Thoma was the one who answered. He picked up one of the papers from the table and handed it to her.

"It's kept one step ahead of us this whole time. Multiple masked shades have been popping up since yesterday, attacking people out of nowhere. There have been twelve casualties, some fatal. And it looks like they're targeting employees and regular customers of the three sacred houses. That's why Pale Moon's closed for business right now. Us too."

"What? But..."

This sounded like a state of emergency the likes of which Irede had never experienced before. She abruptly made to stand up, but her brother stopped her.

"You can't go out, Sari. The moon's almost full."

"What? But I should still have three days..."

"You didn't know? It's been five days since you first went missing. The half-moon has already passed."

"*What?*"

Five days was a long time. Sari turned toward the bedroom, where Isha was still sleeping.

"I slept for five days?"

"Two. You were missing for three."

"What...?"

Since Xixu found her still in the canal, did that mean she'd spent three days underwater? She'd been lucky then, that the moon was still waxing. But how should she explain to Xixu what he'd seen?

Sari smiled stiffly and looked up at the young man. "Um... Were you surprised? When you found me."

"Of course. Just how different *is* this town's maiden?"

"Well, it's a long story..."

Still, the fact that Xixu had rescued her meant that he really *wasn't* an enemy of the town. That was a relief—much more than she'd expected, strangely enough—and the tension drained from her shoulders. Shortly after, however, she looked at the document Thoma had passed her, and her breath caught in her throat.

On it were the locations of the incidents that had occurred over the past two days, the names of the victims, and descriptions of the shades that had been witnessed. The three sacred houses were indeed being targeted; she recognized every victim across the six locations that had been attacked. Most of the names belonged to House Radi craftsmen or Midiridos musicians and singers, but a regular patron of Pale Moon was also among them. That none of its courtesans were listed was likely due to the fact they seldom went out. Sari felt a mixture of relief and anger.

"You said multiple shades. Does that mean you haven't caught any of them?" she asked.

"Ironblade happened to encounter one and kill it," Xixu replied. "The rest are still loose. They just vanish right after they attack."

"I see..."

According to the eyewitness reports, the shades had both male and female forms, and their only common feature was the white masks they wore. Apparently, they would repeatedly pop up all over town to attack.

"Given the circumstances, it's likely they attacked you because they considered the maiden to be an obstacle," Thoma said. "So they're probably quite satisfied to have incapacitated you for three days."

Sari nodded, but she knew that her brother's words were only half true. The shade had been intent on either capturing her or killing her outright. She'd felt it. That she'd been able to escape into the water had been a miscalculation on its part.

Still, the result was that she could no longer act as the maiden. The shades had the upper hand now.

"At this point, I think it's safe to assume somebody is mobilizing these shades," Xixu said gravely.

"Mobilizing them...?" Sari asked. "Is that possible?"

"I'm not sure. Actually, I should ask you this first: does anyone in this town have the means to artificially create shades?"

"Artificially?" Sari exchanged looks with Thoma.

Her brother answered Xixu's question. "No. I've never even heard of such a thing."

"I have," Xixu said. "Not in this town though, of course." Then, he began to tell them a story of what had happened to him two years ago.

He'd been dispatched to a town in the south, where a certain wealthy merchant had been troubled by a series of strange incidents involving shades. No matter how many of them Xixu slew, more kept coming, and so he and his companions had endeavored to hunt down their source. In the end, they'd discovered that the shades had been roused by an enigmatic shaman who had been hired by a man with a grudge against the merchant.

"A shaman...?" Sari asked. "They can do that?"

"I don't know the specific method, but he would kill animals and use their thoughts and emotions to create shades. When I raided the house he was using, I found decapitated animal corpses everywhere."

"Ugh..." Sari covered her mouth with her hand. She had never heard of anything like that before.

Xixu glanced at her, but continued. "The main issue is that the shaman managed to get away."

“Get away?” An unpleasant chill ran down her back. Sari unconsciously grasped her brother’s sleeve. She had already guessed what Xixu was about to say, and it made her feel an unpleasant congestion in the back of her throat.

The dark-haired young man looked straight at Sari. “We found the corpses of those who’d been sent to capture the shaman. His whereabouts have been unknown ever since. Now, my point. If such an individual were to come to this town, do you think they could artificially create shades?”

It was possible. That’s what Sari’s intuition told her. Irede’s shades had physical, human bodies, but in essence, they were no different from the shades anywhere else. So it surely wasn’t impossible.

“I-I think so,” Sari said. “But doesn’t that mean...?”

“Does that mean people are being killed to create these shades?”

Sari shuddered at her brother’s question. She looked to her side and saw that Thoma was wearing a grim expression that she’d never seen on him before. Xixu, on the other hand, was the picture of composure. It reminded her that he wasn’t from this town.

“I’m only pointing out a possibility. We still haven’t found the victim who spilled the pool of blood that Saridi found. Either they were abducted to be used as material to create a shade, mistakenly attacked by a shade not fully under control, or both.”

A memory came to Sari’s mind—a memory of fleeing silhouettes who left only a pool of blood in their wake.

“If the collaborators involved in the case two years ago also have a hand in this one,” Xixu continued, “then that would explain why we haven’t been able to catch any of the shades. They must have people hiding them.”

“But who could...?”

“Not me. And not the king either.”

Sari’s eyes widened at the abrupt mention of the king, but Thoma added a quick “I’ll explain later.” Evidently, a lot had happened while she’d been unconscious. She noticed a slight ripple in the mood between the two men and

tilted her head, puzzled. However, she soon recalled something else.

“Oh, right! Did you catch the man who was with the shade? The person Eid was chasing.”

“Eid said he got away.”

“Oh...”

It was rare for Eid to lose a chase, but maybe her being attacked had held him back. Either way, Sari was relieved to hear that he was unharmed. That said, the thought of how much he was going to scold her the next time they met was already giving her a headache.

“Have you been looking for him?” she asked. “He seemed rather conspicuous.”

“We haven’t. Your vague testimony wasn’t enough to base an investigation on.”

“Sure, but...”

The man had *unquestionably* been suspicious, but evidently, Sari had been the only one who thought so, and she’d spent the last few days in a canal.

She pouted, puffing out her pale cheeks. “He’d definitely stand out in a crowd. His face looked almost fake. It was like a doll’s, but in a weird way, not pretty like Xixu’s.”

“Did you need to use me as a comparison?”

“Oh! And he had black prayer beads hanging from his neck! See? That’s totally suspicious!”

“Sari...” Thoma chided. “Don’t go saying things like that in public. You’re not a child.”

“Black prayer beads?” Xixu’s voice had taken on an inquisitive tone. Across the table from her brother, the young man brought his hand up to stroke his chin. “I...might know who you’re talking about. Can you draw me a portrait of what he looked like?”

“Draw...?”

Thoma pulled a pen out from under the documents and handed it to her. She reluctantly accepted it and began to sketch her best approximation of the man's face. When she'd just about finished with the outline, eyes, nose, and mouth, she heard Xixu release a snort of laughter.

"*Xixu*..."

"S-Sorry. I didn't expect you to be bad at drawing."

"Yeah, I thought this would happen," Thoma said. "That's Sari for you. Hasn't gotten better at all since she was a kid."

"Why don't *you* draw the portrait then, Xixu? You can just show it to me and I'll tell you if it's close!"

"Me?"

Seeing the young man's dismay restored Sari's mood a little. She pushed the pen and a sheet of paper at Xixu, and he hesitantly took them and began to draw. The two siblings watched him work with keen interest.

"You're...not much better than me."

"I never said I was good at this..."

At this rate, they wouldn't be able to tell if the person Xixu was thinking of matched Sari's suspect. But just as she was about to give up, her brother rose to his feet beside her.

"Did Isha see this man too?"

"Oh, now that you mention it, I think she did!"

"Okay. Give me a moment."

Thoma took the pen, some paper, and the box of kimonos, and disappeared into the adjacent room. No doubt he intended on waking his sleeping lover to ask her to draw for them. Sari felt a little bad for her, but she decided to listen to Thoma and wait.

However, that left her alone with Xixu. And *that* reminded her of how he'd seen her barely dressed earlier.

Trying hard not to blush, Sari stood up. "Um, I'll brew some tea."

“No, it’s fine. You must be tired; you only just woke up.”

“It’s no problem. I had plenty of rest.”

She couldn’t just use Isha’s tea without asking, of course, so she stepped toward the door, intending on heading for the kitchens. When she passed by Xixu, however, he grabbed her hand.

“You shouldn’t leave the room.”

“We’re in Pale Moon. This place is basically my home.”

“Even so. Just wait here until Thoma gets back.”

The young man looked serious, showing no traces of teasing her or having made a joke. She supposed that spoke of how dire the circumstances had become. She obediently returned to her original seat. Once again, silence prevailed.

Xixu’s voice broke it, though his voice seemed even quieter than the silence. “Do you ever get sick of it?”

“What?”

“Of having your path decided for you from birth. Have you ever wished you weren’t the maiden?”

“No. Not really.”

She had been born to become the maiden. The proprietress of Pale Moon too. Since before she could remember, that was all she’d ever been told. She’d never felt dissatisfied. It was something only she could do, so she thought it natural that she did it.

However, Xixu frowned at her answer. “You don’t ever see others and envy them?”

“I can’t say I do... I almost never left our estate in the capital, and Irede is all I know.”

The only people Sari knew outside her family were the residents and visitors of Irede, and she’d never envied them before. Rather, she wanted to do her duty so that they could live happy, peaceful lives.

“What makes you ask?” Sari asked. “The story about my mother?”

“When I heard it, it sounded to me like all the burden had been forced onto you alone.”

“Oh...”

Perhaps from an outside perspective, it *did* look like that. Sari laced her fingers together upon the low table. Because she’d just been asleep, her light pink nails looked a little dry.

“Remember when I said I’d only pick a single guest in my lifetime?”

“Yes.”

And then she would go on to give birth to the next maiden after her. That was the unshakeable truth. It couldn’t be altered.

The bloodline of Pale Moon was the very core of Irede.

“To tell you the truth, when I first heard the story about my mother, I thought, ‘If she loved him so much, she should have just picked him as her guest.’”

“Ah... Right.”

“But according to Thoma, that’s wrong. He said my mother didn’t want to bear the responsibilities of the proprietress or pick a guest so she could give birth to the next maiden. He said she wanted to be my father’s wife. To live her life with him, grow old, and die together. Do you understand?”

Sari looked at Xixu, unsure if she’d gotten her meaning across well enough. The darkness of the young man’s black eyes held within them some kind of emotion, but she couldn’t tell which.

“Somewhat. I can only imagine it though.”

“Mmm. I don’t fully understand either. But that was how my mother thought about it, I think. Even if my grandmother might have admonished her for it. My grandmother said that maidens fall in love too. Not only us, but all the women of Pale Moon do. That’s the reason they offer their nights to others.”

There were women like Isha, who only ever chose a single person; women

who stayed with a guest until they fell out of love; and women who freely enjoyed themselves with anybody they took a fancy to. But all of them chose their companions of their own volition. It was never forced upon them. Sari's grandmother had said that was why Pale Moon was the rightful bloodline.

"But I don't know how to do that yet. I know that I'll have to pick a guest one day, but I don't know what standards I'll judge them by, or what kind of relationship I want to build with them. I haven't yet grown up enough to know...which is why I don't envy others, I think. I don't know myself well enough."

Ignorance was, after all, bliss. And Sari didn't think that was a bad thing. In this town, guests who came from elsewhere could forget about the troubles and fatigue of their daily lives for a brief while and rest their weary hearts. That wasn't to say they averted their eyes from hardship. It simply meant that there was a right time for people to face the different parts of their lives.

Sari herself was no exception. She had her eyes solely fixed on the goal of fulfilling her duty and she'd spent her life running toward it, but she was still in the process of becoming an adult. If she hurried things now, she would never be able to truly become either the proprietress or the maiden.

Sari gave Xixu a faint, bittersweet smile. "Or something like that, anyway."

"I...see."

"Mm-hmm. Here I am, acting spoiled and unable to choose a guest when I'm already the proprietress. I need to pull myself together."

Her grandmother was no longer around, and her mother didn't know a thing about Pale Moon. It was down to her and her alone, so she knew that the sooner she grew up and picked a guest, the better, but her inner self seemed unable to catch up.

Xixu's response to hearing her words was to raise his eyebrows slightly. The young man looked into her blue eyes and spoke, voice decisive.

"There's no need to rush into it. Your choice as a maiden is your natural right. It doesn't matter what anybody else might say. Until you find someone you're happy with, spend as much time as you need."

“Huh?”

“They’ll be your partner for your entire life. Whether it takes you five years or ten, waiting shouldn’t make you feel inadequate. I know you cherish Pale Moon and Irede, but when it comes to picking your guest, it’s best if you’re careful.”

Upon finishing his speech, Xixu picked up a document. She doubted that there had been a deeper meaning to what he’d said; he’d simply spoken what he considered to be obvious.

But all the same, Sari felt as though she’d been struck. She stared at Xixu piercingly. He’d told her to take as much time as she needed in picking her guest—something no resident of Irede would ever have said. To them, before she was Sari, she was the maiden of Pale Moon.

And yet, what truly hit her was...

“You said ‘partner for my entire life’ just now.”

Picking a single guest in her lifetime and being with the same person for her entire life were not the same thing.

The guest of Pale Moon’s maiden was exactly that: a guest. More often than not, men left once a maiden’s child was born, or perhaps even while she was with child. Irede was through and through a place of temporary dreams, and guests had their own lives in the outside world.

But Xixu considered “a single guest in a lifetime” and “a partner for life” to be the same. As natural as breathing, without paying it any thought at all. Because that was just who he was.

Xixu looked at her, and his expression turned curious. “Did I say something strange?”

“No.” The slightest trace of warmth was held back behind her eyelids. It threatened to spread through her entire body, so she smiled in an attempt to hide it. “I think you’re just fine as you are. Thank you.”

The almost numbing feeling was pleasant. She felt enlivened and restless. Sari fidgeted as she sat back down. She wanted to ask Xixu more questions, but before she could come up with anything, he spoke first.

“You said...you hardly left your estate in the capital.”

“Oh, yes. Maybe if I had, I’d have met you sooner. Although, keeping me from meeting people was the reason I couldn’t leave to start with.”

“Probably because there are a lot of places that are dangerous for children. Now that you’re older, if you hid your face and were careful, you could go out just fine, right?”

“I think so.”

She tilted her head slightly. Outside of the view from the windows and gates of her family’s estate, she hardly knew a thing about the royal capital. Even if she did leave, she wouldn’t know what to do. The city was terribly large.

Xixu’s expression was serious as he spoke. “Then if you’d like, I could show you around next time you’re there.”

“Huh?”

Maybe he’d made the offer out of pity for the poor girl before him. Maybe it was just because he felt she’d only had scraps of freedom ever since she was born.

But even so...it made Sari genuinely happy, and so she nodded, just like a young girl would have.

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Thoma returned a short time later with a portrait in his hand. He placed it on the low table, and Sari peered at it.

“Oh, that’s good. Mm-hmm, he looked pretty much like that.”

“Then my suspicion was correct.” Xixu scratched his hair in what seemed to be annoyance. Evidently, it *was* the person he’d had in mind. “That’s the shaman I mentioned earlier. The one who could create and control shades.”

“What?”

In the end, the worst had come to pass.

Xixu glared at the portrait bitterly. “If he’s involved, then I know why the shades are wearing masks. They’re to hide the spells on their faces. If they were

seen, the shaman's involvement would become obvious."

Sari heard a loud sigh which made her look up. She saw her brother step over to gather the documents together.

"Okay," Thoma said. "Let's notify the others and take countermeasures. I'll go to the militia. Sari, stay here in Pale Moon."

"Y-You can't! They're targeting the sacred offerings, aren't they?! It's not safe for you, Thoma!"

"I know, but I can't just shut myself inside and let them have their way with us. If he's the one creating the shades, then we can resolve all of this by catching him."

"Then I'll—"

"No. You'll have me in an early grave if anything happens to you again. Xixu, don't let her leave. You stay here too. The rumors might've gotten to some people's heads, and who knows what they might do to you?"

"Have you forgotten that I'm a shadeslayer?"

"Doesn't matter. The two of you are to stay here. Go over to the rear building or something."

"I-I can't let him into my *room*!"

"Good excuse for you to clean it up."

Thoma left the room, and Sari hurried after him. While Xixu followed after the siblings, politely closing the door as he went, Sari was too busy clinging to Thoma's arm to notice him.

"Thoma! Wait!"

She threw all of her weight back to try and stop him, and eventually, he did. Sari looked up at him in desperation.

Ever since she was little, her brother had always been there for her. He was the only family she had in Irede. Of course, she had relatives back in the capital, but they never came here.

"I'll go too. I promise I'll be useful, so—"

“Saridi.”

Her brother’s tone wasn’t strict. But when he called her by that name, she could no longer be just a girl.

Sari the proprietress straightened her back. Thoma looked down at her with kind eyes.

“Stay here. Remember your duty. Don’t be reckless. Or have you forgotten your childhood lessons?”

Sari paused for a moment. “I remember.”

That was all she could bring herself to say. Thoma ruffled her hair and placed a kiss on her pale cheek.

“I love you, Sari.”

At the sound of his gentle voice, she let go. Thoroughly reflecting upon her own childishness, she didn’t make the slightest of movements until he disappeared down the hallway. She hung her head and held back a sigh, and then a voice spoke out from behind her.

“Where’s the back entrance?”

“Xixu. He said you couldn’t leave either.”

“Nobody would actually obey an order like that.” The young man quickly frowned and then added, “Except you. You should. Besides, I’m the only one who knows the shaman. Matters will run smoother if I go.”

“Maybe, but...”

Thoma had mentioned rumors that were dangerous to Xixu. Had he meant the one regarding the king dissolving Irede? Maybe the current abnormal circumstances had put the townspeople on edge.

Sari’s gaze stopped on the scarlet cord tied around Xixu’s military sword. Then, she had an idea.

“Oh, right! There’s *that*.”

“Hmm?”

“Come with me, quick.”

Sari grabbed Xixu's sleeve and began running through the hallways. Perhaps because Pale Moon was closed for business, none of the other women were outside of their rooms. She dragged Xixu along until they were at her room on the second floor of the rear building. When they reached the door, she finally let him go.

"Sorry, could you wait here for a moment?"

"Where are we?"

"This is my room. Just hold on. It's not messy, okay?! I just leave a lot of stuff around..."

She *did* clean it, but she never expected to ever let anybody inside, so, well. It would be kind of embarrassing if he saw. Fortunately, Xixu readily agreed.

"Okay. I'll wait."

"I'll be right back!"

Sari darted into her room and began rummaging around an old accessory cabinet, pulling out a number of small drawers and turning over everything inside.

"Huh... Where did I leave it?"

She hadn't thought she'd need it for a long time, so she had no idea where she'd stowed it away. In her haste, she pulled on the largest drawer too hard. It came out and crashed to the floor, making a loud *bang* and scattering its contents everywhere.

"Oh, drat..."

It was going to be a bother cleaning this up later. But at least she saw a thin box made out of plain wood among the mess.

"There you are."

She hadn't touched it since her grandmother's funeral. Leaving the rest of the mess untouched behind her, she returned to the hallway and showed the box to Xixu.

"This should help you with the townspeople."

“What is it?”

“Show me your sword.”

She took a black and white decorative cord out of the box. It consisted of two intertwined strands of high-quality silk, and at each tip, a half-moon was bound, one made from black stone, and one made from white.

Sari crouched and tied it to the military sword, next to the scarlet cord that was already there.

“What is it?”

“The cord of Pale Moon’s proprietress. If you wear it, people should understand you’re not an enemy of Irede...although newcomers and such might not know.”

“Is it okay for me to wear? They won’t think I stole it?”

“No. There’s no point in stealing it. They should all know that I gave it to you.”

“All right.”

Sari double-checked that the cord wouldn’t come loose, then stood back up. When she looked at Xixu, she realized he was staring in the direction of her room...which reminded her that, in her rush, she hadn’t closed the door. With an ominous feeling creeping up on her, she turned around. And saw the pitiful state of her floor.

“It does look like it needs a clean,” Xixu said.

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong! That only happened just now!”

“So, where’s the back entrance?”

“...I’ll take you there.”

She made extra sure to shut the door, and then led Xixu to the back of the property. A small iron gate lay in the garden, deep behind a copse of trees, and even many of Pale Moon’s women didn’t know it existed.

Sari opened the gate with an old key. “If I said I wanted to go too, would you take me?”

“No. I don’t feel like diving into any more canals.”

“I suppose three times *is* too many...”

Her selfishness hadn’t even made it past her brother, so she wouldn’t be able to force the issue with someone completely unrelated to her like Xixu. Sari smiled at the young man ruefully.

Perhaps out of awkwardness, he adopted a solemn bearing as he replied. “Don’t worry. The king isn’t involved in this incident. I’m sure Irede’s dissolution is just a rumor. I swear it.”

“Oh, right... Okay. Thank you.” Sari watched him exit through the gate. Then, she called out, her voice filled with uneasiness and hope. “Be careful. A-And don’t let Eid see that cord, okay?”

“Is there a problem?”

“A small one. It’s just him.”

“Okay.” The dark-haired young man turned back and studied her. The look on his face was slightly pained, but that didn’t surprise her.

She inclined her head and looked up at the unmoving young man. “Xixu?”

“No, it’s nothing. Stay hidden.”

Leaving those as his parting words, the young shadeslayer turned and left. Soon, he disappeared around a corner.

Now alone, Sari closed the gate and locked it. She looked up at the surrounding trees. This area was dark even in the daytime.

No matter how much she pondered the question of what a person who created shades could possibly be planning, she couldn’t find an answer. Did they not know that destroying the sacred offerings would leave the town with no meaning?

“I suppose we won’t know until we catch him.”

He created shades that killed people and used them to propagate even further harm. Those were deeds that could not go unchecked.

Sari’s blue eyes glared at the somber sky. Deep within them, where nobody could go, they carried a cold, burning will to fight.

4. Crossroads

“It appears she has returned to Pale Moon.”

Upon hearing the shaman’s murmur, Marquess Bughnan flinched and cast his eyes about his study. Only the two of them were present.

For the past few days, Irede had been in turmoil. And while that was exactly what he’d hired the shaman to achieve, the results had exceeded the details of his request. The words “I never asked you to go this far” had been on the tip of his tongue once—that was, until the eerie air hanging about the shaman had made him swallow them down. In hindsight, he was glad he’d never said them aloud.

The shaman, who he’d come across in the south, had the ability to create and control shades. The man made a living from directing those shades to haunt his targets and deteriorate their minds, causing them to incite conflict and bring ruin upon themselves.

Marquess Bughnan had thought such an individual would be the perfect match for this place. Irede was a town of myth—that was something he knew all too well. He’d heard it repeated many times over when he’d first visited as a tourist over twenty years ago.

But more importantly, it was a town of unique vested interests with connections to the movers and shakers of other nations, including wealthy merchants. Irede was almost like a small nation of its own, and it held a degree of equal standing with Torlonia itself.

He’d wanted to become somebody notable here—to bask in the esteem, admiration, and respect of others. In the beginning, that was all he’d wanted. As a member of the aristocracy, he was used to standing above the rabble wherever he went, and he’d wanted that to be true of Irede as well. That was why he’d established a business here.

And all he’d learned was that here in this town...he wasn’t the least bit noteworthy at all.

Owning a large business, having the rank of a noble—neither were considered to be particularly meaningful. This town simply didn't view such things as special. In fact, even the concept of recognizing exceptional status never existed here from the beginning...with the exception of the three sacred houses which drew their origins back to the age of myth.

So, he'd wanted to shake them up a little. Hurt their reputation, peel away their superiority, and, little by little, spread his own influence throughout the town. Then, the residents would respect and rely on him like he'd always wished. To achieve this, he'd devised a number of heavy-handed plans.

And it seemed he'd miscalculated. One of those plans had gone awry—the shaman had taken to Irede far too well.

The shades that the shaman created in this town were much deadlier than he'd anticipated. He'd only wanted the three sacred houses to experience a slump in customers, but now there had been multiple deaths and a heavy mood hung over the entire town. But while he did think the chaos had progressed too far, he couldn't deny that it also made for the perfect opportunity.

And anyway, he doubted he'd be able to turn back now. When the shaman had just begun experimenting with creating shades, he'd seemed reasonable and open to discussion. But one night, that had all changed.

"Wh-What are your plans for her?"

The corners of the shaman's lips raised in a grin. There it was. That smile. The man had always shown signs of suffering from headaches, but one night, he'd screamed and collapsed out of nowhere. Ever since, that artificial, impenetrable smile had never wavered. Marquis Bughnan failed to hide a shudder.

The night of the shaman's collapse had been terribly bothersome. A shade, freed from its creator's control, had escaped. By the time Marquess Bughnan's manservants had found it, it had already killed someone, so they'd had to hurriedly retrieve both it and the corpse.

However, he had a feeling that the current turmoil was becoming far messier than that one night had been.

The shaman narrowed his eyes, smiling his unfathomable smile. "This suits us

perfectly. It was fortunate that she was unable to act for several days, but if she'd stayed hidden away in her shell, there would have been nothing we could do to her."

"I-I've already promised her to somebody!"

That was another one of his plans. Sari, the proprietress of Pale Moon, was the most expensive courtesan in Irede. He'd heard that the price of the previous maiden's companionship had been more than enough to fund the construction of an entire estate. That could only mean the current maiden's price was similar, could it not?

What's more, she wasn't just any courtesan. She was a *holy* courtesan—the only successor to the original myth—and her guest would be the father of the next generation's maiden. If one wished to control this town, then she was exceedingly valuable. He'd gone pale when he'd been told of her escape, but it sounded as though the shaman had more plans in mind for her.

The shaman watched the flustered marquess, and his grin grew wider. "Trust me when I say: I know her value far better than you do."

The words oozed deep into his ears and stayed there, refusing to fade away.

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Although he'd lost his bearings for a moment after leaving through Pale Moon's back gate, Xixu soon found his way back onto familiar streets.

Intending to stop by his lodgings first, he picked an alley and began running. It was possible he'd already received a reply to the report he'd sent to the king. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but it would be best to check before proceeding with anything else.

It was after noon, and many of the alleyway stores had their windows and shutters closed, likely wary of the recent goings-on. However, it appeared that many other establishments were still open for business as usual, and from around the corners, he caught glimpses of the main streets bustling with tourists.

Some courtesan houses had even already opened, despite the early hour, and Xixu found himself somewhat taken aback by their carefree attitude. Did they

think themselves safe just because the targets were the three sacred houses?

Those thoughts carried him all the way to his dormitory. As he headed toward his own room, he quickly confirmed what already knew: pretty much everybody was currently out.

Since shadeslayers were members of the militia, they were each assigned a single room as their lodgings. Xixu, however, didn't feel inconvenienced at all; at the military academy, shared dormitories had been the norm. In fact, he wouldn't have even minded a smaller room.

He kept very few personal belongings in there, so upon opening the door, his eyes were immediately drawn to the unfamiliar object on the floor.

"A box...?"

It was made of wood, wasn't particularly large, and he could quite easily lift it into his arms. The box's plain features only served to emphasize its most conspicuous element: the embarrassingly messy scrawl on the nailed-down cover. *To my little brother.*

Of course, there was no way that descriptor alone would have been enough for the package to reach Xixu, so underneath the scrawl was his name and address, written in a woman's neat handwriting. It all reeked of an uncomfortable amount of mischief, but right now he was more curious about its contents. Hoping that it would be something useful, he pulled out the nails and opened the lid.

First, there was a letter from the king. The message, however, was brief: *You can tell her who you really are if you think you need to. I'm sure adapting to an unfamiliar place will be tough, so take care of your health and do your best.* Well, Thoma had already looked into his identity, so that was mostly meaningless. Xixu put the letter to one side and inspected the rest of the box.

There was something roughly the size of a baby's head nestled inside, wrapped up in black cloth. A small note had been pinned to it, upon which was written: *You may find this useful.* Judging from the woman's handwriting, it had likely been placed there by the maiden who served as the king's confidant. Xixu carefully extracted the black bundle. He opened up the mouth of the sack-shaped cloth and peeked inside.

“Wha—?!”

And what he saw made him let out an involuntary cry of shock. It was the pale white skull of a small animal.

From its shape, he guessed that it had belonged to a dog. Once he’d retrieved it from the sack and took a closer look, he noticed that the words of a spell were painted on the skull’s brow and cheeks in crimson. That was when he realized that he knew where this had come from.

“The shaman used this back when...”

In his previous dealings with the shade-creating shaman, Xixu had found that his target had decapitated a number of animals to use their skulls as catalysts. The spells that remained on them had been proof of this, and Xixu himself had delivered this dog’s skull to the king alongside his report.

And now, in an entirely unexpected turn of events, the king’s maiden had returned it. Xixu deftly re-wrapped the skull and held it under his arm. He examined the rest of the box, but it was now empty. Leaving only the king’s letter in his personal letter case, he exited the room.

“But how am I supposed to use this?”

Shadeslayers were not maidens or shamans. He had no idea how the dog’s skull could be of any use to him. He could maybe ask Sari about it, but she currently lacked her maiden powers, and if he handled it poorly, she’d pester him about taking her along again.

Furthermore, while he didn’t find her company unpleasant...it *did* invoke a strange restlessness within him. How she earnestly bore her heavy responsibility without growing jaded. The way she stood, tall and striking. And above all, how her blue eyes—within which a mysterious power lay—made him instinctively want to avert his gaze.

“I’m being ridiculous.”

Unshackling himself from his incoherent train of thought, Xixu decided to head out with the skull to do a round of the town. He left the dormitory building—and then came across somebody rather unexpected.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here.” Ironblade looked down at Xixu with wide, surprised eyes. He had an unshakeable air of authority and the largest build of all the shadeslayers. He had likely just returned from a patrol. Xixu glanced at the man’s military sword, from which hung a piece of blue quartz.

If at all possible, he wanted to get past smoothly and be on his way. He was well aware of how easy he was to mistrust, currently. To make matters worse, he was holding a dog’s skull—an object which could optimistically be described as “extremely dubious.” If Ironblade saw it, it would be entirely reasonable for him to accuse Xixu of being the culprit on the spot.

Xixu maintained his composure and replied. “I was taking a short break before heading out once more.”

“Mmm. Planning to shut yourself away somewhere again? I heard nobody’s seen you around for a while.”

“I was at Pale Moon, talking to Thoma.”

“Ah.”

Ironblade’s words cut off there. For a moment, Xixu thought he’d had Ironblade convinced, but evidently, that wasn’t the case, as the man’s gaze shifted down toward Xixu’s military sword. Suddenly, he remembered the decorative cord tied to it for the first time and realized the fatal blunder he’d made.

Sari herself hadn’t been made aware yet, but her discovery and safety had only been revealed to the people of Pale Moon. Before she’d awoken, Thoma had given out specific instructions to make sure of that, cautioning against possible information leaks. However, him possessing her decorative cord would betray the fact that she’d returned. Xixu wavered, unsure of how he could cover for the currently powerless maiden.

But before he could say anything, Ironblade nodded sharply. “Right. So the maiden’s safe? No, keep quiet about it. Can’t have her being targeted again.”

He wasn’t entirely sure of what conclusion the man had drawn, but it seemed he was still in Ironblade’s good books.

Xixu stayed silent, and the older shadeslayer continued. “If you ask me, given

her age, it's a little early for her, but I suppose the previous inheritor did pass away early. It's likely for the best this way."

He had to be talking about Thoma and Sari's mother. Considering the woman was actually alive, Xixu was somewhat curious about what she was like. Perhaps it was because she'd given up everything for the sake of a man, whereas his own mother had done the opposite, departing the palace without a speck of lingering attachment for his father.

In an effort to avoid the original topic—as well as to satisfy his own curiosity—Xixu picked up on Ironblade's words. "Speaking of mothers, do you know what Thoma's mother is like? I'm from the capital as well, but I've never heard anything about her."

"Ah, the mistress of House Radi? She's from an old noble house, no?"

"An old noble house?"

Was that what the family of Pale Moon's maidens was? Sari had never given him her surname. That she hadn't been allowed outside much when she lived in the capital likely meant that her grandmother hadn't wanted her to be seen. Apparently, that was in order to prevent her origins from getting out when she became Pale Moon's proprietress.

Xixu had a hunch that this was what Thoma had really been trying to tell him about, rather than the man's blood relation to Sari.

As he pondered, Ironblade smiled wryly, the expression leaking into his tone. "The family might not be familiar to people of the capital these days, but here in Irede, they're well known. Have you heard of them? They're called..."

Ironblade spoke a name, and Xixu recognized it. They were indeed an old house—one with a very long history. The revelation that they were connected to Pale Moon caused Xixu to murmur a question under his breath.

"But then, how...?"

Yes, that house had an old enough ancestry to be the proprietors of Pale Moon. But something felt off. Xixu started to contemplate the inconsistency, but his thoughts were interrupted by Ironblade's voice.

“That aside, we need to sort this case out, or things won’t settle down... Oh, and keep that cord hidden from Eid for a while. He’ll turn into a sulky brat, and I don’t need that right now. Ugh, and to think he’s actually older than you.”

“Saridi gave me the same warning.”

Evidently, the decorative cord implied some kind of significant privilege. For a man who he’d heard was very attached to Sari, it would no doubt be irritating. *I don’t understand how Eid can lay his feelings bare toward a girl so much younger than him,* was the thought that crossed Xixu’s mind, yet at the same time, he felt as though perhaps he was telling himself a lie.

“Still, now you’ll be accepted by the people of Irede,” Ironblade said. “After all, the maiden’s guest is basically synonymous with her husband.”

“...”

He suddenly understood *extremely* well why he couldn’t show the cord to Eid. At the same time, Xixu drafted a complaint to the maiden in his mind: *Wasn’t there another way?*

The decorative cord she’d given him was a double-edged sword, and he was realizing this far too late. True, being the maiden’s guest was equivalent to receiving a legitimate endorsement. However, he was now projecting a relationship with her that didn’t actually exist.

After parting with Ironblade, residents of the town who had noticed the decorative cord began approaching him to talk—with great curiosity and enthusiasm—as he made his way through the street. Feeling despondent, he entered the alleyways.

Clearing up this utter mess of a misunderstanding later would unmistakably be an ordeal. The thought gave him a headache, which compounded his *other* headache derived from the fact that people now thought of him as somebody who’d laid his hands on a beautiful young girl. Some of those people were smirking men who were clearly attempting to tease him about it. Xixu had a strong urge to kick a nearby wall. Several nearby walls.

“Did you *have* to create a new problem to solve the old one?”

He felt as though every step forward was accompanied by a step back, but

decided that he'd concern himself with his task first—he still needed to catch that shaman. Then, maybe that would go a ways toward breaking this new deadlock he'd found himself in too.

Xixu reached the corner of an alleyway and scanned his surroundings. After confirming that no one else was in sight, he opened the bundle under his arm and retrieved the dog's skull, placing it upon a dark stain on the ground—the aftermath of spilled blood from an incident yesterday.

Xixu knew nothing about shamanic arts, but he had learned from the southern incident that shades were created at places stained by blood. Therefore, he'd decided to follow that example. If he was wrong, then so be it. He'd think of something else.

The change, however, happened quickly. From out of the dark stain on the ground, liquid of a similar color slowly but steadily welled forth. It clung to the skull, forming into flesh and gradually obscuring the white bone.

In the end, there stood a single dog. Slowly, it raised its head.

"White eyes..."

Cloudy, crystal-like orbs filled its eye sockets. The dog resembled the shades of other towns, but it was somewhat more physically tangible, likely due to the nature of Irede and the shaman's engraved symbols.

However, Xixu knew that the main force animating it was the magic of the king's maiden. The dog's white eyes proved that.

The dog shook its head once, then set off on a slow waddle. Its lifeless form seemed to be urging him to follow, so he obeyed.

Thus, a man and his dog advanced through the back alleys of Irede.

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Even now, Sari still dreamed about it. It was a memory from over ten years ago. Back then, she had been a child in truth, and utterly, utterly foolish.

She'd thought she'd known what she was doing, but she hadn't understood a thing. And so she hadn't paid much attention to the waxing and waning of the moon, that which held sway over her power. Without any basis at all, she had

been confident that she would be fine.

The one who'd had to pay for her stupidity was the shadeslayer who'd protected her.

Sari had stood there, stock still, while he'd collapsed before her very eyes. She couldn't remember the young man's face. And that was the last she'd ever seen of him.

Even so, she still dreamed. Of the shadeslayer's back as he lay sprawled out on the street beneath the full moon—and of her own young self looking down at him, frozen in place.

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Xixu had said that nobody would obey an order to not be reckless, and Sari agreed completely.

Nonetheless, since her brother had emphasized the point so much, she had actually intended to do as he'd said. *Had*. But after she'd heard Xixu say that the king wasn't involved, she'd come up with a theory that changed her mind.

After returning to her room and tidying it up, she retrieved a folded white cloth from the refitted drawer.

Sari placed it on her dresser for the moment and hurriedly changed her clothes. Once again, to allow for more freedom of movement, she adjusted the hem to be slightly higher.

She'd wanted to wear her gray kimono, but it must have been ruined when she'd fallen into the canal. At the very least, she couldn't find it in her room, so Sari wore her usual white kimono instead, bound with a dark blue sash.

Today, however, the pattern dyed onto the sash was not a half-moon but a perfect white circle. Standing in front of her full-length mirror, she double-checked her appearance.

"Okay!"

No problems. She could do this. She returned to the dresser and unfolded the white cloth, revealing a thin silver bracelet. She slipped it onto her left arm to join the one she always wore. They clinked softly against each other under her

sleeve.

“I’ll be borrowing this, mother.”

The words felt somewhat hollow to her—likely because she’d never addressed her mother by that title before.

But that didn’t change the truth that she was indeed still Sari and Thoma’s mother. The girl nodded to her reflection in the mirror and exited the room, heading for the back gate she’d led Xixu to earlier. She opened it and left.

She proceeded toward the main street in order to confirm her theory, avoiding the eyes of others as she went. But just as she was turning her first corner, she suddenly bumped into a very familiar face. Its owner, upon seeing her, opened his eyes wide in shock.

“Sari, you’re okay!”

“Eid.”

Someone she knew had *already* found her. Sari backed away, expecting him to drag her back to Pale Moon, but he rushed over and pulled her into a hug.

“I was worried about you. Where were you?” he murmured into her ear. He sounded relieved.

“In a canal.”

“A canal, huh? Well, that’s fine. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

She got the feeling that being in a canal wasn’t exactly “fine,” but one look at him was enough to suppress her retort. Eid was Eid, yes, but it still must have been hard for him to deal with her disappearance, especially since it had happened while she was with him. His hug was uncharacteristically tight.

Sari wrapped her arms around his back and patted it gently. “Um, I’m sorry I made you worry.”

“It’s fine. It’s my fault that we got separated.”

Eid finally let go, taking a hold of her hand instead. Then, he asked her the same question he’d asked her long ago when she’d been a lost child.

“So, where do you want to go?”

“You won’t tell me to go back?”

“Do you *want* to go back?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t.”

“O-Oh. Okay.”

She’d left because she wanted to do something to help. The thought of returning had never crossed her mind. Seeing that he had no intention of bringing her back to Pale Moon relieved her.

“I actually had an idea I wanted to look into,” she said.

“An idea?”

It had been on her mind since Xixu had told her about the shaman. He’d said that in the previous incident, the shaman had been hired by another man. If that had been the case, then perhaps somebody had hired the shaman this time too.

Sari didn’t know who that was, but she suspected that the rumors of Irede’s dissolution had something to do with it. The timing was just too convenient.

“Well, I just thought, maybe all of this is a result of an intentional, malicious attack against Irede.”

“Are you saying you think the king hired a shaman for the sake of dissolving the town?”

“Hmm... I considered that possibility, but what I got stuck on was that the inheritors of the sacred offerings are the ones being targeted.”

She couldn’t say that she knew the king wasn’t involved because Xixu had told her that. She didn’t need to anyway. Eid wouldn’t buy it, and as far as she was concerned, it had only been the spark for her theory.

While she was gathering her thoughts, Eid added to her conjecture. “Wouldn’t the king have considered the sacred offerings an obstacle for dissolving Irede? With your influence and lineages, you couldn’t do anything *but* get in the way.”

“Maybe, but wouldn’t it be more normal for a person to think that ruining the offerings and nothing else wouldn’t be enough? It’s not as though there aren’t larger businesses around.”

“Who can say? He could just not know that, since he lives in the capital.”

The pair gradually approached the main street, and Sari stepped behind Eid, sticking close to his back. “Keep a low profile, okay?”

“What are we doing, Sari?”

“I want to see which stores are open.”

Eid looked back at her as she hid, saying “I’ll go look,” but there was a chance that splitting up would lead to a repeat of the other day. Instead, Sari clung onto him and peeked at the main street from around the corner.

The foot traffic was slightly thinner than usual, but many establishments were still open for business. They were making a show of attracting customers, attempting to get a leg up on the more cautious businesses that had closed their doors. It made the mood over Irede feel ever so slightly...different. Like it was rougher than it usually was.

After confirming the marks on the signs hanging from the storefronts, Sari pulled her head back. “I think I’m right...”

“About what? I don’t think I’m following what you’re getting at.”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

It would be bothersome if anybody saw her. The pair returned to the alley and began walking in a different direction. Sari stayed half a step ahead of Eid as they headed to their next destination.

“Going back to what you mentioned earlier, where would you target if you wanted to ruin Irede, Eid?”

“Where? Well...I guess it would have to be the three sacred houses. They’re the symbols of the town, and they have a huge amount of actual influence too. Hitting anywhere else wouldn’t really be considered an ‘attack on Irede.’”

“That’s what you’d think, right? Mm-hmm.”

Eid's answer matched Sari's own line of thinking. She suspected most of the town's residents would give the same reply—and *that* was the key to all this.

"But the thing is," she continued, "I don't think the people living in the capital would think of it like that. I mean, if you just look at the tax breakdowns, the sacred houses aren't the ones generating the most revenue. And I think the people close to the king would know that. Wouldn't *they* think that if only the offerings were ruined, the other businesses would fill the gap?"

"You think? House Radi and such are pretty famous in the capital too. Wouldn't surprise me if they thought of them as an eyesore."

"If that's how they're deciding their targets, then they wouldn't pick Pale Moon. Almost nobody knows us in the capital."

"I'm sure they know you as the tagalong to the other two."

"You're awful..."

It may have been true, but it was still a terrible thing to point out. Sari sighed, and then she put her still-disorganized thoughts into words.

"It's just...something doesn't line up. It feels like whoever's pulling the strings only kind of knows Irede really well."

"So do they only kind of know it, or do they know it really well?"

"Both."

This was the part she was having trouble getting across. The line was too vague, but if somebody from the capital was the culprit, would they ever come up with the idea of using shades to attack people? It wasn't widely known that shades had physical forms in Irede. Sari recalled Xixu's reaction when he'd first found out.

She let out a small groan. "I don't have anything conclusive...but I *think* I'm right, maybe."

"So you don't think the king's behind it?" Eid asked dubiously.

She took a moment to consider. "I'm pretty sure he isn't. I think it was somebody from Irede who came up with the idea to target me, and I think only somebody from Irede could hide the shades here."

“There’s a chance that someone else is at the reins in order to mask the king’s involvement. Don’t forget that the new shadeslayer could be involved, or even Thoma Radi.”

At the unexpected mention of her brother’s name, Sari tilted her head to the side. Blue eyes looked up at Eid, harboring a dangerous light.

“Why Thoma?”

“He wants to marry a woman from Pale Moon, and his family’s against that, right? Maybe he thinks he can pull it off if the town itself is out of the picture.”

“You’re wrong.”

Her denial was reflexive. Thoma wasn’t the culprit. Sari knew that better than anybody else. He was her beloved older brother. What’s more, he was one of the few people who knew the truth about Irede.

And those people knew that the core of this town was Sari.

If they wanted to ruin Irede, then there would be no need to attack the other two sacred houses. As long as she alone was taken care of, it was done. The head of the Midiridos also knew this truth.

However, it wasn’t something that could be spoken of lightly.

“Trust me, it’s just not Thoma,” Sari insisted.

Eid sighed. “Trusting others too much will come back to bite you someday.”

“Just let it go already! Anyway, look!”

Sari pointed at a white garden wall that’d come into view at the end of the street. It marked the back of Irede’s largest manor, which was built after its owner had bought up all the smaller houses and stores in the area.

Eid’s eyes narrowed at the wall. Its height surpassed that of a tall man. “What are we doing here? Isn’t this Marquess Bughnan’s place?”

“I want to investigate it. Help me out, Eid.”

“Investigate? How?”

“By sneaking in.”

“What?”

Sari looked to her left and right, confirming that there were no guards watching, then ran to the wall and jumped. Naturally, she wasn’t tall enough to reach the top.

As she hopped repeatedly in place, she looked back. “Lift me up, Eid.”

“It’s cute that you can’t reach.”

“Hurry *up*!”

She didn’t want to waste time here messing around. After repeatedly nagging him, he obliged, grabbing her lower waist and pushing her up to the top of the wall. Then, he pushed his foot against it to climb up himself. The pair quickly jumped down into the garden to avoid being seen.

The garden was spacious—and unlike the copses of trees around Pale Moon—was well maintained, with many ornate statues placed throughout it. Sari looked around, then took off at a jog alongside a row of shrubs. Eid followed behind, taking large strides.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked. “Even you’ll get more than just a slap on the wrist if they catch us here.”

“That’s why I just want to have a quick look and get out.”

“Look at what? Did Marquess Bughnan do something?”

“I told you earlier, didn’t I? I think the culprit’s somebody who only kind of knows Irede really well.”

What she was looking for wouldn’t be in the main house. Sari headed for the small detached building she’d spotted earlier. Although it was daytime, it looked like all of the shutters were shut tight.

Luckily, she couldn’t see any guards in the garden. To prevent anyone from stumbling across something they shouldn’t, maybe? Sari peeked through the windows of the main house as she went, and when she reached the detached building, she hid in its shadow. The faint smell of incense wafted out from within. Eid joined her against the wall.

“In the first place,” Sari said, “you told me the dissolution rumor was going

around the capital, but apparently it isn't. I asked Thoma about it, and he said he'd never heard of it. But it *is* going around Irede. Isn't that weird? Who did you hear it from, Eid?"

"Me? From a tourist that came here."

"Right? So that must mean someone is intentionally spreading it around Irede."

"But why?"

"To direct our suspicion toward the capital."

Sari continued along the wall, following it around a corner until she reached a back door. Although it was locked, she could see the footprints of multiple people—both children and adults—on the ground leading to and from the manor's back gate.

"You saw the main street earlier," she said. "Did you notice that the open stores who were loudest about pulling in customers all had signs marking them as having come from the south?"

Eid's eyes widened. His gaze grew unfocused, as though he was trying to recall a scene he'd just witnessed, but he quickly shook his head. "No... I didn't."

"I don't blame you. But if you'd looked closer, you'd have realized that they were almost all new businesses that opened in the last two years. All owned by Marquess Bughnan too. Isn't it strange that even though so many stores are closed because of the danger, all of the ones seeing even more business than usual are connected to the same person?"

It was simple once she'd thought about it. Somebody who knew a reasonable amount about Irede and disliked the three sacred houses. Didn't that description match the man who'd come to this town, wanting it for himself?

According to Isha, who'd been born in the south, Marquess Bughnan was timid and obsessively greedy. It was strange that a person like that didn't seem to have been rattled by the news. There wasn't any guarantee that the southern businesses—which had been expanding rapidly as of late—wouldn't become the next target. If the marquess was behind this, then his deeds couldn't be written off as mere harassment. However, it was also possible that

he was only connected to the true culprit.

Sari placed her hand on the door, but it was locked. “No good. I was hoping to get a look inside.”

“Give me a moment. I’ll get it open.”

Eid took her place and sat in front of the door. He retrieved a thin metal strip that almost looked like a spatula from the inner chest of his kimono and inserted it into the slim opening of the lock. Then, he pulled out something akin to a long needle and began using it to fiddle with some kind of inner mechanism.

After a short while, there was a quiet metallic click, and the lock opened.

Sari exhaled in admiration. “I guess you weren’t a problem child for nothing. That was amazing.”

“Was that meant to be a compliment? Sure didn’t feel like it. If you’re going to thank me, do it with your actions.”

“I’ll make you a boxed lunch sometime.”

“Now *that’s* more like it.”

Eid gently pushed open the door. The strong scent of incense immediately poured forth from inside. Mixed within was the reek of decayed blood. Feeling a slight urge to throw up, Sari pressed a hand over her mouth.

Eid set foot into the dark hallway. “What is this place?”

“Be careful. There could be shades here.”

“Shades?” Eid drew his sword.

The pair continued down the narrow hallway, heading deeper within. There were no lights inside; the only source of illumination were the thin beams of sunlight peeking through the gaps in the frame of the back door behind them.

Eventually, Eid stopped before a large set of double doors. “Whatever’s in there really stinks.”

“Is it locked?”

“No.” Eid pushed the doors open.

It was pitch black inside. But the cloying smell of blood grew thicker. Sari, whose eyes had become mostly accustomed to the darkness by now, peeked out from behind Eid.

And what she saw made her swallow her breath. “What is this place?”

There were no corpses. No shades. It was simply a spacious room with a dirt floor that bore a massive bloodstain.

On further inspection, it looked as though the blackened ground had been dug up several times over—the traces of some kind of work being done, perhaps. There was a large iron cage in the corner, but it was empty.

Eid looked at the right side wall and pulled on her hand. “Sari, look.”

White masks hung from a wooden frame—the same kind worn by the shade that had attacked her. She took a breath, and it came filled with a mix of unpleasant emotions.

“You know, the reason I suspected Marquess Bughnan in the first place was because of the man you chased, Eid.”

“That weird guy? What about him?”

“He’s apparently a shaman who can create shades, and he kicked up a fuss in a town in the south. That got me wondering if he might have met the marquess there.”

And then maybe the marquess had called him to Irede. Sari scanned the dark room. Opposite the wall with the masks hung a number of large blades, their edges stained with blood. There could be no doubt that abominable things had happened here. Unable to endure the tainted air, Sari stepped back.

“Let’s go, Eid. We need to tell people.”

“Was that man really a shaman?” Eid was still staring into the room, seemingly in thought. His voice sounded bitter.

Sari nodded. “Yes. Why?”

“I saw him talking with Thoma.”

“What?” She hadn’t heard about— No, there had to be some mistake. “When

was this? Before I went missing?”

“Right after. They were talking by the canal. It felt like he was trying to avoid being seen, so I didn’t call out to him.”

“Are you sure it was him? Thoma said he didn’t know that man.”

“I’m certain. It was those two. The only reason I didn’t get the militia to search for him was that I thought he was an acquaintance of Thoma’s. Otherwise, we would’ve tracked him down to get a lead on your whereabouts.”

“But...”

That was impossible. If Thoma had lied to her, then the basis of all of her reasoning until this point crumbled away.

Even her assumption that the dissolution rumor wasn’t spreading around the capital was something she’d only been told by her brother. Marquess Bughnan was obviously involved in this, but how were the shaman and Thoma connected? If her brother really was a part of this, then was it indeed because of Isha and his family?

Sari staggered, feeling dizzy, and Eid propped her up.

“Are you okay, Sari?”

“It...can’t be Thoma.” That was all she could muster herself up to say.

Eid looked at her, sympathy in his eyes. “We’ll sort it out later, let’s get out of here first. This place would make anybody sick.”

He made to support her weight on their return to the back door, but before they could leave, the sound of a lock opening came from down the hallway. Somebody was coming.

If they stayed where they were, they’d be seen. Evidently, Eid had judged the same, because he swiftly stepped into the dirt-floor room, pulling Sari in with him, and closed the doors. She stood frozen in the utter darkness, but he dragged her into a closet at the back of the room with him. Sari clung to his arm and strained her ears to hear the sound of oncoming footsteps.

Whoever it was wasn’t alone. She thought she could hear people talking. The doors of the room opened, and candlelight flickered through the gaps of the

cramped closet she and Eid were hiding in. Then, she heard the sound of a man speaking, an almost frustrated quality in his tone.

"A-Are you *still* not done? You have more than enough shades already."

It was Marquess Bughnan. Sari squeezed Eid's arm. The marquess sounded timid and needy. The voice of another man replied.

"It is almost over. I've accumulated a considerable amount of essence, you see."

The smooth, high-pitched voice made it easy to imagine its owner's smile. Despite never having heard his voice before, the shaman's grin flashed across Sari's mind.

The man creating shades with such foul methods was *right there*. A nervousness welled up inside her chest, overtaking her discomfort. Noticing that she'd involuntarily begun to tremble, Eid held her closer.

"Wh-What do you mean 'accumulated essence'? Your job was to get rid of the three houses."

"I'm saying the groundwork for that has already been laid."

The sound of footsteps grew closer, then further. One of the two men was pacing slowly around the room. Sari swallowed, her throat dry. The scent of incense—likely lit to mask the stink of blood—was a constant pressure on her head, and she desperately fought down the rising urge to throw up.

"Groundwork? What groundwork?"

"The act of shedding the blood of those connected to the three sacred houses. Without the essence accumulated from doing so, one cannot obtain sufficient power. Listen to me. If one wishes to possess Irede, then one must deal with the maiden. However, ordinary shades do not possess the strength to harm her."

How much did this man know? Sari almost collapsed on the spot, but Eid supported her with his arm. She refocused, desperately trying to avoid making any sound. And then, her ears caught the decisive remark.

"That is why the cooperation of the son of House Radi is essential. He—"

“Stay away from Thoma!”

The two men looked startled as she burst out of the closet. Both Marquess Bughnan and the shaman. The latter, a doll-like man, was standing directly above the bloodstains, and Sari glared at him with eyes full of hatred.

The shaman’s face, reminiscent of a finely crafted mask, broke out into a smooth smile. “Well, well. To think we’d find you in a place like this.”

“I’m telling you to *stay away* from Thoma.”

She didn’t know what kind of honeyed words they had misled her brother with. But she did know that she wouldn’t let them do as they pleased.

Seeing her standing there undaunted, gritting her teeth, seemed to jolt Marquess Bughnan back to himself. “Y-You must be joking. You can’t even use your powers, maiden, and—”

“Shut up.” Sari raised her bracelet-fitted left arm, and pointed a pale finger at the shaman. “Get out of Irede.”

She concentrated. She hadn’t forgotten her experience as a child. But right now, she had two bracelets. Hers, and her mothers. She could do this. She knew she could. Sari began to exhale...

And then something cold pressed against the side of her neck.

She didn’t understand what had just happened. But she knew exactly who the blade before her eyes belonged to. So she called the name of the man behind her.

“Eid...?”

“Y-You brought her here?!” the marquess cried. “This entire time, you haven’t done a blasted thing to help us, and when you finally choose to act, you do this?! What were you thinking?!”

“I didn’t bring her here. You got carried away with all those touts in front of your stores, and she picked up on it.”

“That doesn’t mean you can just ignore my— I’m your father, boy!”

“Father?” Sari looked back at Eid. She felt a sharp pain where the skin of her

neck touched his blade, but she didn't care.

Eid smiled at her gently. When he did that, his easygoing features indeed looked like that of a noble's. Sari stared up in a daze at the man she'd known for over ten years.

"Eid. Why?"

"Come to think of it, I never told you, did I?"

His left hand touched her cheek. It was as warm as it had always been, but something in that warmth reminded her of loneliness. Eid's fingers brushed loose strands of her silver hand over her ear.

"You see, Sari, I *hate* this town."

The sound of the shaman's laugh echoed in her ears. A numb sensation ran down the back of her neck. And then, as though the thread holding her up had been severed, Sari collapsed into Eid's arms.

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Although the white-eyed black dog plodded slowly through the back alleys, it certainly seemed as though it had a destination in mind.

As Xixu left the business district and approached an area composed mostly of residences and estates, he found himself puzzled.

"*This* is where the shaman is?"

The dog did not answer his question. As Xixu was still unfamiliar with some parts of Irede, he was unable to make a realistic guess about where they were going. All he could do was follow the dog at its leisurely pace.

Eventually, when a white garden wall came into view, Xixu noticed several familiar people passing by a corner up ahead. Since one of them was the man who'd insisted on him staying back at Pale Moon, he wavered for a moment over whether to hide.

The dog, however, had no way of understanding his hesitation. It continued along at the same pace as always. One of the men noticed, turned, and spotted Xixu with ease.

“What are *you* doing here?”

“I told you. I’m a shadeslayer.” He kept his face perfectly neutral.

Thoma gave a stiff shrug. “And Sari? You didn’t bring her, right?”

“Don’t worry. She’s at Pale Moon.”

Thoma looked relieved to hear that his sister was safe, and beckoned Xixu over. “You showed up at just the right time. We were just in need of a shadeslayer. You’ll be perfect.”

The other people in Thoma’s group were three members of the militia and an elderly woman, her mouth covered by silk cloth. She was dressed in scarlet, and Thoma introduced her as the head of the Midiridos. As she bowed to Xixu, she caught sight of the dog on the road.

“What is this dog?” she asked.

“The magic of a maiden from outside of town. I believe it’s tracking the shaman.”

“And that cord?”

“I—”

I received it from Sari, was what Xixu was about to say, but then he felt Thoma’s eyes on him. Was it just his imagination, or was that bloodlust mixed into the man’s penetrating gaze? For the first time, he noticed that Thoma was wearing a sword.

“So, what did you do to her after I left?” Thoma asked.

“I didn’t do anything...”

“I guess you’re a part of the sacred offerings too now. Not that that’s a problem. It’s just, you know, she’s still only sixteen.”

“I said I didn’t do anything! She just gave it to me when I told her I was leaving!”

“Oh, okay.”

Thoma’s casual acceptance could only mean that the man had been teasing him. Xixu stifled the sudden fatigue he was feeling and joined their group of five

as they walked. The dog was slightly out in front, advancing at its ever-unchanging pace. Were they headed toward the same destination?

"Where are we going?" Xixu asked Thoma, who was walking next to him.

"I used the portraits to look into who the shaman's employer was, and a name came up. A suspicious one."

"Who?"

"A southern nobleman who's been expanding his influence in Irede recently. In his eyes, we're eyesores that he can't stand the sight of. In this town, no matter how many businesses he opens or how much money he makes, the legitimate bloodlines will always be regarded as above him."

Thoma's tone was self-deprecating. Perhaps he didn't put much value in revering bloodlines.

"He's a vulgar man unfit for Irede," the woman of another sacred house added coldly. "I always knew he'd expose his own faults eventually, but I never expected him to commit deeds such as these."

"We haven't confirmed anything yet," Thoma replied. "But the moment we do, he'll have to be ousted. He went as far as to lay hands on the maiden. He can't stay in this town."

The two sounded as though they were talking about a foregone conclusion. Perhaps for them, the problem of this nobleman was already solved. Xixu was struck by the feeling that this was one of the sides of Irede his liege had wanted to know of. It was a pleasure town famed for its wine, music, and holy courtesans, but beneath its glamorous surface lay an utterly inviolable sanctuary.

Somewhere deep within him, it invoked both admiration and melancholy, but he swallowed them down. "So I take it you want me to go to this man and dispose of the shaman and his shades?"

"Yes," Thoma replied. "There's no guarantee they'll be together though. Follow your dog, not us. From what you've told me, the shaman sounds like he'll be a pain to deal with, but while I do wish we had more numbers with us, I fear they have an agent on our side."

“What do you mean ‘agent’?”

“No matter how you look at it, too many shades are slipping through our fingers. I can only assume that our enemies have intelligence on the militia patrols, or that someone on our side is letting the shades get away. What’s more, it looks like that agent is one of the shadeslayers.”

Xixu frowned. Was he a suspect?

But evidently, Thoma had ruled him out from the start. “You were with me when it happened. Yesterday, a shade attacked a manor where a number of Midiridos musicians were staying the night. One of them managed to get away and call for help, saying his colleagues were in danger.”

“And then?”

“He returned almost immediately. Said he found a shadeslayer, and that everything would be fine.”

“He stumbled across one on patrol?”

“That’d be my guess. But the shadeslayer never showed up at the manor. And while several people survived by hiding under the floorboards, the man who went to call didn’t make it. So basically, we don’t know which of the shadeslayers ignored his plea.”

“Was it...really a shadeslayer?”

If there was a traitor among the shadeslayers, then this would not end smoothly. The profession almost entirely consisted of individuals skilled in combat. The shaman and his shades were already problematic enough without the addition of more on their side. To make a dire situation even worse, it was hard to assemble more allies with the possibility of a traitor in their midst.

Thoma, perhaps with the same thoughts in mind, shook his head listlessly. “Can’t say for sure. It could’ve just been somebody dressed up as one for all we know.”

“What a mess.”

“If we pressure the ringleaders, we should be able to flush out the traitor. Just make your first priority dealing with the shaman. Ah, but if it seems like he’s too

much for you, run.”

“That won’t happen.”

He wasn’t going to let the same man get away twice. Back during the case in the south, the shaman had killed his pursuers, but this time, Xixu would settle the score. He imagined that was the king’s desire too.

Xixu returned his gaze to the dog in front. Although it had been walking along the white walls for some time, he realized that it had started stopping occasionally to sniff at the air. Evidently noticing this too, Thoma pointed at the other side of the wall.

“We’re after the owner of this estate.”

“Then it looks like our goals align after all.”

“That makes things easier. We don’t have to split our forces.”

“What do we do if a horde of shades comes piling out?”

“Fall back temporarily. What else?”

Even if that happened, they could still make progress as long as they identified the culprit. Xixu nodded in agreement—which is exactly when the dog’s behavior suddenly changed.

“What?”

The dog stopped dead in its tracks, stared intensely at the top of the wall, and then leaped without a sound. It landed on top, then disappeared as it jumped down to the other side.

“Wh— Are you kidding me?” Thoma murmured, looking dumbfounded.

“We’re going after it.”

If he lost sight of it now, then the king’s assistance would have proved meaningless. Xixu pressed his foot firmly against the wall and climbed up, ignoring the attempts of the others to stop him as he jumped down into the garden.

Fortunately, the dog hadn’t moved yet. It had its black head raised toward a detached building in the corner.

But just as Xixu thought that was his destination, the dog broke out into a run in the direction of the main house. He set off after it in pursuit.

For a moment, he wavered over whether it would be okay for him to act alone, or whether he should wait for Thoma, but his doubts were immediately cast away, because when the dog leaped into a window of the main house—

He heard the familiar voice of a young girl screaming from inside.

5. Ignorance

His mother hitting him had been a simple fact of his everyday life. As had her torrents of abuse and the occasions when she'd kick him out of their home. And since he'd grown up around violence, he'd vented his frustrations upon the outside world in the only way he knew how. He'd been arrested by the militia more times than he could count.

His mother had been a beautiful woman. With her kimono on and makeup done, she had been the perfect image of a respectable courtesan. However, because of her unstable temperament, she could never maintain any decent guests in the long-term, and she had used him, her son, as an outlet for her own frustrations.

If he had to describe the feelings he held toward his mother, they would be "contempt" and "loathing." Beneath her beautiful facade, she had been an unsightly animal.

He felt the same about Irede. The self-assured expressions of those who venerated mythical lineages and traditions were only skin-deep, and beneath them hid filthy human passions. A pleasant exterior was all these bearers of ugly emotions could manage—behind closed doors, they sought to drive out anyone or anything that didn't conform. Just like how shades, reflections of the inner thoughts of humans, were cut down in places away from the prying eyes of tourists.

The young boy hadn't bothered to conceal his hate and animosity for the town, and he'd been shunned by those around him as a matter of course. *It's because he's* her *child*, they said with scorn in their voices. *He doesn't belong in this town,* they gossiped, just loud enough to make sure he heard.

Once he learned how to put a superficial smile on his face, they eased off somewhat. But to him, even that change had seemed arrogant of them. There had only ever been one person who treated him the same way from the beginning, and that was the girl who lived at the manor in the north.

Irede, the town of myth. He had been born and raised here, and from the

moment he'd become aware of his surroundings to this very day...

He had always hated this town.

※

Which of them felt betrayed?

It was not Sari—at least, not when she woke up. Because while she found herself in an unfamiliar tatami mat room, she had been neatly placed on a futon, and Eid was sitting cross-legged beside her.

When he noticed that she was awake, he smiled just like he always did. "You're up. How do you feel?"

"Fine... I think I had a weird dream."

"What kind?"

"One where you—" Sari cut herself off. She sat up and looked around the room. "Eid, where are we?"

She'd thought it had been a dream. Eid betraying her had just seemed too unreal to be true.

With her hands behind her back, Sari checked for her bracelets. Once she confirmed both were still on her left wrist, she relaxed.

However, that by no means meant she was out of the woods yet.

Seeing her guarded expression, Eid spoke pacifyingly. "We're in a guest room in the main house. The air's pretty awful in the outbuilding."

Sari was silent for a brief time before replying, "Why?"

"Hmm? Why what? Would you rather have been left in there?"

"No! Why are you helping the marquess?"

"He would say it's because we're blood." Suddenly, Eid's tone sounded almost spiteful. She reflexively drew back, but he smiled at her. "You know how I went to a town in the south recently?"

She paused. "Yes."

"That's when he summoned me and told me he was my father. What a story.

Makes you want to throw up, doesn't it?"

"Eid..."

She knew that he'd grown up without a father, just as well as she knew that was the reason he'd acted out in his younger years.

Eid had blond hair and blue eyes—features often seen in the south—and he screwed his face up in annoyance. "As for why he chose to come forward to me *now,* after so long, apparently me being a shadeslayer caught his eye. He said he wanted to abolish Irede's three houses, and asked for my help."

"And you agreed?"

"I turned him down. I didn't have a reason to say yes. But then, he offered me a reward."

"A reward?"

"You, Sari."

He reached a hand out to her, grabbing her arm and pulling her in. He sat her on his legs and held her in place. Sari let out a cry of protest—she was being treated like an object.

"Me, a reward?" she asked. "But why?"

"You haven't realized, Sari? Having the proprietress of Pale Moon is the same as standing above everybody else in this town. I've always wanted that. To get the better of every single person who thought they could look down on me from their high horses with those *glares* full of contempt."

"E-Eid."

"I've been thinking about it ever since I learned about you. The courtesan who only accompanies a single guest in her lifetime. What kind of face would they all make if that guest was me, the infamous problem child? To those who hold Irede's origins and bloodlines in high regard, it'd be a disgrace. The holy courtesan is a sacred offering, and the one person she chose was the man the entire town ostracized. Their dignity would shatter to pieces."

That murkiness, flickering in his blue eyes—was that his desire for vengeance? Sari was speechless. Within the man holding her, she could see the clinging

shadow of his younger, plain-spoken self, there as though it had never left.

Eid jerked her ornate hairpin out and caught her falling silver hair between his fingers. “Sari. I became a shadeslayer in order to get closer to you. I was disappointed, though, when I found out that the maiden is at the beck and call of *all* of the shadeslayers. Just like any common courtesan.”

He laid a kiss on her hair as he spoke. Seeing the unbridled disdain in his gaze, Sari reflexively bit down on her lip, holding back a frustration that was starting to boil over.

Eid noticed, and smiled gently. “In any case, I was just going to take my time and wait. For you to choose me, and for what would come after.”

Her reply came slowly. “What were you going to do after?”

“Who knows? I considered just abandoning the town, you included, without conceiving a child with you at all. Oh, I guess I’d exile the other two houses first though. Honestly, I was just going to walk all over everybody, doing whatever I wanted.”

“That’s not how it works.”

“If that’s not possible, then sure, so be it. All I really want is to see the faces of those obsessed with ‘tradition’ turn bright red.”

It sounded like how a child would vent their anger. And, she thought, that was exactly what it was. Deep down, Eid had never truly grown up from the boy he’d once been. He only pretended to be an adult out of spite for those who’d treated him so coldly.

And he must have seen Sari as the perfect means to get his revenge. Now that she knew the true reason behind his long-held attachment to her, she didn’t feel frustrated anymore. Just tired and empty.

“If you wanted to get revenge on Irede, you only had to target me. You didn’t have to do all this.”

“Everybody sees things differently, Sari. That’s a lesson you should learn. Besides, this disturbance was just what I needed. If I wanted you, I needed to get a certain obstacle out of my way.”

“Obstacle?”

“Thoma Radi. The only man who you clearly consider to be special. Then again, in Pale Moon, once you’ve purchased the company of a courtesan, you can no longer purchase another. Given your position, you can’t choose him as your guest anymore, right? Still, an eyesore is an eyesore. Every single chance he gets, he tries to keep me away from you, and you just ignore me when I try to tell you about it. He’s always worth more to you than me.”

“Thoma’s...”

Thoma was her brother, related by blood. Of course he was special to her—he was the only one in her family she could talk about anything with. But Eid didn’t know that. Smiling as though he were enjoying himself, the man brushed his fingers through her hair and traced them along her earlobe.

“It’s your fault, Sari. You should have picked me sooner. Then I could have just killed my father and helped you.”

“Eid...”

“I guess it’s too late now, though,” he said in a murmur, and all she could hear in his words was sheer, unadorned exhaustion. It sounded as though it were the only genuine emotion he’d ever voiced.

His expression looked like that of a hurt young boy, and he was no longer smiling. Sari reached her fingers out to his face. Eid let them touch his cheek. She stared back at her own reflection in his blue eyes.

On the day she’d been a child looking up at him like this for the first time, had he hated Irede then too?

Sari remembered the warmth of the boy’s hand. Lost and confused, she’d clung to it for comfort and had never let go.

“Eid, I—”

The sliding screen behind him opened soundlessly, revealing the doll-like shaman. He was wearing a black kimono, and he smiled down at the two nestled together.

“The preparations are complete,” he said. “May I trouble you to bring her

along?”

“Fine,” Eid replied.

“Preparations?” Sari asked. “What...?”

Before she could question them any further, Eid stood up, holding her in his arms, then set off down the hallway behind the shaman. Sari didn’t know where they were going, but she knew it could only be bad. She beat her fists into Eid’s chest.

“Eid, put me down!”

“Can’t. I’m tired of chasing after you.”

“Are you going to kill me?”

“Ask him.”

The shaman looked back, although he ignored the haphazard invitation to reply and simply smiled.

Before long, they came to a stop in the middle of a long hallway before a door that looked like it was made from artificial wood.

“Here we are.” The shaman opened the door, revealing a set of wooden stairs leading down at a steep incline. He descended so smoothly that it looked like he was sliding, rather than stepping, down. Candles were fastened to the walls, and they flickered to life as he went by. Eid followed after him from a short distance behind.

“Watch your step,” the shaman called out. “These stairs were rather hastily improvised.”

“I know,” Eid replied.

“Where are we going?” Sari asked.

“Not far,” the shaman said. “See? We’re already here.”

He was right; the staircase wasn’t that long, and they soon found themselves in a spacious basement. Just like the detached building outside, it had a bare dirt floor.

Load-bearing pillars were scattered throughout the room. They supported the

walls and ceiling, which—perhaps because whoever had dug them out had decided they needed no further work—were composed of crumbling earth. What looked like a hundred or so candles had been nailed into the pillars at irregular intervals. The dim light of their flames revealed a large pit in the center of the room, the depth of which she couldn't tell.

The dark room was filled with the sickening stench of corpses. Here and there, Sari saw shades crouching, maskless, in the forms of both adults and children. Like Xixu had said, written spells were visible on their faces. They were hugging their knees, moaning feebly, and didn't look up. They almost seemed like well-crafted clay figures.

"I've never seen shades like these before..." Sari said.

"They are my creations," the shaman replied. "Made to follow my every order."

"How did you create them?"

"I'm sure you've already guessed."

So he'd made them by killing people in that building outside. Sari ground her back teeth together.

"*Fiend*," she spat. "I'll make sure you get what you deserve."

"By all means. I can hardly wait. That being said, I'm afraid you don't have much time left."

As the shaman spoke, he retrieved something hanging from the wall and tossed it to Eid, who, still holding onto Sari, deftly caught it. It was a small knife in a black sheath.

"And this is?" Eid asked.

"Something else I created," the shaman replied. "It contains a spell. Cut her with it, then drop her into the pit, if you please."

"Not the knife?"

"No, her. Quite honestly, I was going to have your father do this, but he was too scared."

Now that Sari thought about it, Marquess Bughnan was nowhere to be seen.

Eid laughed scornfully at his father's cowardice. "And the reason you're not doing this yourself? Are you testing me?"

"No. I'd love to do it myself, really, but *as I am now,* touching her may have undesirable effects on me. I explained when she confined herself in the canal, didn't I? That once her power manifested, she was untouchable, so it was fine for us to leave her be."

"Effects? From me?" Sari was puzzled. Touching her would cause "undesirable effects" on him? What did he mean by that? Even shades could touch her, as long as they had physical forms to do it with.

So what did that make him?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Eid putting her down. He grabbed her arm with one hand and used the other to unsheathe the knife. When she saw its blade, she flinched. It was a discolored bluish-black. The shaman had said it contained a spell.

"Poison?" Eid asked, holding the knife up to the dim light.

"No, but for you, it may as well be," the shaman warned. "Try not to stab her. That would be more trouble than we'd want. A shallow cut is enough, so long as it draws blood."

"Fine."

"Eid! Don't!"

"Don't move. It'll hurt more if you thrash about."

Eid took her right hand and ran the knife smoothly across the back of it. There was hardly any pain. As she watched a thin line of blood form on her pale skin, Sari shuddered. Then, Eid pulled her toward the pit.

"Come on," he said.

"N-No! I don't want to!"

"Don't make this harder than it needs to be, Sari."

She tried to escape his grip, but he kept mercilessly dragging her along. She

planted her feet and pulled back, but the difference in strength between her and the shadeslayer was unmistakable. In no time at all, she was at the edge of the pit.

It was wide, and deep enough that even a tall man could stand in it with no hope of reaching the top.

It looked empty; there was nothing at the bottom. But something in the air that wafted up from the pit made her entire body tremble in fear and disgust. Suddenly, some deep part of her *knew* what was going to happen. Unfortunately, it was too late.

“Eid... Don’t...”

“Are you scared?”

“No! You can’t do this! It’s—”

“Do hurry up.” The shaman’s voice was as sweet as poison, a sound that ensnared human hearts. “You want to get revenge on this town, don’t you?”

Eid scowled. “Don’t order me around.”

“Eid!”

Sari grabbed the hem of his kimono above his chest with her left hand. She could try to tell him how much danger they were in right now, but she knew he wouldn’t listen to that. And there was no point bringing up the duty expected of a citizen of Irede. So all Sari did was plead with him.

“Eid, please. That’s enough. Let’s go back.”

“Go back? Back where, Sari? I don’t have a home to return to.”

“But there’ll be *somewhere* for you. You can still turn back. I know you can.”

Maybe he had been the lost child all along. Back then, when the boy who’d escorted Sari home to Pale Moon had turned heel and left, he had seemed just a touch despondent. As though he’d been searching for his own home to return to.

Sari pulled on his clothes. “Let’s go back. Okay?”

“Sari.” Eid’s eyes unfocused, as though he were looking at something far

away. Something lost. She saw an unbearable homesickness in them, and she faced it, staring right back.

His hand touched her cheek. Long fingers traced her brow over her eyelid. They were the calloused fingers of a man who wielded a sword, but at that moment, they seemed impossibly soft. When she felt them on her lips, she breathed a sigh.

“Then, Sari... Will you come with me, and leave this town behind?”

“Wh—?” The unexpected question stifled her breath. She looked up at him and saw the sincerity in his eyes.

She only let her guard down for a single moment, but that was enough.

The shaman raised his arm in a small gesture. A black cord flew out of the pit and coiled around her body. Something touched the cut on her right hand. There was a sound of blood being slurped up.

When Sari saw what it was, she screamed.

Eyes wide in shock, Eid reached a hand out toward her. But before he could make contact, a sickening weightlessness enveloped her as the black cord pulled her off her feet and into the pit, where she slammed into the bottom.

Sari groaned. The pain shuddered throughout her entire body. But it wasn’t over. The pit bottom should have been empty, but one by one, black snakes began welling forth. They had bright red eyes like a shade’s, and they quickly swarmed her right hand and grazed legs.

As the snakes coiled around her body, Sari let loose a soundless scream.

“No... Stop...!”

She couldn’t raise her left hand. Small fangs pierced her exposed throat. The snakes had gone from drinking her blood to now trying to devour her. She felt dizzy. Sick. Unable to form thoughts.

“Sari!”

The girl’s body was swiftly buried under a countless number of snakes and disappeared from sight. No screams or cries could be heard. Barely visible within the writhing mass was a small, pale hand, seemingly calling for help. But

it soon lost its strength, its fingers going still.

“Sari...?”

“Oh? That was surprisingly abrupt. I hadn’t expected her to be devoured so easily. It seems it’s true that she’s unable to use her powers after the half-moon. I had taken it for a fool’s tale. Evidently, all the precautions I took were unnecessary.”

As he listened to the shaman’s disappointed voice, Eid stared down blankly at the pit of writhing snakes. He noticed his own hand, which he had extended unconsciously, and turned it to look at its palm. It was empty.

The shaman smiled. “I’m afraid it’s too late. Those are no ordinary snakes. If you go down there, you’ll be quick to share her fate.”

“You must be joking.”

He’d been fine with losing her if he couldn’t have her, and that was exactly what had happened—as quickly and as easily as that, without any time for him to waver. No, he had never wavered from the start. He’d known that if she wouldn’t choose him over Thoma, he’d just abandon her. Sooner or later, he would’ve done the same even if she *had* chosen him.

Sari was the most important girl in town. So if he wanted to hurt somebody to get back at Irede, it had to be her. It was something he’d been planning for a long, long time. She was nothing more than a tool for his revenge.

A tool who, from their first meeting to their last, had been the only person who’d ever been there for him, constant and unchanging.

“Where were we going to go back to, Sari?”

A memory came to mind of when he’d led a small girl by the hand. Of when they had walked together. All he’d done was escort a lost child back to Pale Moon along the twilit streets, replying to her childish chattering as they went. But that had been the only time he’d felt as though he’d had somewhere to return to.

And just then, for the briefest of moments, he’d felt it again. That he could take her hand and go home.

But now, he'd lost her. There was nowhere left for him. He would leave this town, and that would be the end.

At that thought, Eid was overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness he didn't understand.

I should have just died here with her.

※

He heard the girl's scream almost at the same time as the black dog broke the window. Xixu climbed through and into the manor, not caring to remove his shoes as he chased after the dog through the polished hallways. Just as he began to pick up the pace, another man caught up to run along beside him.

"Didn't you say you left Sari behind?!"

"I did! Who knows what happened afterward?!"

"Well, you should have kept an eye on her! If anything happens to her, I'm blaming you!"

That was a false charge no matter how you looked at it, but he didn't have the time to argue with Thoma right now.

The dog came to a dead stop halfway down a hallway and began barking at an open door.

Xixu reached it and peered through. "A basement?"

He stopped for a moment, wary. He couldn't tell where the dark, descending staircase led. Thoma lightly pushed him to the side and headed down with no hesitation.

He and the dog followed after him. Just when the bottom of the staircase came into view, Xixu called out sharply.

"Get down!"

Xixu had meant it to be a warning, but Thoma instead drew his sword, quick as a flash. The blade, gleaming with a dull light, decapitated the shade that had leapt at him in a single stroke. Thoma stepped onto and past the fallen body, continuing into the dim basement. Xixu caught up to his side.

“You’re better at this than I took you for,” Xixu said, astonishment leaking into his tone.

“I planned to be a shadeslayer, way back.”

“Ah. For Saridi.”

Xixu surveyed the spacious basement as he spoke. What caught his notice first were the slowly approaching shades. There were a dozen or so in total, their eyes glowing a bright red, and they were closing in. The words of a spell on their faces were clear to see, and each held a weapon in its hands. Xixu nodded curtly. The elusive culprits of the recent series of violent crimes were now standing before them.

“We’ll settle this in one swoop,” Xixu said.

“Somehow, I don’t think things will go that smoothly.”

Thoma had noticed the person standing far back behind the shades. Xixu studied the familiar-looking shaman and frowned.

“He...feels different.”

“Is he not your guy?”

“No, he is, I think. The face matches.”

But was it just his imagination, or was the shaman giving off a different *impression* compared to back when he’d met him in the south? The man felt unpleasant, like he’d lost his humanity, or his insides had been hollowed out and replaced.

Xixu shook his head, brushing off his discomfort as a trick of his mind, and took a closer look at the shaman. There was what looked to be a large pit in the ground beside him, and another man was nearby, bent over and looking in.

Xixu couldn’t see Sari. Upon realizing this, he felt a strong sense of unease. Thoma must have felt the same way because he called out to the shaman, anger clear in his tone.

“What are you doing over there? Are you the one behind this?”

“I am. Thank you for coming and saving me the trouble of fetching you,

Thoma Radi.”

“What did you do to Sari?”

The shaman ignored the question and instead lifted his arm and pointed at Thoma. “Just to make absolutely certain, I’d like your blood too. As the maiden, your sister was far too weak. Perhaps the power she should have had was instead inherited by you, her brother?”

“Her brother...?” The man who had been looking into the pit muttered blankly. He straightened up, and for the first time, Xixu realized who he was. The maiden-obsessed shadeslayer stared at Thoma, disbelief in his eyes. “You’re...Sari’s brother?”

“Yes, though I’d like to know how the stranger over there knows that. Eid...what are you doing here?” Thoma’s threatening gaze seemed to instantly draw a line between all those present, separating friend from foe. Xixu recalled that the man had told him there was a traitor among the shadeslayers. “Never mind, I get it. So that’s why you didn’t launch a militia search for the shaman.”

Eid could also have easily lured Sari out of Pale Moon. Xixu frowned at the unpleasant thought of what might be in the pit and exchanged a look with Thoma.

“Let’s be quick,” he said.

“Yeah,” Thoma replied. “And you two.” He turned his gaze back toward the men at the far side of the basement. “We’ll hear your stories later. If you’re still alive.”

“Now, now. I wouldn’t be so sure that it’ll be *you* who comes out of this alive.” The shaman raised his hand, and the shades threw themselves at Xixu and Thoma all at once.

The two jumped back, but something else jumped forward, and Xixu saw the white-eyed dog bite into the windpipe of a female shade. The woman let out a cry and struggled wildly, unsuccessfully trying to shake its black jaws off. In the corner of his vision, Xixu watched her collapse onto her back, her throat torn out, as he swept his sword to the side.

A shade had reached for him, but had its stomach cut open instead and

crumpled to the ground. Ignoring the spray of decayed flesh and blood, the young man flowed smoothly toward another opponent, using his blade to parry the downward swing of a kama before using its tip to fend off a third shade and prevent it from circling behind him.

He couldn't hear Thoma saying anything, but he could hear the grating death throes of the shades the man was killing.

The shade in front of Xixu had raised its kama high, and he stepped in close. His opponent's movements were dull. With a single upward stroke, he scored a gash across its large, male frame. He immediately jumped to the side to avoid the shower of blood and cut down a child shade holding a pair of shears.

In barely any time, the two of them had reduced the shades' numbers by half. As their bodies vanished, leaving behind a foul odor, Xixu assessed the situation.

If they kept this up, they'd be able to cut through. He wanted to examine the contents of the pit as soon as he could. However, as if to throw cold water on his haste, the shaman laughed.

"Oh dear, I think I'm in trouble." The doll-like man turned to Eid, who was standing still before the pit. "I'm afraid I'll need your help with this."

The traitorous shadeslayer returned the shaman's gaze with one filled with anger. "You didn't tell me about Thoma."

"You didn't ask. Besides, the result wouldn't have been any different. Look at that man's sword."

"His sword?" Eid's eyes fell upon Xixu's military sword. Tied around it was a black and white decorative cord, from which hung two half-moons.

Upon seeing the cord that signified the maiden's partner, Eid's face contorted as though he'd been wounded. A gruesome smile flickered across his mouth.

"Oh..." Eid said. "So it wouldn't have mattered anyway."

"Don't get the wrong idea," Xixu said. "She just loaned it to me. I'm giving it back later."

"You can't."

“What do you mean I can’t?”

Xixu took a step forward toward the man and the pit behind him. Perhaps cowed, the shades around them took a half-step back. Eid smiled and drew his sword. The smile itself was well crafted, but the man’s eyes only held a terribly exhausted, broken light.

“It has nothing to do with you,” Eid said. “Give it to me and I’ll make sure it gets back to Sari.”

“You think I’ll trust that? What happened to her?”

Eid didn’t answer. But for the briefest moment, an irritation with no outlet, like that of a young boy’s, flashed across his eyes. It was gone as quickly as it had appeared though, and Eid shrugged lightly.

“Fine. Then I’ll *take* it.”

By the time Xixu heard the words, the man’s sword was already closing in. He turned reflexively, avoiding the tremendously fast thrust, but the maneuver broke his stance. The blade pursued him in an upward cut and brushed the tip of his nose. If it had connected properly, he would have died. Yet again, Xixu was made aware of how formidable shadeslayers were.

“Given the circumstances, talking this out doesn’t seem to be on the table,” Xixu said.

Time was wasting, but if he acted with impatience, he would only die. Xixu leaped to the side and swept a leg out from under a shade there. It had been about to leap at him but instead found itself staggering forward. Xixu kicked it in the back toward Eid.

Eid irritatedly cut down the shade before it could collide with him. Xixu used the brief distraction to step in after it and swing his blade at the man’s arm.

Eid’s eyes flashed in surprise as he noticed and tried to pull his arm back, but he was a little too late. The tip of the blade cut through his sleeve near the elbow. Eid glanced down at his torn clothing and clicked his tongue.

“You know you’re meant to cut flesh, right?”

The man’s right arm, which he made no effort to hide, bore a number of old

burn scars, as though somebody had once pressed a hot poker to it. Xixu's eyes widened briefly, but his expression didn't change any further.

Without pause, Xixu brought his sword back to the ready. "Where's the maiden?"

"Who knows? Seems a little boring to just tell you. In any case, she didn't choose me to be her guest."

"That's just because she's still taking her time."

Sari had said that she couldn't choose because she didn't truly understand what she was choosing. Right now, it was simply too early for her. She was not yet an adult. And any person who forced her to choose would be no adult either. They would be no different from a child with a child's love, pulling too strongly on the target of their affection's hand. Ignorant of how to hold back, like a lost child screaming and crying for their mother.

Xixu swung his sword and its blade met another. The unpleasant shriek of metal on metal resounded as both pushed against the other with equal strength behind them. As Xixu pressed his blade in hard, he scanned for an opening in his opponent.

Eid looked down at the younger shadeslayer with hollow eyes. "Even if that's true...I'm already too late."

The man's strength overcame the deadlock. Xixu staggered back, and Eid swiftly raised his sword before bringing it down toward Xixu's head.

Xixu wasn't going to make it. A vision of his own head being split apart flashed through his mind. He didn't have the time to move out of the way or block. So instead, he made the split-second decision to swing his own sword at Eid.

The figure of a dog sprang into the space between them. A black half-moon and a white one swayed in the air. The spray of blood was as vivid as the folly of man itself.

"Ngh..."

Eid staggered back from the blade that had cut his face. His sword slash that had almost cut down Xixu had instead been blocked by the black dog's body.

Xixu swiftly struck Eid's sword aside with his own. It left the traitor's hand with no resistance and tumbled across the cold earthen floor.

Eid made no attempt to retrieve it. He simply stood there, pressing a hand to his wounded right eye.

"Ugh..."

Eid's left eye was unfocused, not looking at anything in particular. Rivers of blood streamed through his fingers—it appeared Xixu had left quite a deep wound.

Xixu looked at the black dog. "You saved me there. Thanks."

Without its assistance, the best he could have hoped for was that they would trade blows. Eid's swordsmanship was formidable. But the loss of an eye—even though it wasn't a fatal wound—and his sword meant that the fight was over.

Xixu walked over to the sword on the ground and kicked it further away. He looked back at Thoma but saw that he had already cut down almost all the remaining shades. The man's skill surpassed that of an average shadeslayer. Xixu was more astonished than he was impressed.

"I imagine he's got a tale to tell..."

In any case, all that was left to do was defeat the shaman and find Sari. Xixu first turned to examine the pit but noticed a number of black worm-like shapes at its rim. Slowly swaying shadows with red eyes. He'd seen them before. A chill ran down his spine.

"Those are... From the canal..."

They were the snakes that had been peering into the waterway back when Sari had disappeared. These ones were a size larger and had stuck their heads up out of the pit. A terrifying image crossed Xixu's mind, and his face paled as he stepped forward to look inside.

But Eid moved faster. He turned and ran for the pit...

"Sari..."

...And then plunged in. A brief groan followed shortly after, and the black snakes shivered as though they were excited.

Xixu could only stand there, confused. Then, he heard high-pitched laughter.

“So he chose to die for her,” the shaman crowed. “I suppose fake attachment is no different from its genuine counterpart, if nurtured to its limit. Well, I’m just grateful to have another sacrifice.”

“And *I’m* grateful that this will all be over once we cut you to pieces.”

Those sharp words had come from Thoma as he beheaded the final shade. Sword in hand, he approached, but the shaman’s self-assured smile never wavered.

“Of course, I’ll be having you go into the pit too. While I appreciate his contribution, a mere human’s blood won’t be all that effective. For the One Origin Snake, I need the blood of someone like you.”

The One Origin Snake. The words alone had a sinister echo to them.

Thoma’s handsome features turned grim. “The Origin Snake? Don’t tell me... The snake *poisoned* you?”

“Poisoned him?” Xixu repeated. There had to be a deeper meaning to the words, but he didn’t understand what it could be.

Thoma glanced at the shaman and then the pit with probing eyes before beckoning Xixu over. “You know how this town was founded, don’t you?”

“Yes. The king of an ancient nation built it to answer a request from a god.”

“And why did that god make the request?”

“There was a titanic snake that tried to devour the sun, and the god—” Xixu cut himself off. He looked at the shaman with the artificial face and the pit of writhing snakes. “The snake?”

“That’s the one. The snake that the god sliced up. The shaman must have been exposed to its essence when he came here. We get people like that from time to time. Too involved with cursed magic, so the snake’s essence swallows them up.”

“That explains why...”

When he’d come down here and first saw the shaman, he’d felt a different

impression from him than when they'd last met in the south. If that transformation had happened as a result of the shaman coming to Irede, then that made sense. However, there was an obvious question Xixu had yet to ask.

"Isn't the snake already dead? Irede was founded to repay that, wasn't it?"

The shaman smiled. "The One Origin Snake will never disappear, not even in death. As long as this continent exists, so will it. Because it is the continent's true master."

"Yeah, okay, whatever." Thoma interrupted the shaman, waving his hand as if to ward him off. Then, he turned back to Xixu. "Leaving the nonsense about it being the 'true master' aside, it *is* true that it hasn't disappeared after dying. Irede is responsible for sealing its essence underground."

"What do you mean by 'sealing its essence'?"

"The snake was beheaded here, and a vast amount of its blood soaked into the ground. That's why shades take physical forms here."

So it was that concentrated essence that gave shades physical bodies. Sari had told him it was because the "power of that age" still lingered. But she hadn't specified where that power had come from.

The town was still filled with the essence of the god-slain snake. It was an extraordinary story, but then again, so was the fact that shades possessed physical forms. This town had *always* been extraordinary.

Xixu's thoughts threatened to become disordered, and he took a breath to compose them. Responding to Thoma's beckoning, he stepped over next to the man, eyeing the pit as he went.

"So what happens when blood is spilled in there?" Xixu asked.

"The blood of those who serve the god becomes strength for the snake. With enough of it—well, I'm sure you've already guessed. The snake will be revived." Thoma shook his head in frustration.

Xixu *had* guessed, but he'd hoped for a different answer. "So...it'll succeed in swallowing the sun this time?"

"I doubt it, given it was already sliced to pieces once. It'll be strong enough to

destroy the country though.”

“That’s not good.”

“Right?”

“Even so, the second coming of the One Snake is already set in stone.” The shaman raised his right hand as though he were dancing. The snakes squirming at the rim of the pit all moved at once, gathering in a mass around him that grew thicker and thicker with each passing moment. Countless more snakes slithered out of the pit to join them.

It was as though a black tide was washing ashore. In no time at all, the spacious basement was filled with a seemingly endless number of snakes, and the pair were surrounded. Though the sight made Xixu want to doubt his own sanity, he stared intensely at the pit.

“That pit...” Xixu muttered.

“Don’t bother,” Thoma said. “This is already beyond us.”

Thoma’s reply came unexpected to Xixu, but it frustrated him more than it surprised him. The maiden was currently powerless, and the idea of what might have happened to her only added to his impatience.

“Don’t you think she’s down there?” he asked sharply.

“She probably is,” Thoma replied. “But it’s too late. If only Midiridos had come with us.”

“I’m glad to hear you know when to give up,” the shaman said. His clear voice was a higher pitch than before. Xixu was taken aback at the sight of him. He’d looked like a normal human being until just a moment ago, but now the snakes were steadily being absorbed into his body, slithering into him from above his black kimono as though they were melting.

His body swelled eerily in proportion to the snakes that joined with him, his skin began to blacken, and his eyes glowed red.

He resembled a shade, but his existence was suffused with far more malevolence. Xixu’s eyes narrowed slightly, studying him. The shaman’s appearance induced a mix of despair and nausea, his mouth splitting open wide

enough to reach his ears on either side.

“No longer do you need to repay your god. I shall have you become offerings to the One Snake.”

At that shrill proclamation, the remaining snakes bared their fangs at them. With no way to escape, Xixu looked down and found, to his surprise, that at some point the dog had reached his feet. He remembered the maiden and the king. In all likelihood, they were on the other side of those white eyes. Breathing a small sigh, he readjusted his grip on his military sword.

“I suppose I *was* told to make myself useful to her.”

This couldn’t be his end. If he was incapable of saving a single girl and fulfilling his liege’s orders, there would have been no meaning in him coming to Irede. He took a step forward, covering Thoma.

“For the time being, just stay here,” Xixu said. “If you see an opening, run. I’ll get Saridi out.”

“Hey, hold it. You’re staying right next to me.” Thoma’s hand came from behind him to grab his right arm.

Xixu looked down at the hand and frowned. “What? Don’t complicate this.”

“That’s *my* line. Didn’t you check what the family name of Pale Moon’s proprietresses was?”

“I...”

He had, actually. Or, more accurately, he’d been told. It was an old family that lived in the capital—older than the country itself. *Werrilocia.* A family that traced their bloodline back to the king of an ancient nation.

“What do the Werrilocias have to do with this?” Xixu asked.

“*Think* about it. Why would the family of the ancient king be the protectors of Pale Moon?”

“Isn’t it because he was the one who established it as a courtesan house?”

It did seem a little odd that the bloodline of a king would inherit a courtesan house, but Xixu was able to allay his slight misgivings with a little further

thought. After all, what other family would have inherited it?

But Thoma shook his head as he watched the slowly approaching snakes.

“No. Pale Moon originally wasn’t a courtesan house. It was the king’s manor that he dedicated to the god.”

“The king’s manor?”

He didn’t know what Thoma was talking about. But before confusion could fully set in, Xixu noticed a change in the dark pit. A faint white light was spilling forth from beneath the snakes.

Thoma must have noticed it too because he started to adopt an ironic tone. “Whenever Irede is mentioned, you think of fine drink, music, and holy courtesans. But, you know, holy courtesans have never actually existed.”

“What?”

“The god who was summoned by the king. She was a woman. The women of Pale Moon were her handmaidens...and the one who answered her request for the warmth of human touch was the king himself. So the proprietress of Pale Moon is the inheritor of both of their bloodlines.”

The light grew stronger. Soon, the basement was so bright it was difficult to keep his eyes open. Xixu raised his left arm to block it out. But the light penetrated everything and burned into the back of his eyes. All he could hear was Thoma speaking right next to him.

“You get it now, right? The maiden of Irede...*is* that ancient god.”

6. Manifestation

Cold. Alone. There was nobody but her in the desolate darkness of the stone chamber; this was god's chamber, after all.

"So cold..."

Speaking only deepened her sense of isolation. Sari wrapped her arms around her naked body and looked around.

Your power is too great.

It was a warning she'd heard from her grandmother as a child. At the time, Sari had not yet known what her power was. Although she had been forbidden from doing so, she'd attempted to sew a shade after the half-moon had already passed.

Her ancestor was the moon god, to whom the sun was an elder brother. So the greater the moon waxed, the stronger her power became.

Ignorant of this, Sari had inadvertently forced a shadeslayer to the brink of death. He had been unable to withstand her waxing power, and his heart paid the price.

Afterward, he'd left Irede, and she had been sent back to her family's estate in the capital. *Your power is too great.* Ever since, Sari had worn a bracelet that kept her power in check and had never used it after the half-moon again.

The maidens of Pale Moon were the very core of Irede. As descendants of a god, the town existed for them. But this was because they bore the duty of sealing the snake and safeguarding the people, not the other way around. To bring harm to those under their protection—mistakenly or not—would be to defeat their own purpose. Irede had been given to the god as a gift, and so the maidens inherited it. But as the blood of the king also flowed in them, they also inherited the responsibility of rule.

Sari, too, was one of the bearers of this duty. It was why she had worked so hard, both as the maiden and as the proprietress.

But now, she was wondering if she'd made another mistake. She wanted to see her family. To touch someone.

Yet there was nobody to be found. There was only one person in god's chamber. One person, and the cold. Sari crouched down and hugged her knees. She hung her head. Since she was lonely, she wondered if perhaps she should go to sleep. But then, suddenly, she felt as though somebody had called her name, so she looked up. Was somebody there? She rose to her feet. Then, she began to search...

At that moment, she felt the gentle warmth of another touch her hand.

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There was a scream. While he could tell it belonged to a girl he knew, it also sounded like it belonged to something else entirely.

A girl was standing on empty air over the pit, holding onto an unconscious Eid by the hand.

The snakes must have attempted to devour her. Her white kimono was in tatters, and her chest and slender legs were exposed. All four of her limbs were smeared with mud and blood—but her appearance, which should have been pitiful to behold, was instead beautiful to the point of being unearthly.

Her long silver hair rippled despite the absence of any wind and seemed to house a light of its own within. Her delicate limbs emanated not allure, but a cold, untouchable purity, and yet they still possessed such magnetism that any who laid eyes upon them were unable to tear them away.

Silver eyelashes cast shadows over her solemn eyes. It was impossible to tell where their gaze was directed. Her lips, firmly pressed together, were like the petals of a flower.

There was no resemblance at all to the girl with a carefree smile, but such thoughts were secondary to the instinctual feeling that struck Xixu after a single look. *She's not human.* Her presence asserted authority over her surroundings and threatened to swallow him up. He exhaled.

Next to him, Thoma whispered in a hushed voice, "Don't do anything rude. That's Sari, but it's also not."

“Has the god possessed her?”

“No. She *is* the god. She’s just at a different layer of consciousness. Right now, she’s a higher being.”

Sari glanced around the basement, gaze uninterested and dismissive, then she leisurely began to walk through the air. The snakes that had been looking up at her fled like the retreating tide, leaving the pit’s rim empty of their presence. She alighted there and lowered Eid’s body to the ground. Her inhuman blue eyes fell upon the deformed shaman.

“Oh? Now there is an essence that brings back memories.” Her clear voice had a resonant beauty to it and was slightly lower in pitch than usual.

The shaman’s distended face stiffened. “I had not expected you to survive.”

“It seems you rather made light of me. Before the union, I was restraining my power, as it was unstable. Yet now that I have been so unceremoniously awakened, I need my fetters no longer.”

The girl smiled and removed the two bracelets that had been threaded over her left arm. She dropped them to the ground and tread on them as she stepped forward. Her lips twisted sweetly as she stretched her pale hand out, pointing at the shaman’s forehead.

The shaman’s red eyes glared back, full of loathing. “Then I shall tear you apart myself and present you as an offering to my master.”

“You are welcome to try.”

The shaman leaped off the ground as soon as the words were spoken, bringing his engorged arm to bear in a powerful swing.

But Sari simply watched his attempt to crush her impassively. The only movement she made was a slight, upward twitch of her finger.

“Bind.”

The spell was but a single word, yet it slammed the shaman violently into the ground. As he let loose a cry of anguish, Sari gently skipped onto his body, drifting weightlessly through the air as she went. A dull rupturing sound rang out, and a gaping hole opened up in the shaman’s back.

The girl looked down upon the black entrails scattered on the ground around her and giggled. Yet, the shaman still lived, a testament to the loss of his humanity. He attempted to crawl away from under Sari's feet, but her pale toes pressed down on his shoulder.

"Wherever are you going?"

"You...accursed..."

"Ah, but the air is so disagreeable in here. I feel as though I might suffocate."

Still standing on the shaman, the girl swept her left hand to the side. A white light—the same as earlier—flashed, cleaving through the writhing snakes in the room. They scattered in a desperate attempt to get away, but the light split into tiny beads of illumination, each pursuing a different target. When they caught up to the black snakes, they shredded them into pieces.

Xixu stared in mute amazement as what had previously seemed like an endless tide of snakes was swiftly eradicated before his eyes.

In spite of himself, he whispered into Thoma's ear. "Why didn't she just do that from the start?"

"What, you think she can just do that whenever she wants to? And trust me, you don't want *her* to come out if you can help it. She's downright terrifying. You're taking responsibility for this too, you know."

"'Responsibility'?"

In the span of their brief exchange, the snakes that had blanketed the basement were now completely gone.

Sari, still atop the shaman, crouched down and peered at his face, smiling. "Is that all?"

"A curse...upon..."

"Hmm. I suppose it is."

The girl's hand slowly reached out toward the shaman. Elegant, pale fingers grasped his swollen head—and the next moment, there was an unpleasant *crunch*.

More than half of the shaman's head had been crushed into an unsightly black mess of meat. Snake essence leaked from the scattered flesh and blood, quickly congealing into a dark liquid that soaked into the dirt, and staining the ground underneath Sari's feet. But then...it was gone, leaving nothing but desiccated flesh and crumbling bones.

Sari laughed, and it came from low in her throat. Then, she spoke, deep and deliberate.

"Melt into the earth and tell the snake this: eternity shall come to pass before the day you return."

The girl who was a god removed her hand. And just like that, Irede's recent string of abnormal events were over.

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Thoma had told him what came next would be terrifying, but Xixu hadn't been able to anticipate what that would entail. The young shadeslayer watched the girl who had become so different from the Sari he knew. Then, her gaze suddenly turned toward him, almost causing him to flinch.

A seemingly sweet smile settled on Sari's features, and she inclined her head. "Awoken by a triviality. Shall I take this to mean man no longer considers me to be of importance?"

"Heaven forbid that be the case." Thoma had knelt down and bowed his head. The man retrieved a small bottle from his breast pocket and proffered it to the girl. "Your wine will always be here for you."

"And my music?"

"In attendance," the head of the Midiridos said, stepping down the stairs. Somewhat out of breath, she stepped up to Thoma and knelt beside him. "Request any song you wish. I will always be ready to play for you."

"Delightful. And the last?"

"Over here," Thoma said.

"Wait." Xixu stiffened, immediately grasping Thoma's meaning.

The god's final request was for a man to attend her. But why was that role

now being thrust upon *him*? Before he could object, however, Thoma poked him in the leg and whispered in a low voice that would not reach Sari.

"I *told* you to take responsibility. If we can't provide all three right here, she'll raze the country to the ground."

"*What?*"

"Just get on your knees already. Do you want to die?"

He glanced around and saw that the Midiridos head was gesturing for him to kneel as well. Even the black dog joined in. It tugged at the hem of his clothing, almost making him cry out in surprise.

Sari stared at him curiously as he tried to shake the dog off. "Do you find me disagreeable?"

"It's not a problem of..."

"You are reluctant to kneel, then?"

That wasn't the reason, but it *was* true. Xixu resolved himself, straightened up, and faced her.

"My allegiance lies solely with the currently reigning king. God or not, I cannot kneel to you."

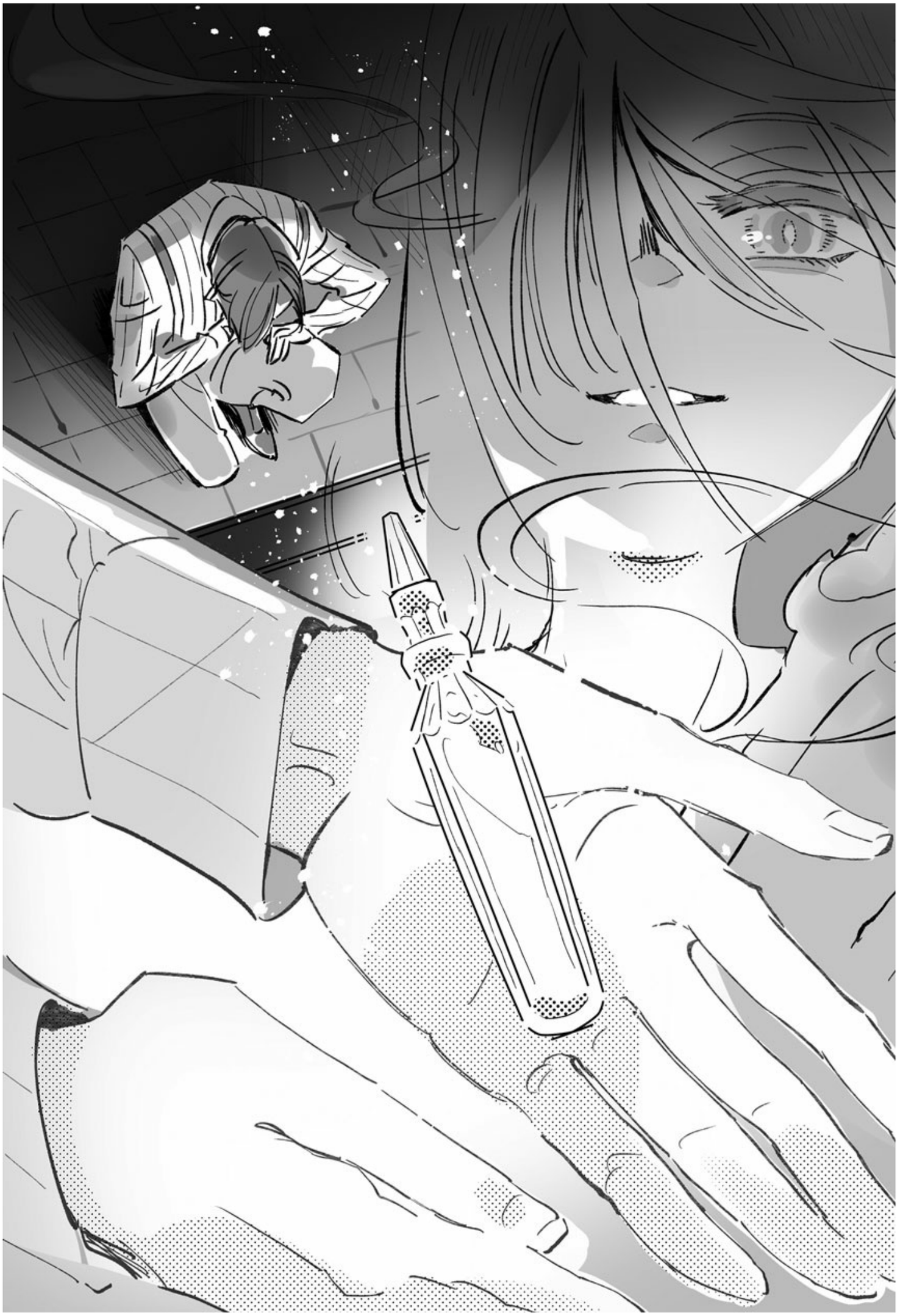
"The currently reigning king? Then all I must do is safeguard this country in your stead, yes?"

"That would—"

He lost the ability to form any further words when he noticed the black dog at his feet was nodding. The smile of his mischief-loving, yet talented liege came unbidden to his mind.

"He set me up..."

Why had he been sent to Irede? Because his liege's maiden, with her gift for foresight, must have seen this future possibility. Xixu now knew the king's true motive, but all that information did for him was inflict an unbearable headache.



Seeing him at a loss for words, Sari smiled at him impishly. “Is something amiss? I do not mind if you stand if the alternative displeases you. What I want from you is not allegiance.”

The girl walked barefoot across the dirt and stood before him. Her graceful figure was almost entirely exposed, giving it a terrible allure. A sweet scent tickled his nostrils, and he could see in her enticingly beautiful gaze that she was willing him to submit.

Her charm felt like a heavy pressure. However, Xixu did not reach for her. He simply frowned. The woman in front of him was an entirely different being from the girl he knew.

Sari raised her pale arm toward the unmoving young man. Yet before her hand could touch his face, it stopped. Something flickered in her blue eyes.

“Ah... C-Cold...”

“Saridi?”

The smiling girl’s expression froze. Tremors began in her raised fingers and swiftly spread to the rest of her body. She wrapped her arms around herself, looking as though she might collapse at any moment.

“C-Cold... So cold...”

“This isn’t good. She’s reached her limit.”

Thoma looked up, alarm on his face, but he seemed unable to stand. Was it because the offerings to god had not yet been completed?

Xixu faced the girl alone, unsure whether he should reach out to her trembling form.

Sari’s eyes, though wavering, looked up at him. Her delicate lips parted slightly.

“Xixu...”

She’d called his name. Xixu stared into her dimming blue eyes. The unease in her gaze was unmistakably hers—the girl who knew of her own ignorance but shyly faced forward anyway.

He’d thought her beautiful. More than that, however, her tendency to immediately throw everything she had at the tasks before her had been adorable. She wasn’t a god. She was just a regular girl, earnestly trying to do her duty.

Xixu could see something in her eyes—something that resembled the fear of being alone. Gently, he reached his hand out, touching her icy cheek. Then, he pulled her into an embrace.

Without a word, he firmly held her fragile form in his arms. Her eyes closed, and she entrusted herself to him. Her trembling stopped and she exhaled as though in relief. Slender fingers clutched onto his clothes.

Xixu held her tighter.

“Saridi.”

The emotion within him did not burn. All he conveyed to her was a scant warmth. Sari nodded minutely. Then, he heard a whisper from his chest.

“Warm...”

7. Ties

“I caught a cold...”

Nobody seemed to hear her grumbling. Lying in the spacious bedroom, Sari pressed down on her pounding temples. Since she had been put to bed in a futon in the proprietress’s room, which usually went unused, there was nothing around to stave off her boredom. However, she had been the one to protest the idea of letting anyone else into her actual room, so she’d just have to bear with it.

She flailed about for a while, and Isha, who had been in the adjoining tatami mat room, noticed and came to take a peek.

“You’re up? Would you like a drink? I’ll bring you some ameyu.”

“Mm-hmm...”

“I’ll be right back.”

The woman left, smiling, and Sari waited obediently. As a child, her power had often given her fevers. The touch of the women around her had offered some relief from those, but what she had now was a genuine cold. No doubt it had been caused by her walking around almost naked the other day.

“I must have used too much power... My memories are gone, and my dreams felt freezing...”

She didn’t like how both her dreams and her time as her other self were locked away from her memories. It made her feel terribly lonely—keenly aware of the fact that only she wasn’t human.

Whenever she said that to Thoma, he’d smile and tell her, *“That’s because you haven’t met the man who’ll be your offering yet.”* But even if she did one day meet him—the man who would be equivalent to her partner—she wasn’t sure this loneliness *could* be dispelled.

Lying atop white sheets, she sighed. She’d been told that, during the gap in her memories, Irede’s series of strange incidents had been resolved.

She hadn’t heard the details yet, but she knew there had been no small number of casualties. She also knew that the culprit, Marquess Bughnan, had been taken to the capital where he would face his punishment.

His collaborators, subordinates, and anyone else who had a hand in his crimes would be sentenced as well—a process the king himself was apparently weighing in on. Her brother had told her to ask Xixu for the specifics, but she hadn’t seen him since she’d sent him off with the decorative cord. She felt a little lonely about that, but kept it to herself.

Those thoughts led her to wonder about the whereabouts of another man she knew. Eid, who had lost his right eye, had been exiled from Irede. In more usual circumstances, he would have faced punishment in the capital too. He had, after all, stood idly by despite being aware of his father’s crimes. However, the three sacred houses had prevented that from happening.

A shadeslayer of Irede was judged by the unwritten laws of Irede. It had been Thoma who’d proposed the exile and pushed it through, claiming it was a more fitting punishment for Eid. However, Sari had a feeling that her brother had done it out of consideration for the wish she’d been unable to say. She’d heard that after Eid had received his sentence, he had departed the town without a word.

She hadn’t even been able to say goodbye to him. Where was he now, and what was he doing? She stared at her palm. A painful sense of loss ached deep in her chest.

“If I had grown up, then...”

Had he been too early, or had she been too late? She felt as though, somewhere deep inside her, she already had the answer.

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Isha returned with the ameyu—hot water mixed with thick syrup and sprinkled with cinnamon—but she also brought her lover.

Thoma sat down by Sari’s pillow. “Take it easy, okay? If you push yourself, you’ll feel it later down the line.”

“Mmkay.”

The ameyu Isha had brewed was the perfect sweetness, and it warmed Sari's body. As she sipped at it happily, Thoma held a sealed letter out to her.

"What's this?"

"A letter from the king. Take a look at it later."

"From the king?" Did it have to do with the cleanup proceedings? Whether she was of a legitimate bloodline or not, it was strange for the king to write to the proprietress of a courtesan house directly. Sari took the letter and turned it over. The sender's name was indeed that of the king. "I wonder what it says."

"His best wishes to you regarding his younger brother, I'd bet."

"Younger brother? Is that somebody I know?"

"Eh. You'll find out before long. Just focus on your own recovery for now."

Unlike his bedridden younger sister, it seemed that Thoma was extremely busy. He got up to leave, but Sari suddenly remembered something she still needed to do and hurriedly called after him.

"Hey, Thoma, can you help me with something?"

"What is it?"

"U-Um, I gave something to Xixu, and...well, I'd like you to go ask for it back."

The decorative cord had a special meaning. If she left it in Xixu's hands, it would only cause all kinds of trouble for him.

Thoma grinned at her. "I know. It's still too early for you, after all."

"R-Right. Wait, you know what I gave him?"

"Sure do. Don't worry. He doesn't seem like the type who knows when to give up either, but I'll make sure he takes full responsibility."

"Responsibility?"

"I'll make it so he comes to this room every night, in due time."

"Thoma! That's not what I asked!"

Despite her shouts of protest, her brother simply left the room, laughing as he went. Left behind, Sari pouted, her blushing cheeks puffing up, and drank more

ameyu.

Isha placed a cool hand on her brow. “I think your fever’s gone down.”

“Mmm...”

“Tell me if you need anything, okay?”

“I don’t. But thank you.”

The sweet taste of the hot ameyu spread through her, warming her from her core. Her loved ones were with her too. She didn’t need anything else. She wasn’t alone. Sari told herself this as she laid back down.

Just as she closed her eyes, thinking she’d get a little more sleep, she heard Isha’s voice from the other room, calling out a question. Somebody must have come by. She heard the door opening.

“Sari, there’s somebody here to see you.”

“Huh? Wai— Why?”

These rooms were where the proprietress of Pale Moon received guests. With the exception of family, no visitors should have been allowed to come here without her knowledge. To make matters worse, she was in her sleepwear. She hurriedly threw on a disheveled kimono and pulled it closed in a feeble attempt to present herself properly, but that did nothing to help. She may as well have hid under her sheets.

While Sari was combing her unkempt hair, unwilling to concede defeat, the visitor showed himself. The young man had the same uneasy look on his face as usual, but after noticing her, it became one of relief, tinged with something ever so slightly bitter. Sari’s eyes widened upon seeing it.

“Ah...”

She didn’t know why. But all of a sudden, she felt happy. The warmth that filled her chest made its way up onto her face. Suppressing the blush on her cheeks, she smiled.

“Thank you for checking in on me.”

“How are you feeling?” Xixu had knelt in front of the sliding screen, a good

deal further away from her than Thoma had been. It was very much like him to do that.

Sari nodded. “Better. I just caught a little cold. Apparently, I was walking around in rather light clothing?”

“You... Wait, you truly don’t remember?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Xixu had been covering his reddening face with one hand, as though he’d remembered something he’d rather not have, but he lowered it upon hearing her response. He looked somewhat troubled, and she wondered what he was thinking about.

The young man, oblivious to her gaze, retrieved a cloth bundle from within his breast pocket. “Here, I borrowed this from you. I know how important it is, so I thought it’d be best if I returned it myself, rather than through others. Of course, that means it’s late getting back to you, for which I am sorry.”

Sari reached out and opened the cloth bundle he’d left on the tatami mat floor. Tucked carefully within was a decorative cord with white and black half-moons—the cord that represented the maiden’s singular guest.

Sari began carefully rewrapping the bundle. “Thank you. Was it useful?”

“It...”

The young man looked like he was on the verge of saying “it wasn’t,” but was holding it back with his teeth. Sari watched him, amused. This time, he did notice her gaze, and he cleared his throat softly.

“It helped me in this case, but it is an important possession of yours. You should refrain from giving it out so casually in the future.”

“I wasn’t being casual when I gave it to you. And I doubted you’d misuse it.”

“You shouldn’t be so quick to trust others, Saridi.”

Xixu’s eyes weren’t sharp as they looked at her, but neither were they smiling. Perhaps part of his warning was referencing how she’d been betrayed by her childhood friend Eid. She smiled wryly and shook her head.

“I’ll be okay. I’m young, so I make mistakes. But if I don’t experience failure, I won’t make progress either. That’s how people grow up.”

She hadn't noticed Eid’s loneliness and hatred because she was still a child. She’d blindly believed that he was an adult who’d overcome his past. And then he’d received what his immaturity and egotism had deserved. There was nothing more to it than that.

Xixu frowned slightly, creasing his well-shaped eyebrows. But his face soon reverted to its original solemn expression.

“I believe you should be free to live however you wish. As for me, I do not want to worry you more than I already have.”

He retrieved something from his breast pocket and showed it to her. It was a small silver badge that she immediately recognized. Only this country’s high-ranking officials wore it. Her blue eyes widened.

“You’re a veteran, Xixu?”

“I’m still in active service. My true name is Kilis Raxixu Zack Torlonia. I’m an officer under the direct command of the king, and it was under his orders that I became a shadeslayer of Irede.”

“U-Um.”

Sari glanced at the sealed letter she’d left by her side. She had a feeling she knew what it said now. But this wasn’t over—she hadn’t missed the last part of his name.

“You’re...royalty?”

“In—and please, I cannot stress this enough—name only. I was born and raised in an ordinary family, and I enlisted in and graduated from the military academy via ordinary means. It was after I became an officer that my liege’s whims led me to the position I’m in today. In fact, I’m here in the first place because he told me to ‘see what I could see of Irede’ and to ‘be useful to the maiden.’”

“You’re giving me a lot to take in right now.”

“Sorry.”

He'd been earnest and apologetic throughout his explanation, and she more or less understood the position he'd been put in.

In brief, his king had made requests of him that he'd been unable to refuse and they had all piled up and led to this.

Now that she knew that, she felt something akin to disappointment. She wasn't exactly sure why, but her best guess was that it was because his coming to this town and rescuing her hadn't been of his own volition. Unconsciously, Sari held her fingers. They were getting cold.

Xixu put his badge away. "When you asked if I was in the pocket of the king, you were correct. I'm sorry I didn't answer you at the time."

"I don't really mind..."

To him, Irede had only been a temporary mission. It only made sense, once she thought about it. This was a town of the night—it was ill-suited for an honest and sincere person like him.

There was an emotion within her that had vanished before it had been allowed to take form, and she swallowed it down. As she gripped her fingers tighter, Xixu continued.

"As such, I need to make a trip to the capital to give my report. I should be back in a week or so, but during that time the town's security will be weaker, for which I'm sorry."

"You're coming back?!" Sari shouted reflexively.

Xixu flinched at the noise. "Would it...bother you?"

"Um, no, sorry. You wouldn't be a bother at all. I just thought...since you came here for your mission..."

With the capital being involved in the cleanup, she'd entirely assumed that his mission *was* the recent incident, meaning that it was now over. However, Xixu shook his head.

"My orders were to come and see Irede, convey my impressions to my liege, and be of service to you. And the specifics of those duties aren't particularly defined—they are within my own discretion."

She paused. “As orders go, aren’t those kind of strange? You’re a high-ranking officer, aren’t you, Xixu? And directly under the king too. Doesn’t that make you rather invaluable?”

“‘Strange’ is a good way to describe him.”

The sincerity he put into his words gave her an inkling of the hardships he must have gone through in the past. Perhaps his “royal status” had fallen into his lap in a similar fashion. Sari pictured the young man reluctantly accepting his liege’s orders, and the image made her grin.

Xixu shook his head, as though clearing away a cascade of unpleasant memories, and returned his gaze toward her. The way he faced her was neither frightened nor pandering—just sincere.

“Anyway, I will be continuing my duties as a shadeslayer. If that is okay with you?”

Sari, who had been captivated by his dark eyes, came back to her senses and found herself feeling shy.

“Mm-hmm. I’d appreciate your help. And I’m glad.”

It was how she truly felt. Sari’s white porcelain cheeks were dyed scarlet as she smiled. Her fingers were heating up, and she wanted to use them to pull on his sleeve, but she held herself back for now.

The young man relaxed, looking relieved. “Good. I’m glad too. I’ve yet to prove myself useful to you, or this town you cherish so much.”

Words of respect—for both her and Irede. Because that was just how he was, wasn’t it? Silently, Sari thanked the king for giving him such strange orders.

The young god smiled, as brilliantly and beautifully as a flower in full bloom.

“You’ve already done so much. So...please make sure you come back, okay?”

As she watched the young man’s eyes grow wide in surprise, she gently pressed a hand to her chest which was steadily getting warmer.

She was just happy that she’d be able to wait for him again.

Second Tale

1. Konpeito

In Xixu's opinion, the palace's audience chamber was an audience chamber in name only—it was really more of a greenhouse, constructed to facilitate the ever-busy king's hobby of cultivating flowers. It had sizable windows, the inner temperature and humidity were carefully regulated, and it was crowded with potted plants sourced from all over the continent.

The king was particularly fond of his tree peonies, with their large, pale pink flowers, and recent word was that they had spread so far that they'd begun to annex the palace courtyard.

Then again, Xixu had also heard that this overflow was a rather concerning matter for the king, who wished to keep his flowers close at hand to be able to care for them himself.

Kneeling on the floor and besieged by the cloying scent of flora, Xixu looked up at his liege tending to the flowers.

The king was wearing a white outer garment embroidered with gold thread—an exquisite work of luxury that could only be forgiven for a man of his position—and it convinced all who saw it of the inherent nobility granted by his royal birth. His sleek black hair was bound together behind his head, and his countenance—that when seen in profile, had often been mistaken for a woman's during his teenage years—was currently wearing a gentle smile.

Xixu suppressed a sigh and continued. "And so, I would be grateful to be told the truth of the matter." He tried his best to keep the bitterness from becoming apparent in his voice, but his efforts were in vain—his words only came out as reproachful. The king, holding a pair of pruning clippers, looked up from the flowerpot he was tending to and tilted his head.

"What an odd thing to say. I receive reports, not give them. What would you have me tell you, other than that I'm grateful?"

“The true reason why you sent me to Irede.”

It was obvious, but if he didn’t press for it, this would get nowhere. The young king looked down and smiled at the frown on his half-brother’s resolute face. Behind closed doors, the king’s graceful visage had a reputation for never letting his true intentions show, but from Xixu’s point of view, it wasn’t all that different from that of an unruly child with a love for mischief.

The king placed the clippers aside, tucked his hands into his spacious sleeves, and said, archly, “The true reason? I only asked you to see what you could see.”

“Shall I take that to mean my sightseeing is now complete?”

“You don’t mean to make your return here permanent, do you? And leave *her* back there?”

The retort sounded clearly goading to Xixu, but he clenched his jaw and barely managed to let it pass. *Stay calm. Just stay calm,* he told himself, but it was a losing battle, and the next moment, his efforts proved to be for nothing.

The king wore his usual smile as he looked down on the young man, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “To say nothing of your outrageous decision to return of your own accord. It makes it appear as though I’m an individual who will take back any offering I make whenever it pleases me. Especially considering the recipient in this case is a god.”

Xixu’s only reply was silence. His suspicions had been confirmed. The sudden drain in strength he experienced had him feeling as though he might melt into the floor. He’d much rather have stayed an ordinary officer than become embroiled in all of this. Since he was royalty, it had occurred to him before that he might be thrust into an arranged political marriage, but becoming a sacred offering had obviously factored outside of his expectations. To make matters worse, his would-be partner—though on the cusp of adulthood—was most definitely still a child.

Fighting a simmering headache, Xixu began mentally drafting a series of choice—but honest—rebuttals to his liege.

Naturally, he already knew full well that they would all be futile.

※

In an era long gone by, the town of Irede was built as an offering to a god. Though times changed and so had the nation it belonged to, the town had always enjoyed a moderate prosperity. Today, the three long-standing lineages known as the inheritors of the sacred offerings still called Irede home.

As her price for slaying the wicked snake, the god had requested fine drink, music, and the warmth of human touch. The last of those three offerings was the purview of the courtesan house Pale Moon, which was located at the northern tip of the town, nestled unassumingly amongst a copse of trees.

The sun had begun to set when Sari lit the hanging lantern at the entrance, and she scrutinized the stone paving outside, damp from the light drizzle. As most of Pale Moon's patrons were regulars, it had no need for advertisements or gaudy illumination. Nevertheless, weather such as this necessitated light to guide one's footsteps at night.

Sari turned back to a maidservant standing inside. "Fetch me an umbrella and a basket lantern, please. I'll greet the guests by the front gate today."

"Of course, Miss Proprietress."

The maidservant promptly returned with the requested items, along with a haori—a jacket-like garment worn over one's kimono—for Sari to keep warm from the cold. Sari thanked her for her thoughtfulness and opened the umbrella. Similar to her kimono's sash, it was pale blue and bore the design of a white half-moon.

Holding the umbrella which would denote her identity to any resident of the town who saw it, she made her way outside the front gate. Shortly afterward, a familiar face she'd been expecting rounded a bend down the road.

Thoma had two people with him today, and when he noticed Sari by the gate, he smiled.

"Sari. Aren't you cold?"

"Thank you for the concern, but no, I'm fine. May I be introduced to your new companion?"

"He's a fresh craftsman of ours. Brought him here to say hello."

Upon closer inspection, Sari noticed the boy by Thoma's side couldn't have been too far from her own age.

House Radi's breweries had suffered a considerable loss in manpower due to the recent attacks, so the boy was likely an apprentice who had been brought in to fill those vacancies. When he reached the front gate, Sari held her large umbrella over him, and gave him a graceful smile.

"My name is Sari, and I am the proprietress of Pale Moon. It is a pleasure to meet you."

The boy with short blond hair and a simple, rustic look about him simply stared at her, dazed and seemingly captivated.

Thoma rapped him on the back of the head. "Come on, where are your manners?"

"Oh, um... I'm Teté. It's nice to meet you..."

Thoma pushed the bowing Teté inside the gate and jerked a thumb at his other companion, who had been standing silently behind him. "As for this guy, I caught him just as he got back from the capital. Could you ready a meal for us?"

"Of course," Sari said.

Perhaps it was the fault of the rain, but the frown on the young man's ever-dour features looked somewhat deeper than usual. Thoma must have dragged him here without even giving him time to put on a rain jacket. Noticing Xixu's damp hair, Sari tilted her head to the side.

"Welcome back, Xixu. Would you like to take a bath first?"

"No."

The expression on the young man's face grew yet more severe, and her brother burst into laughter.

Thus, despite being dubious of the pair's suspicious reactions, Sari welcomed her first guests of the evening.

※

Pale Moon customarily stocked a dozen or so types of tea in order to

accommodate for the taste of any of its guests, but ever since Xixu had come to Irede, that number had nearly doubled. This hadn't been a conscious effort—it was just that whenever Sari came across a rare tea, she would think of how Xixu might enjoy it and would end up purchasing it. When her work for the evening reached a lull, she brewed some tea herself and stopped by the room the trio were using.

The craftsman boy must have already left. Thoma and Xixu had just finished their meal, and in what was a rare sight, had sakazuki—drinking cups—on the table before them. That being said, what filled Xixu's was not wine, but light pink konpeito—small, bumpy pellets of sugar candy. After noticing her and her tray of tea, the young shadeslayer pushed his cup toward her.

As she set out teacups and poured the pair their tea, Sari asked, "What's this?"

"A souvenir from the capital," Xixu replied. "Although I'm not sure anything from the capital would count as a souvenir for you."

"Can I really have it?"

"Yes. I have another bag that I'll leave here for you."

Sari thanked him and popped one in her mouth. It melted little by little, and she savored its rich, delectable sweetness. It was so tasty that she made a mental note to check if any stores sold them in Irede—it'd be worth stocking up on.

She grinned down at the light pink candy. "They're delicious!"

"Probably because the confectionist caters to the royal family."

"What? Really?"

"Maybe. I think so."

Xixu—who she thought was being surprisingly blithe considering it was his souvenir—sipped his tea. As usual, Sari watched with great interest as the crease in his brow softened slightly.

She also found it novel that, since he'd just come from the capital, he wasn't wearing his militia uniform. The everyday attire he was wearing was largely gray

and simple, and, perhaps because of that, it made him look younger than he normally seemed.

Noticing Sari's intent gaze, Xixu uncomfortably placed his teacup down. "Is something the matter?"

"How was the capital?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that. It was the same as always. Although that might just be because I only visited the palace and my home."

"Oh, right, you went to see your brother."

The king had explained in his letter that he and Xixu were half-siblings by different mothers. However, when she brought this up, the dark-haired young man pulled a face as though he'd bitten down on something sour.

"I've never thought of him as my brother. His Majesty is His Majesty."

"Really? Thoma and I were raised separately, but I still love him dearly."

"Our case is different. Entirely different."

Evidently, things were quite complicated between the pair. Sari's brother beckoned her to sit next to him, and she moved over to do so.

"Leave him be," Thoma said. "He's just sulking because he got teased. More importantly, Sari, it's almost time you made a return trip too, isn't it?"

"Oh, for the yearly storehouse reopening..."

Sari's family, the Werrilocias, were nobility in the royal capital. She hadn't returned in a while, having spent all of her recent time at Pale Moon, but as the current head of the family, it was required of her to be present for the traditional yearly reopening and organizing of the Werrilocia storehouse. Her proprietress work had kept her so busy that she'd forgotten. Now that she'd been reminded, she sighed.

"I completely forgot... I haven't even sent word to make the arrangements."

"It'll come from their side any day now, I'd wager. The capital's fete is happening at the same time this year, so they must have their hands full too."

"Really?"

The storehouse contained many items with strange powers, so it was customary to carry out the organizing on a night of the new moon, when those powers would be weakened. Evidently, that date had coincided with the fete this year. Although Sari herself didn't have anything to do with the capital's fete, this was a laborious event for distinguished houses, and the Werrilocias were no exception. A house's quality was in part judged by its charitable contributions, as well as the food and alcohol it provided. The competition wasn't cutthroat by any means, but it was still a busy period for both House Werrilocia and House Radi.

Sari, who had forgotten about her family's matters while living in Irede, recalled her two cousins back at the estate in the capital.

"That might make things easier for me though. If everyone at the main household is busy, they won't have much time to spare lecturing me."

"Well, you're bound to see them at the storehouse reopening. Just let it go in one ear and out the other."

As her brother rubbed her head, Sari went for another piece of konpeito. But just before she put it in her mouth, she noticed Xixu frowning at her from his position on the opposite side of the table.

"Oh, I can't eat it?"

"It's not that. What would your family lecture you about?"

Thoma tapped on her head. "Nobody in the estate knows the truth about who she is, you see. They just treat her like a kid with a failure of a mother."

As she crunched on the konpeito, Xixu had a look of incomprehension in his eyes. His gaze read, *How could they treat you like that?* Sari, feeling a little sheepish, scratched her temple.

"It's fine. They don't pick on me or anything. It's true that I'm still young, so it's a given that they'd nag me."

The fact of the matter was that she knew very little about the work of the Werrilocia family. Sari never made public appearances in her capacity as its head. She wasn't exactly a figurehead, but that was a close approximation. When it came to matters such as the fete, her cousins took the lead, and from

their point of view, she was nothing more than an incapable head of house.

That being said, when it came to matters of *Irede,* she had no intention of letting them meddle.

Sari wiped the pink stain off of her fingers with a tea towel. “Anyway, that means I’ll be away from town around the new moon this month. If anything happens, I’ll hurry right back.”

Xixu considered her words for a moment before replying, “Okay.”

Her trip would be inconvenient for the town’s shadeslayers, but if she worked quickly, she would only be away for a handful of days. Aside from Xixu, the new recruit, the other shadeslayers were aware that this was an annual event.

As Sari stood to return to her work, Thoma spoke from behind her in a calm voice.

“Saridi. I’ll be putting out a call for a new shadeslayer soon.”

Sari didn’t reply.

Irede conventionally had five shadeslayers, but one position was currently vacant.

It could not stay that way forever, especially with the maiden absent during the new moon period. Sari recalled the man who’d left the town after the recent series of incidents.

He had been exiled from Irede, and she would never see him again. For all that, she’d still had the feeling that the place he left empty would have remained that way. If not forever, then at least until she’d grown up and become able to fully digest his absence.

Sari pressed her lips together, stifling her melancholy. Then, after a pause, she said, “Okay. Please do.”

The moment she agreed, she felt as though she could hear the sound of the door to her childhood closing within her.

※

Since he’d gone straight to Pale Moon after returning from the capital, it was

late into the night by the time Xixu returned to his dormitory.

“I swear... I’m nothing but a toy to them, to do with as they like.”

Both his liege and Thoma seemed to have no qualms about leading him around by the nose. But while he hadn’t wanted to play along with the latter upon coming back, he *had* wanted to stop by Pale Moon to announce his return, so perhaps the invitation had been opportune after all.

Xixu lit the lamp on his writing desk and exhaled. The only reason he was still in this town of myth was a single girl.

Outwardly, she was the maiden and the proprietress of a courtesan house, but she was also an honest-to-goodness deity—a god who had resided in Irede since the age of myth. It was a staggering tale, but since he’d seen that she wasn’t human with his own two eyes, he had no choice but to accept it. Evidently, the blood that daughters inherited from their mothers did not weaken, and both were the god in truth. Thus, through the human method of a bloodline, the god’s existence was inherited.

In other words, Irede genuinely *was* for Sari and Sari alone, and her proclamation that she wanted to protect it because it was her town had been, word for word, the literal truth.

“Then again... Is there even a need for the maiden herself to defend it?”

Since the town was payment in the form of a gift to the god, it seemed to make sense that its human residents should have managed on their own. Her running around exterminating shades was like having the proprietress of a courtesan house sweep the garden.

He stood there, taking his jacket off while deep in thought, when suddenly a voice spoke from behind him.

“Why would I not? I was given this town, and maintaining order myself is no great task.”

“Wha?” Xixu pivoted to face the doorway, which *should* have been empty. Instead, standing there was a young god in her yukata, smiling sweetly.

“Moreover, it is the shadeslayers such as yourself doing the actual fighting. I

merely provide assistance.”

“How did you get in here?”

“This town is my garden. I can go wherever I wish.”

Sari’s chest was puffed out with pride, and her blue eyes were imbued with a hint of light. Her breath was white with cold, and Xixu, having more or less discerned the meaning behind that, looked up imploringly at the ceiling. Upon seeing his reaction, the girl pouted.

“What? I make the express effort to come see you after your return, and this is my reward?”

“You just treated me to dinner at Pale Moon, didn’t you?” Xixu asked, gauging the distance between the two of them. At his stride, it was five steps to the doorway where Sari was standing. It was the first time he’d wished that his room was larger. While she could be reasoned with in her normal state, she was currently the god. If he misstepped in how he acted toward her, it could mean his life. Furthermore...

“Nonsense. You hardly even talked to me. *Despite* being my offering, I might add.”

He didn’t reply, because her words caused him to draw a complete blank. After agonizing for a while over which issue to bring up first, he eventually settled for putting both of his hands up in the air.

“I’d like to request a discussion.”

“What kind of sacred offering are you? Do you not understand your own position?”

“I’m aware of the circumstances. The issue is, back then, Saridi didn’t have another choice.”

Of the offerings made to the god when she’d manifested, Xixu had only been deemed the offering of warmth because there had been no one else. Thoma was her brother by blood, and the Midiridos head was a woman. The unconscious Eid had been there too, but Irede would not have been able to abide by a traitor shadeslayer being one of its sacred offerings.

Even if he didn't factor in his own feelings about being an offering, he felt sorry that Sari had been forced to choose him for lack of an alternative. He'd told her that she should take her time until she found a partner she was happy with, but now his words seemed brazen and hollow. The ordinary Sari had no memory of the selection in the first place, so he wanted to discuss the matter now and wipe the slate clean, if possible. That was how things should be, even if his liege chastised him for it later.

However, the god furrowed her lovely eyebrows and scowled at him. "You are irritatingly picky. I have made it clear that I am satisfied with you."

"We need to ask Saridi what *she* wants... She'll live with this choice for her entire life."

"You are, quite frankly, a pain. Do you not know how much I am attracted to *that* part of you?"

"What part of me?" Xixu asked. However, the next instant, he was left startled by a pale hand that had suddenly appeared before his eyes.

How had she managed to take those five steps so quickly? The girl's delicate hand reached out to touch his face—and he swiftly grabbed it by the wrist, stopping it.

It was as cold as ice, but he'd half-expected that. Blue phosphorescent eyes glared at him.

"Why did you stop me?"

"Saridi... You'll catch a cold again, at this rate."

"Hence the warmth of your touch."

"If nothing else, I'd at least like to talk to the usual you during the day."

Arguing with her alone in the middle of the night had him feeling rather restless and uncomfortable. Although she wasn't human, she *was* a beautiful young girl. It was his duty to maintain propriety, and he also could not allow the girl—who was not yet an adult—to just pressure him into being her sacred offering. He still did not know how he felt about her, or how she felt about him.

But Sari's response to his words was to look at him pityingly. "I *am* me. Fool."

The young god folded her arms sulkily. As Xixu stared blankly, wondering how she'd managed to slip her hand free, she turned her face away in a huff.

"So be it. I like that part of you—it amuses me. If you wish to give me time, then I shall reciprocate with the same."

After saying her piece, she vanished from the room as though she'd never been there in the first place.

There had been no warning. All that was left behind was a moderate chill, spreading through the room. As Xixu changed his clothes, he wondered where he'd gone wrong in life. How had it come to be that he was on the receiving end of complaints from a god?

He went to bed in the town of myth, alone and troubled. The next evening, when he went to call upon Sari for her assistance with a shade, she told him she didn't remember anything about last night.

※

The window in Sari's room at her family's estate in the capital had been slightly too high for a child.

Standing on tiptoes, the small Sari could just barely reach the frame. The window faced the courtyard, and, to her, had been one of the very few places she knew of as "the outside." Prohibited from going out, she had often spent whole days in her dimly lit room on a chair by the window, looking down upon the courtyard.

She remembered one particular day when, as usual, she had expended great effort to move the heavy chair to the window frame, so that she could gaze outside.

It must have been spring. White flowers had been blooming in abundance across their thickets, and a maidservant had been sweeping their fallen petals. The view had seemed frozen in time, unchanging—except that a young boy had suddenly barged into it.

The boy, her older cousin who shared her grandmother, had carried a thick book under one arm and looked to be about to cross the courtyard.

Then, suddenly, he stopped and looked up.

“Ah...” Sari, who had been watching him from the third-floor window, was startled as their gazes suddenly met. A breeze blew through the slight gap in the barely open window.

The boy stared up at her suspiciously. What should she say? Panicked, Sari opened her mouth to speak to the cousin who she hadn’t seen in so long.

“Hey, um...”

And that was where her dream ended.

※

“Wh-What an awful dream...”

Hearing her own murmur swiftly forced Sari’s consciousness back into reality. She awoke in her own room in the rear building and, still lying face upward, wiped the sweat off of her brow with the back of her hand. She could still feel a damp heaviness clinging to her chest, which was bare since her nightclothes had unraveled open. Sari sat up, brushing her hair aside as she did so.

The storehouse reopening must really be weighing on my mind, she thought.

As her grandmother had passed away, this would be the first time Sari would be attending alone. She didn’t *think* there was anything to worry about, but perhaps, somewhere deeper down, she was anxious. The truth was, she knew that her two cousins in the capital would be difficult, and she wasn’t particularly looking forward to going back there.

“Back then too...”

What she remembered of the events following her dream were unpleasant. The memory was from her time as a small child, so it was indistinct and riddled with holes, but she clearly recalled the last part of it—her heated argument with her cousin. Sari frowned indignantly, remembering his words which still lingered in her ears today. *You can’t even do anything on your own anyway!*

She knew getting annoyed over memories of the distant past was nonsensical, but in this particular matter, her cousin’s opinion hadn’t changed. Each time they met, he would mock her for being an inadequate little girl. Driven by the

force of her own irritation, Sari shot to her feet.

“He’s not even that much older than me!”

If she was a child at sixteen, then he couldn’t be much different, considering he was only eighteen. Thinking over this as she finished dressing, Sari made her way to the front entrance where she stepped out into the afternoon daylight and immediately ran into her brother.

“Hmm? Thoma? Is something wrong?”

It was rare for her brother to come by before the lantern had been lit. He had a sealed letter in his hand, and he held it out to her.

“I came to deliver this to you.”

She took it and saw that it had no writing on the front or back. However, Sari knew immediately that it was from her family. It had to be about the storehouse reopening. She thanked Thoma and tucked it into the breast of her kimono. Perhaps due to the dream she’d just had, a sigh involuntarily escaped her lips.

Thoma noticed and studied her, looking concerned. “Are you okay? I’ll go with you if you want.”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

She didn’t hate the storehouse reopening itself, and, in general, the Werrilocia household didn’t think well of the fact that she and Thoma were so close. It had never led to any issues, as everybody understood the need to maintain appearances, but Sari had no wish to subject her brother to that particular bed of nails if she didn’t have to.

For a few heartbeats, she shut her blue eyes gently and took the moment to calm herself before looking back at Thoma.

“I’ll be okay. I’ll get it done properly and come right back. Thank you.”

If she couldn’t manage that, then she didn’t deserve to be who she was. For both Irede and the Werrilocias, Sari had to stand undaunted.

Her brother’s eyes still showed concern for her, but, understanding that her will was firm, he smiled wryly.

“If anything happens, just tell me. Feel free to rely on Xixu too.”

“He’s a shadeslayer of Irede. I can’t burden him with that.”

Xixu was one of the few people that knew about her family, but shadeslayers had nothing to do with storehouse reopenings. He was already working harder than usual right now, so she couldn’t take further advantage of him.

Sari parted with her brother and opened the letter from her family. All that was written on it were her male cousin’s name, a schedule, and the necessary details. The contents were curt, but Sari was grateful. As far as she was concerned, that meant less annoyances for her.

Since she would be leaving Pale Moon in a week, she began quietly going about her work, hoping to get as many miscellaneous matters sorted in advance as she could. She checked the stock of various supplies, made arrangements to replenish any insufficiencies, and consulted her regular suppliers. After checking in on the women and making sure nothing was amiss, Sari finally found time to take a break past midnight.

Sitting on a couch in the flower room and surrounded by a dozen or so lounging courtesans, she sipped at a cup of white tea.

“I don’t think we’ll get any more guests today...”

Pale Moon did not see many guests in the first place, and almost nobody would show up at this late hour. The courtesans evidently thought the night’s business was concluded too, because aside from the few who were in other rooms attending guests, they were gathered in a circle playing a board game.

Time leisurely drifted by, and Sari was watching the garden through the window when she heard the door opening and looked over.

Standing there was a maidservant and a large man in a navy blue uniform. As Sari stood up, Ironblade, one of Irede’s shadeslayers, nodded to her.

“Maiden. Is now a good time?”

“Yes, I’ll come.”

For a summons from him, she likely had no need to change. After just checking that her bracelet was on her left arm, she dashed over to Ironblade,

and they walked back through the hallway he'd come from.

"What does the shade look like?" Sari asked.

"A courtesan in her twenties. Vermillion kimono, brown hair. Multiple sightings reported on Third Street. No damage yet."

"Then we'd better be quick."

Third Street was one of the busiest main streets in Irede at night. Although the shade didn't appear to be the type that caused direct harm to people, things were bound to get messy if they let it move about unchecked. In particular, it was shades that took the forms of courtesans that often tended to lead people astray.

The pair left Pale Moon and strode down a deserted night path. When the manor could no longer be seen behind them, Ironblade spoke, his words succinct.

"Is the newcomer caring for you well?"

"Huh?" Though Sari's eyes widened in surprise at the out-of-the-blue question, she grasped that he was asking her about Xixu. She didn't exactly know what Ironblade's intent was, but she answered, "Yes. In his own way."

Whenever Xixu called for her, it always resulted in her sprinting madly all over the place, but she was gradually getting used to that. In fact, it was probably good for her stamina.

But in contrast to her carefree smile, Ironblade's expression became complicated, and his eyes narrowed slightly.

"You're both still young, so I suppose that's fine for now. But, Maiden, if you fail to assert yourself and allow him to do as he pleases, it won't do him any good in the long run. His reputation in town will suffer."

"Oh, I see... Hmm?"

His advice had seemed sound, but was it just her, or had there been something off about it? To begin with, the maiden and the shadeslayers stood on essentially equal standing. The former was irreplaceable, of course, and the latter were soldiers, but that did not give her the authority to control their

actions.

Or was it that Xixu, unaware of Irede's unwritten rules, had caused some kind of problem?

As she puzzled over what he'd said, Ironblade continued gravely, "You might be concerned that we'll lack the maiden's abilities for a time if you conceive a child, but please, don't be. Having a successor early is preferable to the alternative, and since your partner is a shadeslayer, there'll be no fear that you'll go unprotected. You should have him visit Pale Moon more often."

"..."

That was a *very* large misunderstanding. One that she'd most likely caused by lending Xixu her decorative cord. She'd thought she had explained the circumstances to everybody who needed to know, but she'd evidently missed *Ironblade* of all people.

Utterly lost as to how she should even begin to explain, she found herself wishing her brother would come to her rescue. Unfortunately, escaping from reality wouldn't resolve this problem. She mustered up what meager resolve she could manage, and spoke up.

"Um, I think there's been a misunderstanding..."

"When you leave Irede, you should take him with you. You never know what might happen."

"No, um... He's not that kind of..."

"We're almost there."

She looked up, and just as Ironblade had said, they were almost upon a main street lit by a myriad of brilliant lanterns.

The sound of easygoing music reached her ears, and the sight of intersecting streams of people dazzled her eyes. Ironblade tapped her on the shoulder.

"Stand by at that corner."

"Got it."

By the time she reached the corner he'd indicated, Ironblade was nowhere to

be seen. Sari went over the description of the shade.

“A vermillion kimono and brown hair... Courtesan in her twenties...”

There were a number of courtesans in vivid kimonos mingled here and there amongst the pedestrians, but she couldn’t see any that matched the description she’d been given. Sari focused, studying the street intently. She began counting to herself.

Ironblade never erred in his work. He was unwavering and constant. It was a given truth that his blade would bisect any shade that became his target.

So Sari did as instructed and waited at the corner, standing alone in the night. When her counting surpassed five hundred, a woman appeared four corners down, looking as though she was being pursued.

The courtesan, who was throwing constant glances back as she blended into the crowd, looked to all the world like a butterfly flitting through the night. Her dark vermillion kimono, seen as flashes in the gaps between people, seemed to soak in the light of the surrounding paper lanterns. Though only able to catch glimpses, Sari tracked her carefully.

The woman’s fluttering advance was taking her toward Sari, but the courtesan hadn’t yet noticed the maiden—she was too preoccupied with the view from over her shoulder.

Sari left the corner and joined the tide of people. Then, as she passed the woman by...she gently snapped her pale fingers in her direction.

“Bind.”

Her whisper was drowned out by the noise of the crowd. The courtesan let out a brief shriek and crouched, curling into herself, but Sari didn’t look back. She swam with the stream of people, allowing it to carry her away down the main street. When she reached the fourth corner, she slowed her pace and smiled at the man waiting there.

“Fight well,” she said.

Though the finger that tapped his navy blue uniform sank into his chest, Ironblade’s expression remained unchanged. Sari saw him off as he left, then

rejoined the bustling main street, headed home.

“Oh. I didn’t clear up the misunderstanding...”

By the time she realized this, she had already reached Pale Moon.

※

The white stone pillar protruding from the earth was a small thing, only reaching as high as Sari's waist.

In the northern corner of Pale Moon's grounds, she placed her right hand on the pillar and exhaled deeply.

Breath and power were one and the same. Sari felt the power within her leisurely flow out and into the pillar. Without even a ripple to disturb her consciousness, it seeped all the way down to the pillar's base, buried deep within the earth.

Although the pillar's height above ground was unimpressive, it was less than a tenth of what lay beneath.

There were four others of its kind within the confines of Pale Moon's premises, and the boundary they formed prevented shades from intruding into the manor. The power diffused into the earth also extended to the outer circumference of Irede, keeping the stagnant, underground essence of the snake from leaking past the limits of the town. Thus, Irede was, so to speak, the interval of a two-fold boundary created by a god.

Sari removed her hand from the pillar and sighed heavily. "That should do it, I think..."

Once a month, the maiden reinforced the boundary by supplying each pillar with power. However, this practice, which had been carried out for generations, had been mildly endangered by Sari's involvement in the recent turmoil. The girl, clad in a white kimono, craned her head up to gaze at the dense overhang of tree branches.

"I need to think of a way to adjust the spell too," she mumbled.

The original spellwork had been created by the maiden ten or so generations prior, but Sari was unsure whether simply maintaining it was the best course of action.

She recalled the havoc wreaked throughout the town the other day by the snake-enslaved shaman. That Pale Moon's grounds were safe was all well and good, but she could not abide such harm being inflicted upon Irede. If she could, she wanted to establish countermeasures.

However, lacking in knowledge as she was, the specifics of how she should fine-tune the boundary eluded her. Her divine self would likely know, but for the time being, both switching between the layers of her consciousness at will and sharing her memories were currently beyond her capabilities.

She puzzled over the issue while she returned to the manor, but a memory suddenly formed into an idea. “Oh, right! The storehouse has...”

If she was remembering correctly, the Werrilocia storehouse contained the documents and records of generations of maidens. There was a chance those included notes about the boundary. Finding fresh hope in the idea, Sari clenched both fists in front of her in a victorious gesture.

As she entered the manor from the back, removing her sandals as she did so, she came across Isha.

Sari’s closest confidant among Pale Moon’s courtesans was—perhaps because it was not yet time to light the lantern for the night—dressed simply, in a plain kimono under a coat. When Isha noticed the young proprietress, she stopped.

“Oh, were you out in the garden?”

“I was just reinforcing the boundary.”

“Ah, of course. You’re leaving for the capital tomorrow.”

Sari had already informed them all of her departure. Isha in particular knew about her connection to the Werrilocias, so Sari said, “Send me word if anything happens.”

Then, she added, “I’ve already let the militia know though, so you shouldn’t have any shadeslayers dropping by for business. Oh, except maybe Xixu. I haven’t told him my schedule.”

“Hmm? Why not?”

“They said he’s been out of town for a little bit. If he comes back while I’m gone and stops by Pale Moon, let him know, would you?”

Well, the militia would likely inform him upon his return anyway. Xixu’s movements were highly irregular for a shadeslayer of Irede, but given that he was a retainer of the king, there was nothing to be done about it. He must have

been sent on some kind of mission. Those who were unaware of Xixu's true identity surely had their doubts about his departures, but his dedication was proven by his record—his results surpassed those of the other shadeslayers. That alone would have been enough for Sari, but he also served as a connection through which she could glean insight into the king's intentions, for which she was grateful.

Isha, seeing her casual indifference, smiled wryly. "It wouldn't hurt to fuss over him a little more. He's caught your interest, hasn't he?"

"A courtesan...cannot be a pushy saleswoman," Sari said awkwardly. "Besides, Xixu's not the type to visit courtesan houses for leisure anyway, so..."

Isha giggled. Her smile indicated that she'd seen right through everything. Sari, harboring a slight restlessness, parted from her and returned to preparing for her departure.

Thus, by the time she left Irede and reached the royal capital, the storehouse reopening was the only matter that occupied her thoughts.

※

The Werrilocia estate, Sari's original home, was located at the northern outskirts of the royal capital.

The neighborhood consisted of nothing but the large estates and manors that lined the streets, and foot traffic was scarce. Standing before the front gate with her mopey expression hidden behind a black veil, Sari stared up at the Werrilocia's sizable manor. It had been constructed sixty years ago and had yet to lose any of its sophisticated ambience.

"I think I'm a little early..."

Sari checked her pocket watch. She wasn't wearing her usual kimono, but an old-fashioned black dress, complete with a veil—the better to make the switch from Pale Moon's proprietress to the head of the Werrilocia with.

It could not be made public that the proprietress of a pleasure town's courtesan house and the daughter of an old and noble house were the same person. It was for this reason she had been kept confined to her room ever since she was a child. She reached a gloved hand out to the iron bars of the

gate, intending to push it open.

However, before she could, a terse, male voice called out from the other side.

“May I ask what happened to your carriage?”

The name slipped from her mouth in an involuntary mumble. “Vas...”

A young man stepped up, narrowed his left eye, and scowled at her. The blue of his irises matched hers, but for a grayer tinge, and he had scowled at Sari like this ever since they were young.

He had ashen-colored hair with no luster and a handsome, androgynous face. There was a striking harshness about his features, which bore little resemblance to Sari’s. When they had been children, their grandmother had called them as alike as brother and sister, but—possibly because of a difference in gender or environment—at eighteen and sixteen, there was a clear divide between their appearances.

There was no gaudiness to the teal-gray suit that had been tailored for his thin frame, but one could tell at a glance the quality of its cut. Any who saw him would immediately recognize that he was a son of nobility. Sari realized she had slipped into her habits as proprietress and had been unconsciously evaluating his appearance, but if he actually were to visit Pale Moon as a guest, all the women would like as not turn their noses up at him for being too young.

As she stayed silent in thought, Vas pressed for an answer while he opened the gate. “I believe a carriage was arranged for you.”

“I disembarked a little early. I wanted to go for a walk.”

“Dressed as you are? I would advise you to better consider your own position.”

As he showed her into the estate grounds, Sari frowned underneath her veil at his cutting remark. Vas, who had all the expression of a porcelain doll, took her luggage from her hands and promptly set off toward the manor. As the iron grille gate shut behind her, Sari asked after her other cousin.

“Is Fyra around?”

“She is currently at Marquess Garaq’s estate. It seems he has planned an

impromptu soirée two days before the fete, so she is confirming the details.”

“I see.”

For the time being, Sari was simply relieved that she would have a reprieve from Vas’s less restrained older sister. When the flagstone path ended and they reached the entrance of the manor, Vas turned and looked down at her. His gray-blue eyes held an ambiguous light.

“Well then. Please spend your time at your leisure until the storehouse reopening. I would recommend not roaming about outside unless strictly necessary.”

“I know.”

Now that Sari was in the capital, there was nowhere she could really go in any case. She reached out to take her luggage from Vas’s hands, but when she stooped over to do so, his icy voice murmured in her ear.

“Have you selected a guest yet?”

He thrust the question at her as though it had a bladed edge. Sari glared at her cousin with cold eyes.

“I believe I’ve told you in the past how meaningless it is for you to stick your nose into such matters.”

Where Pale Moon and Irede were concerned, she would not brook any judgment from a person of the capital. Just as Sari had little standing to meddle with how the Werrilocia conducted themselves, they had their own domain to stay within as well. It was perhaps natural that they would speak about her guest, given the circumstances regarding her mother, but that did not mean she would tolerate any disrespect.

However, instead of faltering, Vas merely raised one corner of his mouth into a smile. “Very well. I understand.”

The young man resumed walking, making for the main staircase while carrying Sari's luggage. Sari followed silently behind, wishing the entire time she could plant a kick in his back. When she entered her personal room in the inner part of the manor, she waited for the sound of Vas’s footsteps to fade away

before removing her veil.

“Ugh, I *knew* it! Would it kill him to keep his mouth shut for once?!” She began pounding the pillows on her bed with her fists as hard as she could manage. When she finally ran out of breath, she rolled over onto it, staring up at the ceiling.

This estate was the only place in the capital where she could be her true self. Vas would even tell her not to leave her own room. As far as he was concerned, it would be far more convenient for the Werrilocia head to be no more than an inanimate doll. Sari, still unfamiliarly clothed in a dress, rolled around on her spacious bed.

“Why am I so irritated?”

What Vas had said was a part of it, of course, but that it’d come from *his* mouth only made it all the more frustrating. No doubt it was because of the tone he used, and the scorn in his gaze. She wished they could speak more amicably with each other.

If it was already this bad, what would happen when his older sister returned? Thinking ahead to dinnertime, Sari grew depressed. She was tempted to just sleep until morning.

However, a few minutes later, as she was drifting into the beginnings of a doze, a knock at the door made her spring up.

There was every chance that it was Vas again. As she hastily readjusted her appearance, Sari called out a response.

“Yes, who is it?”

“You...have a guest.”

“What?”

The voice belonged to Vas, but Sari had no clue who could be visiting her here in the capital.

It would be Thoma, if anybody, but Vas wouldn’t call Thoma a “guest.” Baffled and wary, Sari donned her veil again. She swallowed back her nervousness and unlatched the door.

Standing there was somebody who she hadn't expected even in her wildest speculations. In contrast to her atypical appearance, the black-haired shadeslayer wore his usual ill at ease expression as he looked at her.

The young man was dressed not in his militia uniform, but in the attire of an officer who directly served the king. He frowned at the faceless girl before him.

"Saridi, is that you?"

"Xixu!"

She was delighted beyond words to have met somebody familiar in this suffocating place. Before her thoughts caught up, she had already sprung forward to give him a hug. Vas and Xixu's faces twitched almost simultaneously.

In one corner of her mind, she had the wherewithal to realize that, while she'd thought perhaps that this had been a dream—it *was* so very unexpected—the sensation of her embrace felt real.

Xixu finally managed to pry her off, and she stared up at him. His familiar frown had taken on a noticeably awkward quality.

"What was that for?" he asked.

"Why are you here?" she asked back.

She'd heard that he'd departed from Irede, but she hadn't known he'd be in the capital. But before Xixu could answer her question, Vas's prickly voice cut in.

"Please refrain from such behavior in the hallways." He turned to Xixu. "And I must request that you not call her by that name here."

Xixu looked doubtful in response to his frank advice, so Sari tugged on his sleeve. "Xixu, let's talk inside."

"You would allow a man into your personal room?" Vas asked. "I should remind you that this is not your 'house.'"

"Then prepare a room for us."

As she brushed off her cousin's rebuke, Sari sighed underneath her veil. The mood seemed only several steps from devolving into an argument. Xixu, perhaps recognizing that she and Vas could not be said to be on good terms by

any stretch of the imagination, simply watched them, an inscrutable expression on his face.

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“Saridi is my name as maiden,” Sari explained, as she and Xixu stepped into a small parlor. The standout feature of the room was a well-polished round table, and Vas, who had entered before them, was in the process of opening the parlor’s thick curtains. Understanding dawned on Xixu’s face as she guided him to a chair.

“Ah, I see. My apologies then.”

“No, it’s okay. I more or less consider it to be my real name anyway. But here, I’m Everie Saria Werrilocia.”

That being said, seldom were the occasions where Sari would need to introduce herself as the family head. Additionally, the estate’s servants referred to her simply as “Mistress,” so just about the only people who used her birth name were her two cousins. Vas, one of those aforementioned two, shot a sharp glance at Xixu before deliberately turning to Sari.

“May I inquire as to the nature of your relationship with this gentleman?”

“What?” Sari turned to the man in question. “Xixu, what did you say the reason for your visit was?”

“I was given this,” Xixu replied, retrieving a sealed letter from his breast pocket. The familiar white envelope bore writing that addressed it to the head of the Werrilocia, and in place of the sender’s name was a seal in the stylized design of a sword.

“Oh, is that from His Majesty?”

“Yes.”

No wonder Vas had been forced to let Xixu in. Sari was about to open the letter but stopped when she noticed her cousin’s gaze. Come to think of it, she hadn’t answered his question yet.

“This gentleman is a relative of the king,” she explained. “And one of Irede’s shadeslayers.”

“Ah. I’ve heard about him,” Vas replied. “I believe he was formally introduced to the higher nobility yesterday.”

“Huh?! He had a debut?! I can’t believe I missed it!”

“I wasn’t there as entertainment...” Xixu said.

“But you would’ve been in full dress right? I wish I could’ve seen that.”

“The head of the Werrilocia would not attend such a function,” Vas said coldly.

Sari glared at her cousin, but he excused himself from the parlor in order to prepare them tea. When the door closed, Xixu turned back to Sari.

“Is he truly your blood relative?”

“Yes, my cousin. My mother and his father are siblings. I’m sorry things got so unpleasant.”

“No, it’s only natural that I’d appear suspicious.”

Sari was grateful for Xixu’s understanding, but she was the one Vas had been the coldest with, and he had no reason to be suspicious of her. Still, there was no need to complicate matters by bringing that up. After asking Xixu for permission to open the envelope, Sari broke the seal. From within, she retrieved a single letter and a written invitation.

“What are these?”

“What do they say?”

Sari showed him the invitation. It was for Marquess Garaq’s soirée—the one Vas’s sister was currently confirming the details of—which was to be held two days hence. Sari placed it on the table, and then unfurled the letter.

In somewhat unique handwriting, it said: *What with the fete upon us and all, you should enjoy your time in the capital. Instruct my little brother to provide you with any necessary items or arrangements.*

Sari looked up from the letter and stared at Xixu.

After a pause, he said, “Yes...? What did it say?”

“He says I can let you spoil me.”

“What?”

Having been thrown off balance, the young man misaimed his attempt to pick up the soirée invitation, and Sari handed him the letter in exchange. Xixu scrutinized its contents intensely, but upon finishing, held a hand to his head, expression haggard. Sari didn’t have a complete grasp on the situation, but she could only imagine it was because he’d seen the highly detailed, written itinerary of recommended destinations. Xixu’s twitching fingers seemed to want nothing more than to rip the letter to shreds, but he folded it neatly back into its original state and returned it to her.

Sari placed the king’s letter back in its envelope. “Still, while I’m grateful for the sentiment, I can’t leave the estate.”

“Why not?”

“It would be troublesome if the face of the Werrilocia head were seen. We can’t have people finding out I’m the same person as Pale Moon’s proprietress.”

Mythical bloodline or no, it would result in an unthinkable scandal if it got out that an old and noble family owned a courtesan house. If that were to happen, the people of the estate would find themselves at the center of an excessive amount of unwanted attention, making their lives in the capital much more difficult. Sari didn’t even want to imagine how mad Fyra and Vas would be at her.

But above all, Pale Moon was god’s manor. Sari’s connection to the Werrilocias being broken and Pale Moon becoming a tourist attraction was something that could not be permitted to happen. In the first place, the Werrilocia residence in the capital existed to support Pale Moon. The role of the Werrilocias was to use their noble status to ensure the smooth provision of information, financing, and all kinds of both tangible and intangible assistance.

This division of labor, so to speak, was in order to preserve god’s manor, and Sari could not allow her thoughtless actions to disrupt it.

Seeing her strained smile, Xixu pondered in silence for a brief period, before asking, “If you can’t leave, does that mean you’ll spend your time confined to the estate?”

“Yes.”

“What did you do when not in Irede? You lived back and forth between there and the capital, didn’t you?”

“Whenever I was here, I essentially never left this place. Wait, haven’t I told you this?”

“I didn’t think it would be this extreme.”

Xixu sounded as though he almost couldn’t believe it, and Sari tilted her head to the side, puzzled. She knew the way she was raised was irregular, but given that her very existence was irregular, that couldn’t be helped.

“Anyway,” she said. “I appreciate you going out of your way to come here, but—”

“Could you go out if it were as the maiden of Irede?”

“Huh?”

Sari’s eyes widened at the sudden question. She hadn’t ever thought of that before. Whenever she was in the capital, she’d always been told she was the head of the Werrilocia, and not a person of Irede.

While she was still caught up in her surprise at her preconceptions being overturned, Xixu plucked the soirée invitation from her hand. “This isn’t specifically addressed to the head of the Werrilocia. You should be able to attend as the maiden.”

“U-Um, but they wouldn’t let a person from Irede into a noble’s soirée...”

“They will if you’re with me,” the king’s half-brother said matter-of-factly, standing up. His handsome features were as stern as they always were, but she also thought there was something about them right now that was a touch different.

Sari sat there vacantly, unable to follow what was happening, and Xixu held his hand out for her. “I promised to show you around the capital, didn’t I?”

He was wearing white gloves. His hand should have been a familiar sight to her by now, but Sari stared all the same, reexamining it.

Was she in Irede right now, or the capital? In this moment, the boundary was indistinct. She let a quiet murmur slip.

“You...remembered?”

She knew she’d receive a severe dressing down about this later. But when she took his hand, the emotion that welled up within Sari was anticipation. For the first time, she was excited about what was to come.

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“I’ve been had.”

Allowing a servant into the parlor Sari and her visitor were occupying would have been careless.

That was why Vas had gone to prepare the tea himself, but upon returning and seeing that the room was empty, he clicked his tongue.

The only trace of the parlor’s former occupants was the similarly empty white envelope that had been left on the table. Under the addressee’s name, in Sari’s handwriting, were the hastily scribbled words: *I’ll be back before the storehouse reopening.*

Vas picked up the envelope with the king’s seal and crushed it in his hand. “A mere relative of the king thinks he can just sneak off with our princess? The nerve...”

Sari was sheltered and ignorant to the ways of the world. It would have been a trifle for a man of the aristocracy to cajole her into leaving with him. What was more, behind that man was the king, who was rumored to be a tricky schemer.

Vas would not allow the Werrilocia princess to become a pawn of the king.

He slammed the tray down on the table and turned around. As he stepped out into the hallway, he almost ran into his older sister, who had been passing by.

Fyra, recently returned from Marquess Garaq’s estate, looked surprised to see the anger on her brother’s face. “What’s wrong? Did something happen? I was just on my way to say hello to Everie.”

“Don’t bother.”

“What? She didn’t come?”

“She did, but she was taken away.”

“What?”

Ignoring his still-confused sister, Vas made to break out into a run. They couldn’t have gotten far. If he hurried, he could still catch them. However, before he could set out in earnest, Fyra grabbed him by the back of his collar, and his own momentum almost sent him crashing to the floor in agony.

“What was that for?!” he exclaimed.

“Oh, you know. I was just thinking I’d love to have an explanation.”

“The king’s half-brother took Everie, so I’m going to go catch him.”

“Do you think he’ll hurt her? And are you going to catch him dead, or alive? Or do you not care?”

“No, well...”

Given his temper, he certainly had no problem killing the man, but realistically, there were a few problems with that. Fyra, perhaps having deduced the gist of the situation from her brother’s sudden hesitancy, replaced her dubious expression with a faint smile—the very same one that Sari and Vas found so difficult to deal with. It made Fyra’s eyes look like those of a snake watching its prey.

Fyra brushed back her hair, which shared its ashen color with his, and kept smiling at him. “Then why not leave them be? We can save the punishment and making amends for after. Ahh, I can hardly wait.”

“...”

The longer he left Sari be, the messier this would all get. If he wanted to save her from his sister’s sadistic proclivities, he had to get to her first. Vas broke off his conversation with Fyra and once again broke out into a run down the hallway. Fyra called out from behind him, her tone relaxed and lazy.

“Everie will only hate you if you keep restricting her like that, you know.”

“I know,” he called back bitingly.

The words tasted bitter, the same taste that had accompanied him throughout his childhood, but he didn’t let that stop him.

2. Capital

Just as they turned a nearby corner after leaving the estate, a carriage pulled up in front of the gate.

Sari, who had been hurriedly pulled out of sight by Xixu, ducked her head back when she saw a beautiful woman with elegant gray hair alight from the carriage. “That was close...”

“Who is she?”

“My cousin. It’s a good thing she didn’t see me. It would’ve been dreadful.”

“Dreadful?”

Once Sari confirmed that Fyra had disappeared past the gate, she relaxed, looked up, and saw that the young man in his officer’s uniform was looking at her strangely.

“You’d be in for a dreadful time if she caught you too, Xixu,” she explained. “You’re her type.”

“I’m...not sure I understand.”

“If that ever happens, I’ll do my best to hold her back while you escape.” Sari clenched her fist, resolute, but the expression on her companion’s face was uncomprehending.

Xixu looked at her black dress. “First, we should get you a change of clothes. They could find us if we stopped in a store nearby, so we’ll make some distance. Can you walk?”

“I’ll be fine. All the running I’ve been doing lately has improved my stamina.”

The shadeslayer made a conflicted face when Sari told him that, but she didn’t comment on it. With Xixu leading the way, they turned onto a narrow street. They had yet to put much distance between themselves and the estate, but the scenery they passed by was all new to her, and her head—unveiled—was on a swivel as she took in their surroundings. Xixu didn’t chide her; he just kept walking, staying half a step ahead.

Sari reached her left hand out to a vine drooping down from a high wall, touching the crimson flowers that bloomed on it. Their pistils were such a bright yellow that they seemed to have soaked up the sunlight. She had never seen these flowers before. Although she wanted to pluck one, she pulled her hand back and continued after Xixu.

The constant procession of mansions and estates eventually made way for the much livelier scenery of lines of stores and streets filled with people in every variety of attire. To her immediate right, a white stone building sat beside a store constructed out of grimy wood. The hustle and bustle of Irede was just as animated as this place's, but while the former had an underlying atmosphere of unity, this was tumultuous and unorganized.

"This is wonderful," Sari said admiringly. "There are so many people. Is it because of the fete?"

"The preparations for the festivities are a part of it, but this area's always like this."

On one corner of the street, Sari saw a great wickerwork basket positively filled with small live birds, and immediately wanted to run over. Before she could, Xixu pointed out a nearby clothing store.

"Shall we check if they sell kimonos?"

"Oh, if they don't, I'm fine with dresses and such too."

"Really?"

"Mm-hmm."

As Irede was a town that had inherited the traditions of an ancient nation, its old-fashioned ambience was one of its unique characteristics. Thus, many of its residents dressed in kimonos. However, it wasn't as though there was any particular dress code one had to adhere to.

In contrast, the mainstream fashion of the capital—as well as other towns and cities throughout the country—consisted of dresses and gowns, suits and shirts, et cetera, a trend introduced roughly a century ago from the Country of the Open Sea. Therefore, while wearing a kimono would make her easily identifiable as a person of Irede, it would also make her stand out to any

pursuers. As Sari debated over which attire would be the safer choice, she entered the store.

The interior was dim and crowded with a vivid myriad of clothing, pressing in on the aisles from where they hung on the left and right.

There was a fragrant, woody smell in the air. By chance, Sari picked out a pastel violet dress, and she began to deliberate over it quite seriously. When Xixu saw how extremely short its hem was, he looked startled.

“Saridi... I think this one would be better.”

Xixu handed her a white dress with long sleeves. It was simple and, unlike the one Sari had chosen, its hem was long. In fact, it was a little too long for someone of her height. She took the dress and held it against herself, thinking, but when she saw the uncomfortable look in the young man’s eyes, she smiled.

“Okay. I’ll go change.”

Xixu’s reply came somewhat delayed. “Right...”

Sari informed the storekeeper in the back, and then stepped behind the cloth partition that marked the changing area. After undressing, she changed into the dress Xixu had selected for her. Once she’d confirmed her prior estimation that the hem was slightly too long, she called out to the waiting young man.

“Xixu, pick a sash for me.”

“A sash?”

“A temporary one is fine too, I just want to test it out.”

Evidently she’d gotten her intent across because, after a short wait, a light silk sash was thrown over the cloth partition.

It was a pale crimson and bore designs of the flowers she’d seen earlier. Sari stifled a giggle, wondering if he’d chosen it on purpose. She lifted the hem of her dress as she tied the almost see-through sash in place. It fluttered lightly behind her, like the spread wings of a butterfly.

She let down her hair as a finishing touch, and then walked out, holding the dress she’d changed out of.

“How do I look?” she asked, arms spread out wide.

Xixu simply nodded, the expression on his face as sour as always. Taking that as affirmation, Sari turned to the storekeeper and indicated the dress she’d originally been wearing.

“If I sell this to you, will it be enough?”

The storekeeper paused. “I’d have to give you change.”

“In that case, I’ll use that to buy some of those.” Sari pointed to a row of silver tins containing rouge. She picked one up, turned to face a plain, full-length mirror, and smiled sweetly.

※

The impression given by a woman’s face could be changed simply by applying a single type of cosmetic. It had been her cousin Fyra who had taught Sari that. Fyra, who was six years her senior, had not only taught her how to take care of her body—she also sent cases of cosmetics to Pale Moon each month, with detailed instructions.

Sari was usually quite perfunctory with her makeup, simply following Fyra’s instructions, but apparently, a lesson one had already learned wasn’t so easily forgotten. Wearing the rouge and cosmetic powder she’d bought, she once again admired the dazzling liveliness of the street outside. Next to her, Xixu focused on her side profile, incredulity in his eyes.

“How did you change so much...?”

“We’d be in trouble if I didn’t, right? Besides, I’m a person of Irede.”

She was wearing her makeup darker than usual, the shadows heavier by about a third. It gave her features both a quality of belonging to the night and a dignified elegance. The dark rouge on her delicate lips created just the slightest hint of allure.

Xixu looked at Sari and sighed lightly. “You look like a different person.” The makeup had made her look several years older.

“But it makes me seem more authentic, doesn’t it?”

When he reluctantly agreed, Sari grinned broadly and tugged on his arm.

“Then let’s go. Where to first?”

“Hmm. How about Blacksmith Street?”

“Okay!”

She had very little idea what kind of place that actually was, but anywhere and everywhere seemed fun to her at the moment, so she had no objections. Paying careful attention to not bounce around—she did this in Irede too—Sari stepped forward to join the flow of people.

Then, Xixu abruptly looked back and to the right. “Not good. They caught up with us.”

“Huh?”

She followed his gaze, standing on tiptoe, and caught sight of her cousin in the crowd, a menacing look on his face.

Vas was looking this way and that, surveying his surroundings, but when his eyes met hers, his expression grew stormier. He opened his mouth, no doubt to call her name, but swallowed it back down. Sari knew he couldn’t call her Everie right now. Instead, Vas pointed her out to the men around him and issued them instructions. The men, who she assumed were Werrilocia manservants, began pushing their way through the crowd toward her and Xixu.

Sari unconsciously placed her hand on her left arm, holding the bracelet underneath her sleeve. “Should we run?”

Or should we force our way through? went unasked. In response to her question, Xixu lifted her onto his shoulders. Sari’s eyes widened as she took in a view that was usually reserved for children.

“Um.”

“This will be faster. Don’t talk; you’ll bite your tongue.”

“But won’t we stand out too—”

Before she could finish, Xixu turned a nearby corner. He ran down the crooked, narrow alleyway at a pace so fast that it seemed as though he wasn’t carrying her at all. Since he’d been born and raised in the capital, she imagined he knew his way around it well. Sari watched the scenery go by, changing

rapidly before her eyes. She felt like shouting for joy.

Their pursuers were soon out of sight. After a short while of more running, Xixu let her down in a deserted back alley, and she looked up at him. He wasn't out of breath in the slightest.

"Should we try doing that again, the next time we chase a shade?" she asked.

After a brief pause, he said, "Too conspicuous."

Sari completely agreed.

※

Whether by luck or Xixu's skill at shaking off their pursuers, Vas didn't catch up with them again.

At first, they visited several places of Xixu's choosing, but eventually, he seemed to decide that his selections were entirely uninteresting. So, despite his unconcealed annoyance, he began taking her to the places the king had recommended in his letter. Xixu led her to a market full of flowers, a hideaway teahouse, antique stores, prestigious restaurants, and more, until they finally arrived in front of a standalone manor at sunset.

Sari's blue eyes blinked as she took in the smallish manor with no nameplate. "What is this place?"

"My home. My mother's, to be more accurate."

The young man walked past the gate with the ease of familiarity. Sari, who had been standing there blankly, hastened after him. When she reached him, she saw that he had opened the front door and was calling out to someone inside. A reply came quickly, and a woman wearing a full-length kitchen smock appeared in the doorway. She had black hair, which she had tied back, and her lack of makeup only emphasized her young appearance—it was difficult to tell whether she had reached her forties yet. Her refined features wore an expression of surprise as she looked at Xixu and Sari.

"My... It's rare for you to drop by. May I ask who your companion is?"

"A maiden who I owe much to," Xixu said. "She's visiting the capital, but certain circumstances mean she has nowhere to stay. Could she stay here?"

“Ah, my name is Sari. I beg your pardon for my sudden imposition.” Sari had been captivated by Xixu’s mother—the woman resembled her son in a way she couldn’t quite place—but when she returned to her senses, she gave a polite bow.

The woman giggled as though Sari had done something funny. “And I beg your pardon for the trouble my son is always causing you. Please, come in.”

After a short pause, Xixu asked, “Why is it a given that I cause her trouble?”

“Well, you’re not very adaptable, are you?”

“...”

The woman turned and went back inside, and Xixu followed after her, a pained look on his face. Sari was about to follow suit when suddenly, she turned back to the dusk outside. Puzzled, she looked around at the surrounding shadows, examining them intently.

“Was it just my imagination...?”

There was nothing outside the gate. Sari shook her head lightly, casting off her sense of discomfort.

Xixu’s mother, Liana, showed them to a parlor, but Sari, feeling restless at being treated like a guest, offered to help brew the tea. She was led to the kitchen, and what she saw there impressed her.

“It must have taken a lot of effort to collect so many,” she said admiringly.

The dozens of different tea leaves lined up in the cabinet amounted to a collection one wouldn’t ever expect of a private home. It was easily twice the size of Pale Moon’s.

“Not at all. I used to have good connections, and I still do.”

Smiling, Liana explained how she had used her son’s enrolment into the military academy as the impetus to leave her family home and purchase this one. As might be expected from someone who had once worked in the palace, she had a gentle bearing, but Sari could tell a steadfast confidence lay beneath. Liana held a pale hand out toward Sari, who was looking up at the cabinet.

“Could you hand me the tea? Pick any leaf you’d like.”

“Can I really pick?”

“Of course.”

Sari looked at the lined up jars, wavering briefly, but eventually picked one in the center, directly in front of her. When she brought it to Liana, the woman’s eyes widened for a moment before she smiled wryly.

“You didn’t have to match his preference, you know.”

“I like this one too.”

Liana must have seen through her improvised excuse, because she chuckled while brewing the tea. Sari found herself unable to settle down. Maybe it was because she was away from Irede, but she couldn’t seem to get comfortable. She knew she just had to act the same way as she did when receiving guests at Pale Moon, but it felt as though she kept stumbling over the fact that Liana was Xixu’s mother. It made her keenly aware of her own awkwardness.

Searching for some way to start a conversation, Sari brought up the young man who was absent from the kitchen. “May I ask what he was like as a child?”

“By all means. Although I’m afraid to tell you he hasn’t changed very much.”

“He hasn’t? So he’s always been like that?”

“Yes, though he smiled a lot more as a child, of course.”

“Huh...?”

She found it almost impossible to imagine Xixu’s smiling face. In fact, despite being the one who’d brought the topic up, Sari found it surreal to think that he’d ever even been a child.

She cocked her head to the side. “Um, when does he smile, usually...?”

“What kind of question is that?”

Sari jumped at the voice that had come from behind her. The young man who’d completely evaded her notice took the tea tray from his mother, who was stifling her laughter. As Sari followed alongside and slightly behind him, she peered up at his frowning face.

“I’d like to see your smile, Xixu.”

“What good would that do you?”

“I think it’d be exciting.”

“I don’t.”

His curt answer brooked no argument, and left Sari feeling disappointed. Liana, following behind them, laughed cheerfully.

“Then in exchange, I’ll tell you all kinds of things about him.”

“Please don’t...” Xixu said, sounding resigned.

Their conversation had an undercurrent of warmth that was unfamiliar to Sari, who had hardly ever talked to her own mother. She closed her eyes partly, feeling a quiet yearning. Xixu noticed, having turned to look at her, and his brows knit in a frown. He seemed unsure of what to say, but eventually settled on keeping it plain.

“I’ll show you around tomorrow as well.”

“Okay... Thank you.”

She wouldn’t be lonely again. Xixu’s words might have been simple, but his kindness made Sari happy all the same.

※

Although Xixu looked as though he was about to put a stop to the conversation between mother and maiden at dozens of different points, he only carried through with it on a few occasions—perhaps because he was being considerate of Sari.

She spent the entire time casting curiosity-filled, sidelong glances at his pained expression, and only retired from the parlor late into the night.

Sinking into the porcelain tub in her room’s en suite bathroom, Sari took a long, deep breath. She cupped her hands together and used the hot water to soak her face. The droplets that spilled through her fingers seemed to absorb her mental fatigue and take it with them. Sari looked down through the rippling water at her own pale body.

“My legs...feel a little cramped...”

She certainly had more stamina than she used to, but evidently, that still had its limits. Sari began carefully massaging her legs from the soles of her feet to her calves. Then, before long, her consciousness began to dim.

She was certain the water was hot, but all of a sudden, it went cold.

※

The moon in the sky was thin and sharp. The new moon was approaching. Xixu recalled that it would mark the night of the Werrilocia storehouse reopening. He had exited the manor, military sword in hand, and was walking toward the front gate, his footsteps silent. A person stood there with a grim look on their face, which made way for outright hostility as they caught sight of Xixu.

Vas, Sari's older cousin by two years, ignored making any greetings in favor of getting straight to the point. "Return her, if you would be so kind."

"She told me she'd only be confined to her room in the estate anyway. It should be fine as long as she makes it back in time to carry out her duties."

"That isn't the issue here," Vas said dismissively, as though Xixu's reply had been irrelevant. With one hand, he drew forth a slender rapier. It was because Xixu had noticed it at the man's waist earlier that he'd brought his own sword. However, Vas had yet to show any signs that he would strike with his weapon.

Moonlight fell upon the pair as they stared each other down. Vas narrowed his left eye and examined Xixu from head to toe.

"I know what kind of person you are. However...I still must request that you refrain from making off with her as you have."

"She agreed to come."

"This is a family matter. You have no right to interfere."

"Oh, but he does."

The voice pierced through the night. Xixu, recognizing who it belonged to, looked back at the manor, startled. Silver hair gave off a glossy luster beneath the pale light. A girl in her nightclothes smiled daintily at the two men.

The sight of her thin clothing—through which the outline of her body could be

seen—and pale, bare feet seemed to shock Vas into silence, but he eventually managed to find his words, blunt as they were.

“You shouldn’t be outside dressed like—”

“Shut up.”

Upon hearing the curt rejection, Xixu realized who the girl was, and it made him want to cradle his head in his hands.

Meanwhile, Sari stepped up next to him, crossing the flagstones with her bare feet. Her pale arms were bare from the shoulders, and she wrapped them around Xixu’s right arm. Though she was smiling sweetly, her blue eyes were glaring at Vas.

“He belongs to me. Should he wish to interfere in my affairs, you are to let him do so.”

“E-Even so—”

“If you understand, then leave. Remember your place.”

Sari shooed Vas away with her right hand. A profound grimace crossed the young man’s face, but it soon reassumed its emotionless mask. He glanced down at his rapier.

“That...is a concern I should be posing to you. Do you remember your position, and your duty?”

“Naturally. That is why I am with him.”

She snuggled against Xixu, and he suddenly felt very fatigued.

However, Vas seemed to grasp the point she was making too, at least. His expression remained unchanging, but there was the brief, barely audible sound of grinding teeth. After the display of irritation—which was quite fitting for his age—Vas turned on his heel.

“Very well. Please try to be back before the reopening.”

Vas disappeared into the darkness of the night, his back straight and head high all the while as he went. Xixu, who was impressed by his pride and sympathetic to his plight, looked down at the girl at his side as the silence

returned.

The air about her was different than usual. The god threw him an impish look.

“Today was rather fun, you know,” Saridi said. Then, she smiled happily.

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Wearing Xixu’s jacket—he had put it on her—and looking quite pleased, the girl plucked a piece of konpeito and ate it. Right beside the candy on the table was a drinking cup filled with clear rice wine.

Evidently, even without music, sweets and fine drink were enough to ward off trouble for the time being. Xixu, who had brought her to his room because she refused to separate from him, held back a sigh as he watched her. Sari was sitting cross-legged on a plain wooden chair, and she reached out and poked at a teacup on the table.

“Not going to drink?”

“No...I will.”

The tea had cooled, but it was now steaming again, no doubt because of her. In fact, it had likely exceeded the proper temperature. Still, knowing things with the god would only get more difficult down the line if he let her consideration go to waste now, Xixu obediently picked up the warming teacup.

He swallowed down the hot tea and then returned his gaze to her face, which was lit by a small lamp. “Is she asleep?”

“You’ve had this misunderstanding for a while now. I don’t have two different personalities, you know.”

“But yours and Saridi’s are far too different,” he said frankly.

Sari frowned, then pointed a slender finger at Xixu from within a baggy sleeve. “Do you adopt the same bearing toward everybody you meet, then? Of course you don’t. This is equivalent to that concept. Just as one’s personality changes depending on their partner, the personality I exhibit outwardly differs depending on which layer of my consciousness I am on.”

“I think I see, but I also don’t. Is it similar to how a person’s behavior changes if they’re drunk?”

“Somewhat, but your example is irritating.”

Sari stood up forcefully and made to place herself in Xixu’s lap. He reflexively tried to stop her, but she had already gotten so close that he had no idea where to put his hands. She knelt there and looked down at him and his lack of resistance, looking as though she were enjoying herself.

“In the first place, it’s your fault my consciousness is switching like this.”

“I don’t remember doing anything to cause that...”

“It’s *because* you’re not doing anything, you dunce. Rightfully, the union between my self who was raised amongst humans and my true, divine self should occur at the acceptance of offerings. That is how the equilibrium is maintained. Yet, despite my divine self being roused by the recent disturbance, you have not become my offering, leaving me betwixt and between.”

“I-I...”

When she put it like that, a part of him almost felt as though it was his fault. Still, another part of him denied it.

Whatever the case, the reality was that the god who stood above Irede had manifested. There was no telling what would happen if her anger was provoked. She was both the ruler of the town and a being that had the potential to become a calamity for humankind.

Xixu was completely at his wits’ end. Sari looked at him pityingly.

“Oh, relax. Due to an old contract, I am unable to bring much power to bear against humans. That my very being is in harmony with a human is testimony to that. If I am ever to break the contract, it will also mean abandoning the world of man. I wouldn’t do such a thing.”

“All right, but...no, wait.” Xixu sighed deeply. “That doesn’t change the fact that I’m troubling her.”

Sari smiled abruptly. “It’s fine. It is not my intention to trouble you either. I’ll manage my own reconciliation with myself. It will take time, however, so do be lenient with me.”

“Very well. I’m sorry for the additional burden...”

“Why are you apologizing for that?” Sari placed her hands atop Xixu’s head and rested her chin on them. Then, in a tone that sounded as though she’d just remembered something, she said, “Oh, right. Something’s here. It’s been following us ever since you were showing me around the city. And I don’t mean that dullard from my family.”

“What...?” He’d noticed Vas arriving, but nobody else.

Who would be able to evade his senses? He began to extricate himself from Sari, meaning to look out the window, but she turned around and leaned back against him, smiling in satisfaction and closing her eyes.

“Having said that, I’ve already put up a boundary, so it won’t be able to enter. Let’s save the bother of dealing with it for tomorrow. I’m sleepy. Take me to my bedroom.”

Her piece finished, the god’s breathing soon relaxed into the light rise and fall of sleep. Xixu watched her silently for a while, but when he saw that she was beginning to shiver slightly, he readjusted his jacket around her slender form.

3. Scar

The second day of her stay at Xixu's mother's house was spent in a constant blur of sightseeing, going from one of the king's recommended destinations to the next.

Sari, wearing a kimono she had borrowed from Liana, was guided by Xixu to an old wholesaler's district.

They made their way to a cramped alleyway lined with stores on both sides, the interiors of which were densely crowded with a medley of tools and materials. This place was well-trodden ground for the merchants of the capital, and many of the shoppers who came here were craftsmen and apprentices.

As Sari took in the surroundings, head turning this way and that, Xixu pulled her by the arm out of the way of other pedestrians. There were signs displaying the names of businesses and their respective commodities strung up across the alleyway between the upper levels of the rows of stores with cords of rope and cloth. Though foot traffic was low, there was a liveliness to the scenery that made Sari speak up in admiration.

"This place is wonderful. It's like a different country."

"You think so? I would've thought Irede would seem far more foreign."

"Mmm, maybe I'm just too used to it there."

The look in her eyes was one you'd expect from a girl of her age who'd come to a place where everything she saw was fresh and new. Sari's gaze alighted on a store with nothing but unglazed pottery on display.

"Can we go inside and take a look?"

"Go right ahead, but I wouldn't recommend buying anything."

"Um, okay. I didn't bring any money anyway."

"No, I'd pay for you. It's just that we'd have to carry it around. Anything small is fine, but I don't think pottery would be a good idea, especially considering it could break."

The advice was given with extreme seriousness—a perfect display of his personality. Sari pressed her lips together tightly, holding back a laugh.

Perhaps misreading that as her sulking, Xixu quickly added, “If there’s anything you need for tomorrow’s soirée, we can use this chance to buy it.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. I’ll need something to wear.”

“We should be able to find something for you two streets ahead. This one...can’t be much more interesting to you than the lane of workshops we went to yesterday.”

Though he said that, Sari knew he must have brought her here because it had been in the king’s letter.

“It’s all been fun,” she said. “Thank you.”

“As long as you’re enjoying yourself...”

Suddenly, Xixu seemed to catch notice of something, and pulled her close to his chest.

“Two in front, four behind,” he whispered to her. “They’re armed.”

“What? Is it Vas?”

“No. Some other group.”

Sari looked ahead, down the street. There was a man standing under the eaves of an ironmonger’s, and another man opposite him, leaning against a post and examining a notebook. Both were dressed in the garb of craftsmen, but the looks in their eyes were not those of ordinary citizens. Sari could tell the difference: due to the nature of her profession, she observed people often.

“Who do you think they are?” she asked.

“The type that’s a nuisance to deal with. I’ll get this over with quickly.”

Xixu pulled Sari around a nearby corner. The winding, narrow lane was barely wide enough for a single person, and, half-jogging and half-carried by Xixu, she followed it until she was through to the other side. The alley they emerged onto was dark and unpopulated, lined only with the back entrances of stores. Xixu pointed to a spot by a wall a short distance away.

“Wait there for me.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

Just as Sari gave her reply and stepped away, the first man she’d seen earlier appeared at the entrance of the lane they’d run down.

The man who looked like a craftsman pulled out a dagger with a thick blade. It was a slightly curved weapon favored by the people in the east of the country, and it had a long history of being used for murder. The man must have chased after them after they’d turned off the street. He leered menacingly as he moved forward to step out of the lane—and then stiffened, frozen in place. Xixu’s blade was pointed at his throat.

“Who are you? Why are you pursuing us?”

The man’s face flushed crimson at the terse challenge. However, before any time could pass, the sound of another person’s footsteps could be heard coming down the lane. Perhaps encouraged by the arrival of his allies, the craftsman lookalike left the question unanswered and dropped low. He swung his dagger, its blade aimed at Xixu’s leg—

And the very next moment, his arm, still clutching the dagger, fell to the ground.

The crouching man’s screams filled the gap he’d just vacated. Xixu kicked him in the temple with his left foot, knocking him out, and aimed his military sword at the second oncomer.

The next man said nothing, simply drawing a wakizashi—a single-edged shortsword—and slashing with it. However, Xixu blocked the silent strike, looking entirely unfazed. The sound of clashing blades echoed cleanly throughout the empty alleyway.

Sari, standing at a distance, hardly dared to breathe as she watched the shadeslayer fight. But when she saw three more men appear behind him, she sprang up.

“Xixu! Behind you!”

She had faith in his abilities, but she still didn’t know if he could handle so

many opponents at once. Sari hesitated, then firmed her resolve and pointed her right hand toward the newcomers. She concentrated, intending to unleash her power at them.

If she could only create the slightest opening, it would be enough.

But before she could, her field of vision suddenly went dark. A large hand had come from behind her and smothered her face. She opened her mouth to call out, but something was stuffed into it. A blindfold of rotten-smelling cloth was quickly pulled over her eyes. Finally, unknown hands lifted her light body up.

“Saridi!”

Xixu’s voice was getting further away. Blinded, Sari writhed in nausea as she was violently jolted up and down, back and forth. Her foot struck a wall—had they turned a corner? Her ornate hairpin scuffed audibly against the cloth of her blindfold.

The process repeated several times before she was dumped unceremoniously onto the hard ground.

Her limbs now free, Sari tore away the blindfold and the cloth that had been stuffed into her mouth.

“Where...?”

She looked up, head still swimming, and found that she was in a shadowy, dead-end alley that she didn’t recognize. She was propping herself up with her arms, her clothes were in disarray, and three men were looking down at her. One of them—the one Sari thought had carried her—pointed a bony, tawny-skinned finger at her.

“That’s a fine kimono. It’ll sell for a lot.”

“Which brothel d’you think she’s from? Don’t see hair that color every day.”

“Like I’d know. Definitely a prostitute though. And with those looks, an expensive one. Reckon only nobles could afford her.”

Sari’s thoughts were in a jumble, but as the trio evaluated her, she did her best to think. The men who’d attacked Xixu must have had more companions waiting. She backed off along the ground and asked a question.

“Who are you?”

Her voice had come out fragile, but not shaky. Nevertheless, it must have sounded terrified to the men. There was cruelty in their smiles. The man in front reached out to Sari.

“Well, whatever. Let’s just take her where she needs to go. Ah, but we’ll be keeping the kimono and sash, of course.”

“What...?”

The man’s grimy fingers hooked the collar of her kimono. Sari reflexively shook him off, but he only laughed mockingly at her in return. A chill ran down her spine. Somehow, she managed to scramble away from the man’s arms, and she placed her hands on the ground to try and push herself onto her feet. At that moment, she heard a brief sigh.

“Idiot,” someone spat.

It hadn’t been any of the three men. The voice was biting, but terribly nostalgic. Sari’s blue eyes widened as she saw its owner, standing behind her abductors.

“Eid...”

A right eye concealed by an eyepatch, a kimono the color of faded ink, and a long, slender katana. The blond man standing there was once a shadeslayer, but he had betrayed her and left Irede.

※

“What? That boy became a shadeslayer?”

That had been what the nine-year-old Sari had mumbled after her grandmother had told her the news. He had been eighteen. Later on, she would reflect that “boy” wasn’t an appropriate description, given his age. But to Sari, he was the boy who’d led her by the hand when she’d been lost—the person who’d show up without warning at Pale Moon’s gate from time to time to play with her.

Consequently, her first reaction to hearing that he’d become a shadeslayer was delight. She was looking forward to being able to work with him when she

became the maiden.

However, her grandmother's reply had been bittersweet.

"He's dangerous. You must either manage him well, or distance yourself from him."

"Dangerous? What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly that. If you cannot love him, then you must cut him off. That's the kind of man he is."

Her smiling grandmother's words had been backed by the experience of age, but Sari had not understood them. Instead, she had spent the next seven years with him, up until the point he was a shadeslayer no longer.

The last memory she had of him was the desperation on his face, his hand stretched out toward her as she fell into the pit.

She didn't remember what happened afterward. It was all black. By the time she'd awoken, he was already gone from Irede.

As such, she'd had to hear everything secondhand. Like that he'd lost his left eye.

Even so, to Sari, it seemed as though he hadn't changed at all.

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The one-eyed man examined the three thugs with open irritation.



One of the trio snarled, baring yellow teeth, and called out to the sudden newcomer, tone menacing.

“And who do you think you are, wearing a getup like that?”

“Are you the ones who have been abducting courtesans lately?”

Eid’s voice was like ice, and it caused the mood between the three men to shift dramatically. They took out their weapons and moved to surround him. The overlapping sounds of their shoes scraping against the gravel brought Sari back to her senses.

“E-Eid?”

“Don’t get in my way.”

She hurriedly clambered to her feet and created some distance. Sari knew where she should stand—it was an unspoken agreement between her and the man she’d known for so long. Back when they had been maiden and shadeslayer, she’d known then too.

Seventeen paces away from where he stood with his sword drawn. It used to be that she’d counted the distance from his back.

Now Sari stood opposite him, and she studied his face. It looked colder than before.

Eid ignored her and faced the men. “Where did you take the other courtesans?”

“Beats me. I heard the brothels have been hiring bodyguards. You one of ’em?”

The question, laced with hostility and just a touch of wariness, had come from the man closest to Eid.

The reply was the white flash of a blade. The cut Eid’s sword made through the air was audible. It completed its arc faster than the eye could see. Then time caught up, and blood spurted from the man’s neck.

The man looked down, dumbfounded at the rapidly growing bloodstain on his torso. With his throat cut, he had not even the voice to cry out. He simply

lurched, once, and then crumpled to the ground of the alley.

The remaining two, seeing their companion go down without a fight, looked to be on the brink of outright panic. The desire to escape was writ clearly on their faces, and they readied their respective weapons at Eid.

“B-Bastard! You think you can just—”

“Where did you take the women you abducted?”

He repeated the question in exactly the same tone as before. For Eid, fighting men like these was beneath him. Sari, knowing this, absentmindedly wondered what he was going to do with the corpses.

In that brief span of time, another man went down. Not even a dozen seconds had passed before the last one had his weapon knocked out of his hand and the point of a sword at his throat.

The man who had carried Sari here gasped like a landed fish. “I-I don’t know where the prostitutes were taken. It wasn’t us, I swear.”

“Then why did you take *her*?”

“We got paid to. Earlier today. It was a guy I’d never seen in this area before. I don’t know him.”

“What did he tell you to do with her?”

“Just to deliver her. To behind Turnback Corner.”

“I see.”

The man’s expression slackened in relief when Eid nodded, and it stayed that way even as the sword flashed out. Blood sprayed back onto a faded ink kimono. Sari watched in a daze as the man went down, rent from shoulder to hip.

Little by little, the smell of blood grew stronger—it reminded Sari of the scent of rusted metal. Eid wiped his sword and returned it to its scabbard. His single eye caught Sari.

“Idiot. Why are you in the capital?”

“‘Why’...? I was visiting the estate, so...”

“Ah.”

That seemed to be enough to remind the Irede-born man of the times the maiden would leave town. A momentary silence fell over the corpse-strewn dead-end alley.

Still half in a daze, Sari examined the one-eyed man. She’d thought about what she would say if she ever met him again. But now that she was looking at him, she didn’t know what words would be right. It almost felt as though she were dreaming. Still, Sari came back to her senses and bowed to him.

“Um, thank you.”

Eid narrowed his eye at her, not saying a thing. The old him would have smiled in delight and pulled her close, putting on airs and expecting a reward. But his current cold demeanor made Sari realize that his old behaviors had all been an act. Her distant childhood memories ached in her heart.

Yet, this was no time to give herself over to sentimentality. Sari brushed the grit off the bottom of her kimono.

“I’m sorry. I’d like to have a proper talk, but I have to get back as soon as I can.”

“To where?”

“Xixu was attacked, and—”

Sari set off into a light run as she talked, stepping around the corpses, but Eid’s hand reached out and caught her arm. She stopped reflexively. He gazed down at her with an unrecognizable look in his eyes.

“Did he bring you here?”

“He didn’t really *bring* me... He was showing me around the capital. Then before we knew it, we were being followed.”

“How many is he dealing with?”

“Five or six people, I think.”

How much time had passed? She felt as though it had only been a few minutes, but she couldn’t be sure. She wanted to get back as soon as she could,

but she didn't know the way. Eid seemed to notice her impatience.

"Six men are hardly a threat to him," he said, sounding exasperated. "You'd only make things more difficult if you went back."

"Huh? But..."

"You should focus on doing something about your own ignorance first. What kind of idiot walks around a place like this dressed like that?"

"Dressed like...? Is something wrong with how I'm dressed?"

"This isn't Irede. If a high-class courtesan walks around in back alleys unprotected then she'll be robbed of all her possessions and murdered. Or was it that he was showing you off without knowing how things work in the rougher parts of the city?"

His glare rooted her to the spot. Sari swallowed, immediately shaking her head, but that was all she could do.

In some ways, Xixu was just as ignorant of the ways of the world as she was. He was uncomfortable around courtesans, to begin with, so how could he have street-level knowledge about them? If anyone was to blame here, it was her and her own carelessness.

Before Sari could go on to explain that, however, Eid interrupted her by hauling her by the arm, almost causing her to fall.

Ignoring her staggering, he began walking toward the exit of the dead-end alley. Sari broke into a trot to keep up as he pulled her along, and turned her head to look back.

"E-Eid, can you really just leave the bodies there?"

"Around here, nobody cares about the deaths of a few thugs. More importantly, their employer's still out there."

Eid didn't even look at Sari as he turned the corner. Since she had been brought here blindfolded—on top of not knowing the lay of the city to begin with—she had no idea where she was. She could guess where Eid was going, though—he was trying to catch whoever had employed her abductors.

As Eid pulled her briskly through a dizzying series of alleys and lanes, Sari

somehow managed to catch her breath enough to speak, though her words came out disjointed between gulps of air.

“Eid...are you...living in...the capital now?”

He didn’t reply. His hold on her arm reminded Sari of what had happened in that dark, underground room. A tightness rose gradually into her throat, making it hard to breathe, and it wasn’t because she was running. She looked up at the tall man’s profile.

“You said courtesans are being abducted, right?”

“It’s got nothing to do with you. Go back to Irede. The sooner the better.”

“But, Eid...”

She wasn’t sure what she wanted to say.

Eventually, she decided to make some kind of case for herself anyway, but before she could, he came to a dead stop before a corner and silently pressed her against the wall. He did the same, hiding himself and leaning out to survey what lay ahead. When Sari noticed he was holding his breath, she did the same. She looked at the large hand against her shoulder. At the edge of her downcast gaze, an emotion that was neither impatience nor nostalgia quietly lapped at her feet. She heard him click his tongue.

“Must’ve run already.”

Evidently, his quarry was gone. When his hand let go of her, Sari took an unnoticeable breath. Then, she looked up and saw that Eid was staring down at her, motionless.

His intense, straightforward gaze hadn’t changed in the slightest from how it had used to be. If there was ever a time for her to say something, then perhaps it was now. Spurred by that thought, Sari grabbed the sleeve of his kimono.

“Eid. I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know.”

She just knew she wanted to apologize. It felt as though the warmth of a time

gone by still remained in her hand. Sari cast her eyes about, unsure where to look.

“I...”

Not enough time had passed for her next words to gain form. She still needed a little more. Sari was dimly aware of this, but she also wasn’t sure the two of them would ever get another chance.

As she gripped tightly on his sleeve, Eid looked down at her, expressionless. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Huh?”

He reached for her with his free hand. Sari reflexively tried to lean back, but the wall at her back prevented her from doing so. Eid’s finger began to trace firmly over her eyelids. The color of her eyeshadow gradually stained his skin.

The undisciplined yet somehow gentle way his hand touched her brought childhood memories to mind. He’d wiped her face like this then too, after they’d played together in the mud.

The young boy’s face had been dirtier than hers, but he’d still shown more care for the girl who was smaller than him.

It was a memory of a past that could no longer be returned to. Sari, no longer a child, had the bittersweet feeling that she’d lost something precious.

His finger swept across her smooth cheeks as it removed her makeup, and finally, his thumb, smelling faintly of blood, rubbed the rouge from her lips. A shiver ran down Sari’s back at the touch, and she looked up at him.

“Eid?”

“Don’t play at being a courtesan, Sari.”

His left eye stared at her piercingly. The tinge of pain within his gaze made it look far closer to how his eyes had been as a boy, rather than when he’d been a shadeslayer.

His words sank through Sari’s heart, down to the very bottom...bringing with it the touch of something cold. She realized they had always meant to be torn apart after all.

Sari shifted her gaze to his rouge-stained finger. The red color, more captivating than blood, was an idea—it represented a woman who had chosen the night as her place to stand.

“Eid. I *am* a courtesan.”

No matter who would deny that, it was true to her. The maidens of Pale Moon had the longest history of any courtesans of the town, and they would receive a man in accordance with the old contract from the age of myth. Thus, their blood and duty would pass on to their inheritors. As long as humanity needed them, this would continue on evermore.

So, because of his hatred for her town, it was clear to her that all the paths they could have taken still would have led them here.

Sari released the grasp her fingers had on his sleeve. When she looked up, she saw that he was scowling at her, irritation and disdain in his eye. It was exactly how he’d looked at her the last time their beliefs had clashed, and she stood her ground and matched his gaze. Searching for words to say, Sari began to open her mouth, but a voice that resembled cool water cut in from the side.

“Please leave it at that, if you would be so kind.”

“Vas...?” she asked. “Why are you here?”

“I’d be remiss in my duties if I could not at least track you.”

The young man who appeared from around the corner looked somewhat worn-out, but his stride was steady. He stepped up to Sari and pulled her behind himself by her arm.

By all rights, her cousin would never reveal the connection between “Saridi” and the Werrilocia family. That he was attempting to protect Sari right now caught her entirely off guard. She wanted to ask if he should really be doing this, but the back he’d turned to her brooked no interference.

Vas politely bowed to Eid. “I thank you for watching out for her. We will commit the appropriate supervision to ensure nothing like this happens again.”

Eid narrowed his left eye in annoyance at Vas’s unmistakable noble demeanor. Sari saw the danger in his gaze and tensed up at the thought of the

pair coming into conflict.

The old Eid would never have backed down easily at a time like this. But all he did was glance at Sari's paling face, then turn on his heel without a word. The sound of his feet on the gravel gradually faded away. When he was out of sight, Vas finally turned back to her.

"*What* are you doing?"

"I'm sorry..."

"Come. There's a carriage waiting for us nearby."

"Huh?"

"There's no need to make that face. I've no intention of taking you back to the estate. He's unharmed too, incidentally. We'll meet with him later."

As he spoke, Vas produced forth a black veil. If she was going to be riding in the carriage he'd arranged for, she had to conceal her face. Sari obediently took the veil and donned it.

The view through it was one she was familiar with—a world cast in shadow. She took a single glance back at the empty alleyway, and then set off after her cousin.

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"Spare him no more compassion than he deserves. Else you'll find it coming back to bite you." The words spoken in the carriage, headed to a destination unknown to her, were neither scornful nor disparaging, just quiet.

Sari raised her gaze from her lap to her cousin sitting opposite her. She grasped his meaning at once. Vas glanced at her briefly, then returned to looking through the silk-curtained window.

"I know he was your childhood friend. And that you still care for him. But that does not mean what he did can be forgiven...and a person's nature does not change easily."

In her cousin's warning, Sari heard the echoes of her deceased grandmother's words. She wondered if her grandmother had seen through Eid way back then.

Sari had always been right there with him, yet she'd never known his true self. She pressed a hand to her eyes over her veil. It wasn't that she was going to cry; she just wanted a touch of support.

There was a heaviness in her chest. Her nails, painted light pink, looked to her like withered flower petals.

"Everie."

"I know."

Sari couldn't brush her cousin's intrusion aside, because this wasn't an issue of Irede. It was hers, as an individual. In any case, the maiden of Irede could never forgive Eid and what he'd done.

She could not falter. It was naught but passing sentimentality. That was what those around her would say. Sari cast off her dull, stagnating thoughts and lowered her hand from her face.

It was fine now. Her head had cooled.

"Vas, won't it be problematic that you came to pick me up directly? Eid knows I'm the maiden of Irede."

"It's of no concern. I'll conjure up some excuse or other. That our family was entrusted with your supervision, for example. If you care about such things, you should have returned home with me last night."

"Last night?"

Sari tilted her head, but he looked at her as though what she'd said confused him. Just then, however, the carriage turned a corner, and they both kept their mouths shut as it jolted.

The curtains on the windows all but prevented her from seeing outside, but even if they weren't there, Sari did not know the city well enough to even begin guessing at where they were going. She wavered over whether she should ask, but Vas spoke first.

"Besides, considering our destination, it would be problematic if I *didn't* escort you."

He looked to be in a truly ill temper as he spoke. Where in the capital would

she require his escort to go? Sari, clueless and wide-eyed, blinked at him.

“Um, where are we going?”

“The royal palace. We’re almost there already.”

She paused. “What?”

She turned to stare out of the window. Eventually, she made out that the carriage had entered the back gate of the palace. Nobody attempted to stop them—had they been informed in advance? When she and Vas alighted from the carriage, a handmaid guided them to a room in the inner part of the palace.

Sari’s eyes widened when she took in the room’s contents. “What’s all this?”

“I imagine they mean for you to change,” Vas replied.

The room’s elegant furnishings unified it to a consistent theme, and in the center stood a clothes stand from which hung dozens of differing garments. They mainly consisted of gowns and kimonos, all for women, and looked to be a match for her height.

She examined a pale blue gown hanging at the very front. Then, she looked at her own dirtied palms.

“I suppose I am a bit of a mess.”

Her kimono wasn’t in terrible disarray, but it was certainly grubby in places. She would need to clean and mend it at the nearest opportunity. What was more, her makeup had all but been removed too. Recognizing that she was in no shape to be making appearances, Sari let loose a soft groan.

“What a bother...”

“If there’s anything you need, I’ll have my sister bring it for you.”

“It’s okay. I’ll manage.”

Her refusal had been half out of reflex. She had no idea what Fyra would do to her if she called her over looking like this. Sari walked over to the clothes stand, deciding to start with choosing her outfit. As she studied the hanging garments, taking care not to touch them with her dirtied hands, there came a knock at the door. Vas, who was standing near it, responded, and it opened silently from the

other side.

Sari sprang up when she saw the young man enter. “Xixu! Are you okay?!”

“I should be asking that of you. I’m sorry.”

Xixu, still wearing his military sword, visibly slackened in relief when he saw her. Then, guilt crept onto his elegant features. When he noticed the dirt on her kimono as she ran up to him, his expression grew even more pained.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine,” Sari said. “I’m sorry too. I was stupid.”

She removed her black veil. There was nobody in the room she needed to hide her face from. She had also done it to show that she was unharmed, but Xixu looked doubtful when he saw that her makeup had been forcefully wiped off.

“Saridi?”

“I’m fine, really. If I’m going to be changing anyway, I thought I’d redo my makeup, so...”

Sari hid her dirtied palms within her veil. She truly hadn’t been harmed, so she didn’t want him to worry too much. Even as she thought that, however, Sari exhaled hotly, feeling relieved to a degree that puzzled even herself. She wanted to lean into Xixu’s chest, even if only for a moment. It wasn’t that she was tired and wanted to be pampered. It was simply that, whenever she was with him, she felt as though she could return to being herself as the maiden of Irede. Not the ignorant child of her past, nor the head of her family, confined to her estate. Her self that was truly *her.*

Sari gripped her thin veil tightly. She closed her eyes and let herself feel the young man’s presence.

Then, she put her emotions in order and smiled up at his concerned expression.

“Xixu. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Being here for me. I’m happy.”

Her unadorned gratitude seemed to render him speechless, but Sari couldn’t quite tell why.

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According to the combined stories of Xixu and Vas, Sari had been summoned to the royal palace by the king.

She'd been surprised when they'd told her, but after further consideration, she realized the Werrilocias wouldn't have escorted her here if it had been for anyone else. What was more, the king—who was famed for his sharp mind—had apparently already known that the proprietress of Pale Moon and the head of the Werrilocia family were the same person before Xixu's report. Vas had been unhappy to hear that, asking where the information had leaked from, but Xixu explained that the king's maiden had been the source.

"She has the supernatural capabilities of both foresight and farsight. Little escapes her notice. Then again, I believe Irede *is* more difficult for her to observe than other places."

"Is that because of me?" Sari asked.

"Probably."

Was *that* why the king had expressly dispatched Xixu? Sari was ignorant as to how the powers of regular maidens worked, but perhaps it was like tossing a torch into a cloud of fog.

Satisfied with her own explanation, she looked down and once again examined her appearance. "How should I dress for my audience then? Did he summon me as the maiden? Or as the proprietress?"

Depending on the answer, her choice of attire and makeup would differ accordingly. Xixu answered her question without hesitation.

"He said he wished to meet 'you.'"

"Me?"

"Yes."

Sari took that to mean he didn't want to meet her in any of her official capacities, but just as her. Vas, who had so far stayed silent, ignored her as she contemplated and casually raised his hand.

"We would appreciate it if such information were kept strictly confidential."

“I’m well aware,” Xixu replied.

“Also, please arrange for a bath to be readied. We cannot let her go before His Majesty having only made impromptu preparations.”

“Understood.”

As she listened to them briskly make arrangements, Sari looked back at the array of clothing.

How should she present herself before the king if he wanted to meet *her*? It didn’t take her long to decide. Sari beckoned to get her cousin’s attention.

“Vas, I think I do want something from the estate after all.”

“Yes?”

It was something she definitely needed, even if it came packaged with a chastising from Fyra. After Sari finished giving him a brief set of instructions, she looked back down at her dirtied hands.

“I’m hungry...” she grumbled quietly.

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The bathroom had blue ceramic tiles covering the walls, ceiling, and floor. Thick white steam hung in the air, condensing into large droplets across every surface. From somewhere, she could hear the sound of rushing water. In the center of the floor, there was a square cavity large enough to fit three people with ease, filled with clear, hot water.

A number of large basins had been placed around the edges, their contents having been emptied into the bath, and they rang pleasantly as they caught the water dripping from the ceiling. The bathroom made use of an extravagant amount of water, and judging from the way it kept in the steam—an architectural choice that was rare in this country—its construction had likely been influenced by somebody’s specific tastes.

Such were Sari’s thoughts as she sat naked atop a ceramic stool, gritting her teeth and trying to bear the pain. Her back was being scrubbed quite forcefully with a cloth. Feeling the stinging on her skin, she exhaled softly.

The hands scrubbing her back stopped abruptly, though it didn’t seem to be

out of displeasure.

“Have you been taking care of yourself properly?” The voice asking the mild question belonged to a woman. Her tone was both gentle and beautiful, but also reminiscent of poisonous thorns.

Sari kept her own voice as calm as she could as she replied to her cousin. “Yes, just like you told me.”

“Indeed? So you’re saying you *weren’t* less than thorough with your back just because it’s hard to reach? I can tell when you’ve cut corners, you know.”

The coarse cloth resumed its vigorous scrubbing against her skin, which felt as though it was already raw.

The pain was numbing, like pins and needles, and Sari almost gave a yelp before managing to swallow it down.

There was a lot she wanted to say, but since this scrubbing was also serving to chastise her, complaining would only make matters worse. Vas had warned his sister to be brief, as there wasn’t much time, but Fyra had never been the type of person to hold back just because somebody had told her to.

Sari eased in relief when the cloth finally left her back, only to shriek when she was abruptly splashed with cold water.

“Hyah!”

“Hmm? Is something wrong? I need to rub in the perfumed oil, so do stay still, won’t you?”

“O-Okay...”

There were still her arms and legs to go. She couldn’t let this exhaust her before her audience with the king. Sari took a deep breath and straightened her back. A shiver ran down it as she felt her cousin’s fingers begin rubbing in the oil.

Fyra was a scary woman in many ways, but when it came to matters such as these, she was an expert.

The woman, who was dressed in bathing attire as she assisted Sari with her bath, suddenly smiled. “By the way, that shadeslayer... His face is quite pretty.”

"..."

Here it is, Sari thought, bracing herself. She'd suspected that Xixu was Fyra's type. Still, she had no intention of just offering him up for the slaughter. Sari consciously kept her tone indifferent as she replied.

"I suppose it is. Be that as it may, it would be problematic for me if you overly involved yourself with a person of Irede."

"If anything, he's a person of the capital, no? Royalty, and an officer directly under the king."

"He is a shadeslayer."

"Yours?"

"*Irede's.*"

Therefore, any Werrilocia meddling would be unwelcome. However, Fyra just giggled at Sari's warning.

"Whether my involvement is problematic or not is something for him to decide."

"It would also be problematic if one of my relatives made a scandal of herself."

Fyra's arms slid around Sari from behind. Her right hand, still glistening with oil, held her throat, while her left caressed her slender stomach. The arms coiled around Sari made her feel as though she'd been doused in cold water again. Fyra breathed against the back of her neck.

"Oh, don't be silly, Everie. Scandal? I'm not going to leave the family. I just want to have a little fun."

A few moments passed before Sari gave her response. "I am fulfilling the duties required of me."

"That's true. For you."

Left unsaid was the matter of her mother, who *had* left the family. Sari didn't bother to hide her sigh, pushed Fyra's arms away, and turned around on the stool.

The two blood relatives faced each other, Fyra smiling faintly, and Sari not smiling at all.

The young proprietress presented her graceful limbs to her cousin. “Then fulfill your own duties. If you are truly too preoccupied with other people’s affairs, however, I’ll do them myself.”

“Oh my. Perish the thought.”

A pair of hands carefully, reverentially, took Sari’s slender leg and lifted it up. Fyra kissed the top of her pale foot and smiled, sickeningly sweet.

“I would never cut corners, my precious Everie. I could never let another lay their hands on you.”

It was far from the first time she’d heard that from Fyra, but Sari still couldn’t tell how sincere the words were. She stayed silent and looked up at the ceiling.

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Sari left the bath with her skin feeling smooth and renewed at the expense of a tremendous sense of fatigue. The principal cause, her cousin, was humming a tune as she dried Sari’s hair with a towel. Sari, naked but for a kimono under-robe, felt demoralized to see Fyra smiling in the mirror.

She’d specifically hoped to avoid getting caught by her cousin during this year’s storehouse reopening, but after a dizzying series of detours, it had ended up happening anyway. Reflecting on the flurry of the last two days, Sari felt as though she’d been tossed about by those around her, disoriented all the while.

While Sari thought to herself, Fyra adeptly tied up her silver hair and applied her makeup just the way she’d instructed. Despite her cousin’s way with words, she was somebody Sari could rely on.

Fyra straightened up and examined Sari’s reflection in the mirror. “Hmm. That should do it. Though I think you could stand to make it feel a little more imposing, personally.”

“I’m meeting the *king.*”

“So? You’re the Werrilocia princess.”

There was clear insolence in Fyra’s scoffing tone, as though she didn’t

consider the king a king at all. Ingrained within her was the pride of having inherited the blood of ancient royalty.

Sari shrugged, a little embarrassed by her cousin's bearing, and changed the topic. "Have you heard that courtesans have been getting abducted in the back streets recently?"

"I have, although it's currently considered an unverified rumor."

Sari had expected her answer. Of the Werrilocia siblings, Vas *did* gather information—chiefly on the goings-on of the royal palace and Irede—but the breadth of Fyra's information network surpassed her little brother's. Wanting more details about the trail that Eid seemed to be pursuing, Sari continued her questioning.

"How many courtesans have been abducted so far?"

"Eleven. All girls younger than twenty from inexpensive brothels. That's why everybody thought they'd simply run off, at first."

"Have any of them been found?"

"No. But Resenté says she might have a lead."

"Resenté?"

"Resenté Disram. A courtesan and proprietress of her own establishment in the back streets. She's my lover."

"Ah... Right." With the exception of her cousin's preferences—Fyra didn't care about gender so long as her partner's appearance fit her type—Sari was extremely interested. She watched Fyra select her rouge in the mirror. "What's her lead?"

"I believe she has a rough idea of who might be behind it, or something along those lines."

Sari frowned sullenly—Fyra *knew* what she was asking, and was being purposefully roundabout. "I'd appreciate it if you could tell me the name of her lead, as well as what they're after."

"If that is what the head of the family wishes to know, then far be it from me to not answer. She believes it is Baron Nedos. He's a man with ties to a certain

high-class brothel.”

“And have any courtesans from there gone missing?”

“Not at all.”

Sari nodded; she’d expected that, but it had been worth confirming anyway. “Does that mean he’s trying to harm his business rivals?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that factored into it. But I heard that he specifically needed young girls.”

Fyra scooped the red rouge not onto a lip brush, but her own pinky finger. She made a gesture indicating silence, and Sari paused their conversation. Fyra placed herself between her and the mirror, smiled coquettishly, and began applying the rouge to Sari’s lips.

Sari wondered why her makeup looked so much more perfect. She was quite sure she always applied it just how Fyra did.

When the woman’s finger left her lips, Sari took a breath of admiration in spite of herself. Beside her, Fyra hummed in satisfaction.

“How is it?”

“Exactly how I wanted it.”

“Next is to get you into your kimono. Would you prefer my brother do it?”

“I’m fine either way.”

Vas had often helped Sari with her kimonos in the past. She hadn’t had much occasion to wear one in the capital these last few years, but that hardly meant she’d forgotten.

Sari hesitated for a moment, torn over whether it would be better to suffer Fyra’s clingy touch or Vas’s acerbic tongue, but after some deeper thought, realized she was perfectly capable of putting on her kimono alone.

She checked the mirror’s reflection and saw the kimono and sash she’d had brought from the estate. “So... You were saying?”

“I was saying?”

“That the baron needed young girls. Do you know why?”

Sari stood, adjusting the front of her under-robe. She had a number of ideas of what the answer might be, but the one she received was none of them. Fyra brought her finger to her mouth and licked the remaining rouge from it.

“Everie, have you heard that if you boil a virgin’s liver and drink it, your youth will return to you?”

Sari failed to hide her instinctive reaction. “*What...?*”

But she quickly grasped what Fyra was trying to say, and her expression morphed into a deep frown.

※

As one might expect, the king seemed to have no intention of summoning a god to an audience chamber full of potted plants.

Xixu examined his liege doubtfully. They were in a hall deep inside the palace, and the king was seated in a chair, visibly in a good mood as he awaited his guest. Standing at his side was his maiden, who smiled pleasantly at Xixu, apparently having noticed his gaze.

She had flaxen hair bound into a single braid behind her head and looked as though she could have been either a girl in her teens or a woman in her twenties. Xixu, however, had never heard her real age. She was wise beyond her years regardless, seeing far more than any ordinary person could despite being blind from birth.

Her eyes were always closed, and a number of small silver rings were woven through her long eyelashes. Silver rings also adorned all ten of her slender fingers. They were ostensibly a kind of maiden tool, but how she used them was unknown to Xixu. Her flowing maiden’s robe was the color of dark ash and was embroidered with overlapping circles of silver thread. It appeared to be a pair with the white, gold-threaded garment that the king was wearing.

The king’s maiden raised her hand, which had been placed on the back of the king’s chair, and indicated toward the main door. “She will finish with her preparations shortly. It should be fine for you to go escort her now.”

“Understood,” Xixu acknowledged. Here in the royal palace, it was he who had been entrusted with the duty of being their bridge to the god of Irede.

Xixu bowed to his liege, then silently departed the hall to greet the girl who was not human.

※

The atmosphere of the royal capital changed drastically from district to district. After a day and a half of Xixu showing her around, Sari had come to know this well. When the capital was mentioned, it called to mind for most people the central district—hub of the civilian and military upper classes—with its neat and orderly lines of stores and houses, and not the main streets or back alley districts populated by the common folk. Several years prior, this difference had been more clearly observable, marked by a blatant wealth disparity. It had been commonly accepted that no matter how back-breakingly hard a citizen worked, they would never be able to achieve a livelihood beyond their station.

It was the young king, Xixu's half-brother, who had changed that. Shortly before he'd ascended to the throne, he had urged his father the king to alter the rights long held by the aristocracy and wealthy merchants one by one, converting them into a legal, meritocratic system anybody could participate in. The king had remarked cynically on his legal reforms, saying that "I find cutting through old unwritten laws to be as easy as taking a knife to over-stewed meat," but regardless of the original intent behind those words, these days, he had the support of the common citizenry, who regarded him to be a good king.

Wey Festt Myd Torlonia, the young king famed also for the loveliness of his features, smiled when he saw her enter the hall. Sari, inheritor of blood older than Torlonia itself, gave him an elegant bow.

"I am here in answer to your summons, Your Majesty. My name is Saridi, of Pale Moon."

Her beauty was such that she seemed to be clad in moonlight wherever she stood. Her features, though delicate, were the surface to a bottomless pool, and she wore a white kimono with a blue sash dyed with a half-moon.

The king looked pleased to see her attire, which was hers as both the proprietress and the maiden. He stood and bowed to her in return.

"My gratitude for accepting my sudden and discourteous invitation, Princess of the White Moon."

“That...is a very old title. I was not aware you knew it.”

“Princess of the White Moon” had been the name used by the ancestor king of the Werrilocias for the god he’d summoned.

Though Sari felt nervous, she didn’t voice it. Nobody alive should have known that name. She shifted her gaze to the woman standing beside the king.

The maiden, both eyes closed, bowed silently to Sari. As she looked at the woman gifted with exceptional farsight and foresight, she began to feel a strange sense of déjà vu.

The king raised his hand lightly in the direction of his brother, who was standing behind Sari. “Be her chair.”

Xixu paused. “Surely not, Your Majesty.”

“Just kidding.”

“Um,” Sari interjected, “I’m fine. I can stand.”

“I’ll bring you a chair,” Xixu said.

Judging from his weary expression as he left the hall, jokes such as these were an everyday occurrence.

Sari, now alone with the king and his maiden, turned back to face the pair. “So...may I ask why you wished to speak to me? How much do you know, and what is your aim?”

Her tone had become sharper. She suspected they intentionally had sent Xixu away so that they could discuss sensitive matters. It was the king’s maiden who answered her.

“Even I cannot know everything. All this blindness of mine can see is the time that awaits us...and even then, only in large fragments.”

“For one who proclaims foresight, you seem to know a rather old title.”

“A simple matter to explain. I merely saw you being addressed as such in the future.”

“Me?”

Traced back to its origins, “Princess of the White Moon” was an intimate

name used between lovers. Would the person who called her that one day be her guest? Sari's thoughts immediately became preoccupied with her own indeterminate future.

She soon noticed the king's gaze, however, and shook her head. "While I would like to say that you may call me by whatever name you wish, I must request you use something else."

"'Miss Proprietress' it is, then," the king said, neatly settling the digression in their conversation. He glanced at the door.

He was checking that Xixu hadn't returned yet, Sari thought. But despite how he may seem, Xixu was not an obtuse man. It was entirely possible that he'd read the king's intention and was taking his time on purpose.

The king's ring-adorned hand indicated the door his half-brother had left through. "I hope you have found him to your liking."

"Yes, he is an exceedingly capable individual. Thank you for sending him to Irede."

"By nature, it perhaps should have been my role to go, but there is a rather significant difference in our ages. And I imagine he is a better match for you anyway."

"Your Majesty still has many years ahead of him."

The thirty-three-year-old king smiled at that, but it was a polite one. Sari was half his age. The difference would most definitely be an obstacle. There was a certain faint suspicion she'd had for a while now, and she decided to bring it up.

"Is it Your Majesty's intention for him to be a candidate for my guest?"

Was that one of the reasons he'd sent Xixu to Irede? Sari waited for the king's reply, unsure of what she'd do if he said "yes."

Contrary to her expectations, the man—who had eyes that resembled Xixu's, in some way—shrugged in slight embarrassment, like a naughty child would have. "Being entirely truthful, I would be pleased if it worked out that way, yes."

"Does he share your intentions?"

“Oh, no, he hates it. Not you—just the idea of being ordered to do such things. Despite it being somewhat of a royal duty.”

Even still, Sari quite liked Xixu’s integrity in that regard. He didn’t treat her like a child, nor did he attempt to urge her forward. He intentionally kept her at arm’s length, which made being with him calming.

That said, if she ever told him that, it would likely just increase the stress he was under.

Seeing her faint, irony-tinged smile, the king winked at her. He was a lot more informal than she’d ever imagined. No wonder he was such a headache for Xixu, who’d warned her quite thoroughly on the way here that the king was “an eccentric individual.” Sari grinned in spite of herself.

“If your maiden has the gift of foresight, do you know who my guest will be?”

If so, then Sari kind of wanted to know. However, faced with her somewhat childish curiosity, the king’s maiden shook her head slightly.

“Henceforth, your power will only continue to grow. The further ahead I look, the harder it is to see.”

“It isn’t my intention to obstruct you...”

“What I am able to see is ‘a person’s history.’ I believe you may not qualify for that. All that I’ve seen until now has only been gleaned from the reflections of you in the fates of others.”

“By that, do you mean...Xixu?”

The maiden smiled faintly but didn’t answer. In other words, yes, she did. Sari turned to look at the still-unopened door. She still couldn’t ascertain the point behind this conversation, nor where it was going. However, she felt as though they were about to discuss the main issue, and her thoughts quietly began to cool.

“What is it that you wish of me?”

By all rights, it was strange that “she” would be summoned by the king like this.

From the collapse of that ancient nation to this day, Irede and whichever

country owned it never interfered in the other's affairs beyond what was necessary. Why was the king stepping over that unspoken line now?

Sari narrowed her blue eyes slightly. The king smiled apologetically and broke his silence.

"I simply wish to have ties with you."

"Through him?"

Did he intend to offer up Xixu to her and receive her divine protection for his country in return?

Sari frowned, creasing her shapely eyebrows. Both as a ruler and as a brother, that plan was in poor taste. However, the king brought up a different topic.

"In several years...a great upheaval will occur in a number of countries, including our own."

"'A great upheaval'? Is there going to be a war?"

"In that, at least, we are fortunate that the answer is likely no. However, we don't know what it's going to be. What we *do* know...is that most of humanity will be lost."

"What...?"

She thought she'd misheard him. But seeing his bitter smile told her she hadn't.

In contrast to her slight shock, her heart cooled. "That was the future she saw with her foresight?"

"Yes, though it was fragmentary."

"Can it be avoided?"

"While we'd like to try, we don't know what will cause it. Or perhaps it is the lot of man to be incapable of avoiding his determined fate."

"Never."

The word had come out reflexively, half her own, and half echoed from somewhere far away. Sari held her pale fingers to her own throat.

“Never. Man is not so easily shackled.”

“I...would be greatly pleased if that were the case.”

The king cast his gaze downward and gently bowed his head, but Sari did not feel as though anything was wrong with that. She didn’t even notice the more formal lilt his words had taken. She just felt that the inside of her body had chilled through, so much so that it burned. She wondered what the source of the irritation prickling at her was. The empty spot beside her made her feel uneasy.

“Do you intend to bring me in to avoid that future?” she asked.

“I would not dare to make so brazen a request. If man is to bear the burden, then we shall be the ones to defy it.”

“Then how brazen *is* your request?”

“I would like to entrust my brother to you.”

“Don’t be so indirect.”

Xixu still hadn’t come back. Sari could sense behind herself without turning her head, and it was there she’d allocated most of her attention. The king’s eyes watched her with a false gentleness. That she could read it for what it was—sorrow that almost resembled regret—must have been because she’d seen so many guests in her time. He raised his right hand and pointed behind Sari.

“If nothing changes come the upheaval, my brother...will die protecting a woman.”

There was the sound of a door opening. Yet, in that moment, all Sari could hear were the king’s words. The icy sensation in her fingertips almost seemed like it belonged to somebody else.

“Could you change that outcome for me?” The king’s request sounded soft.

Sari stood still, frozen in place. Then, Xixu tapped her on the shoulder.

“You aren’t going to sit?”

Sari stared unblinkingly at the young man who was peering down at her, frowning. They hadn’t known each other for that long. But she had come to

trust him completely and had grown fond of him. Being truthful, she had even considered choosing him as her guest.

The moment that thought crossed her mind, her irritation voiced itself.

“Idiot!”

Xixu paused. “What?”

“You’re such a big *idiot*! I can’t believe you! You let me down!”



She beat at Xixu's chest with her fists, and his expression became one of deep suspicion. He let her continue to hit him as she liked and looked over at his liege.

"May I ask what you said to her?"

"Nothing important. I merely told her a little bit about your foolishness."

"..."

"Always just doing what you want!" Sari exclaimed. "You're *mine,* you know!"

"Saridi?"

Evidently, Xixu had finally noticed the change that had occurred in her. He looked at the king and his maiden with doubtful eyes, but neither of the pair spoke. Sari took a deep breath and abruptly turned her back on the king.

"Enough. I'm leaving."

There was nothing more to be said. She made to walk away, but when she saw the chair Xixu had brought for her, she pursed her delicate lips. It had red cloth upholstery, and she sat in it for a single moment before standing back up.

She didn't wait for anybody to stop her as she left, but when she reached the door, she asked the king a question without turning around.

"Is that woman...me?"

"I don't know."

Whether the king's answer was the truth or a lie, Sari couldn't tell.

※

He didn't have a grasp on the exact situation, but this was the first time he'd seen Sari in such a bad mood.

Xixu watched the door close, wavering over whether he should go after her or not. In the end, he decided to ascertain what had happened first.

"I would appreciate it if you told me what you said to her."

"It was really nothing important. Just some nonsense akin to a bad dream."

"It looked like her divine self manifested."

“Mmm. But she’s still immature.”

The king’s tone was decisive, and he wore his usual smile, but it felt as though there was something different in it—a sense of resignation. The faint scent of Sari’s perfume still lingered. Xixu turned back to his liege and scrutinized him for several moments.

“May I presume you informed her of your scheme?”

“My scheme? And what do you mean by that?”

“You used us as bait,” Xixu said sharply.

The king smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. There was a different expression behind it, and Xixu could tell his guess had been correct. He wanted to click his tongue and give the king a piece of his mind, but he settled for using a piercing gaze to deliver his thoughts instead as he spoke.

“It was a distasteful plan. What would you have done if something had happened to her?”

“I had faith that you would protect her.”

“As reluctant as I am to disappoint you, we were separated.”

“Did somebody tell you of this?”

The sudden change in topic was proof the king was approaching the heart of the matter. No more jokes. Xixu placed his reprimands aside for now and answered the king’s question.

“I realized it myself. After considering why you picked the locations you recommended to us in your letter.”

“I was being considerate. It wouldn’t do for her to have gotten sick of you.”

“And yet you included places such as the wholesaler’s district.”

Though the destinations Xixu might have picked would certainly not endear him with any women, the king was a tactful person. He would not have made the same mistake as his little brother. In spite of this, he’d chosen several locations akin to the ones Xixu would have, meaning that entertaining Sari had not been his only goal.

“When we started going to your recommended destinations,” Xixu continued, “we gained a tail. Furthermore, there is the matter of how our tour concluded. What should I take this to mean?”

“Did your assailants not tell you anything?”

“Only that they were paid off.”

“That figures.”

The king began nodding to himself as though he’d reached an explanation he was satisfied with. Xixu gave him a cold, reproving look, but that would not be enough to make his half-brother quail. If the king had been the kind of man to be swayed by Xixu’s gaze, he would have either been a man of even greater character by now or a shut-in who never left his private chamber. As it stood, the brothers reached the same stalemate they always had.

The king’s maiden played mediator. “Our apologies for not informing you. He believed it would make for a better tour for her.”

“What were the places we went to?”

“Establishments connected to individuals who are possibly dissatisfied with His Majesty.”

Xixu considered that for a moment. “Insurrectionists.”

His voice came out unintentionally mixed with a sigh. As an officer, he’d had skirmishes with insurrectionists in the past. They had all sought to depose the reformist king—some directly via assassination and others with help from neighboring countries. It was like cutting grass in the rainy season: no matter how thoroughly one dealt with them, new adversaries would appear to take their place.

Nevertheless, there had been no major issues in that regard for roughly the past year, which was why he’d thought the king’s reign had finally settled into a time of calm.

Evidently, the flames of insurrection would never truly die out. Xixu began recalling the names of the stores listed in the letter. There had been twenty or so, but just as he’d itemized them in his head, the king lightly waved a hand in

his direction.

“There’s no need to look so grim. You wear your heart on your sleeve, you know. Is it any wonder I kept this from you?”

“My apologies,” Xixu said after a pause.

“Besides, it’s just a matter of money this time. Some individuals have been attempting to deceive me as they pocket the taxes they should rightfully be paying. Hopefully, it’s merely for personal gain, and nothing else.”

“Have they used the embezzled funds to make any moves?”

“We aren’t sure yet. That’s why I dangled you in front of them.”

“Then I am deeply sorry for being unable to fulfill my role as bait.”

“It’s fine. We still have more chances. Be a good little piece of bait next time, won’t you?”

“...”

Xixu would have thought the king was just taking the joke too far, if not for the fact that the king had never done so before—whenever it reached this point, it became the truth. Still, just as people were cut out for different things, actions were suited to different times and places. Though Xixu was about ready to give up, he doggedly persisted anyway.

“If that is your command, then I shall become bait. However, if possible, I would request that I fulfill my duty while she isn’t with m—”

“But then you won’t get to show off to her.”

“That isn’t something I’m concerned about. Also, she has already suffered through an unpleasant experience because of this.”

“Have you heard that the Werrilocias are being pressured by Marquess Garaq?”

Another sudden change in topic. What relevance did this have to the matter at hand? Xixu dredged up what he knew of the sponsor of tomorrow’s soirée.

“Marquess Garaq... My impression of him tells me that it’s uncommon for him to make such public appearances.”

“Yes, he’s a reserved man. But that he’s pressuring them is true. He has approached them repeatedly in an attempt to marry Fyra Hanel Werrilocia as his second wife.”

“Ah, she’s...” Xixu swallowed down his next words: *that snakelike woman.*

He had only met Sari’s cousin just earlier, but he’d been able to feel the unpleasant pressure that didn’t match her beautiful appearance. Even if he hadn’t, Sari had called her “scary,” which spoke volumes on its own. Seen from a different perspective, however, Marquess Garaq had to have some rather eccentric tastes if he wished to make such a person his wife.

Perhaps his slightly rude thoughts had come out in his expression, because the king grinned. “Well, you are attracted to *her,* after all. You don’t have to understand it, but try not to let that show on your face.”

“I...am no such thing.”

He frowned sourly—the king had no right to make such wilful comments on matters between him and the young maiden girl. Seeing his expression, the king raised his hands in a mock gesture, as though to say, *“Oh, is that so?”*

“Come to think of it, this is a good opportunity to tell you. You’re already past twenty. If *she* isn’t to your liking, then you should make the acquaintance of a different woman. I’ve already picked out a number of candidates for you.”

“*What?*”

The king held out his right hand, and the blind maiden placed a bundle of profiles and family lineage records in it, which the king then presented to Xixu.

“They’re all daughters of equally competent and distinguished families, and one is even the princess of a neighboring country. If you’re able to win one over, I’m sure they could contribute to our purposes somehow. Several will be at the soirée tomorrow—though not the ones from other countries, of course, given the distance. Select whomever you wish.”

“Whoever I...?”

Hadn’t it been the king who’d said an offering to a god couldn’t be withdrawn? If Xixu chose another woman now, he had no idea what would

happen when *she* found out. He frowned, unable to discern his liege's intentions. The king, still holding out the bundle of documents, smiled.

"You are my retainer and my little brother. Do not forget that."

After a pause, Xixu said, "I am well aware, Your Majesty."

Even if he could not read his liege's intentions, he would never lose sight of his own position or loyalty.

Xixu hid his confusion, stepped forward before his liege, and knelt. He held his hands up above his head, accepting the documents with grace.

A gentle voice came from above. "And make sure you protect *her.* That is an order."

"As you command."

That was one order he'd never had any objections to from the beginning.

※

Since she'd said "I'm leaving," Xixu had assumed Sari had returned to the Werrilocia estate. Evidently, however, she'd chosen to be considerate by waiting for him. Momentarily after he'd left the hall, a handmaid passed on instructions to return to the room Sari had initially been in.

When he arrived, she ran over to him, relief on her face. "Thank goodness!"

"I wouldn't leave you behind."

From Xixu's point of view, he was stating the obvious, but Sari simply closed her eyes and shook her head.

The sorrow in the gesture felt oddly mature, and it made him want to ask which of her selves she currently was.

However, even if he did so, she would only say that her personality wasn't divided in the first place. Both of her selves were the same, individual being—the same Saridi. Though it was difficult to internalize, Xixu knew this.

Unconsciously, he reached a hand out toward her. But when his fingers entered the corner of his vision, he returned to his senses and wondered what it was that he'd been trying to do. Troubled by his hand's lack of purpose, Xixu

finally lowered it without touching a thing. Sari followed his movements with curious eyes.

“Xixu?”

“No, it’s nothing. What did His Majesty say to you?”

“Nothing. It was just a normal conversation.”

Her cheeks looked to have paled and appeared colder than usual. Her body temperature dropped when she changed the layer of her existence, so perhaps that was why. Xixu felt concerned for her; she seemed ill.

“Will you return to the estate today? I can also have a room prepared for you in the palace.”

“Oh, the palace, please. I’m scared of Fyra.” Then, she added, “I think *she’s* stopped tracking us too.”

Xixu’s eyes widened. “You noticed who was tracking us?”

“Only after meeting her earlier. That maiden, right?”

She smiled wryly, and he nodded in affirmation. After she’d told him they were being followed last night, he’d been particularly cautious when leaving his mother’s home, since it was not the most guarded residence, but it had turned out to be the work of the king’s maiden. It wasn’t difficult to imagine what purpose she had been using him for, and he had no doubt that she’d had their tour watched from the beginning, observing the reactions of the suspect establishments and ready to intervene the moment he and Sari encountered actual danger.

But Sari hadn’t known that, and their tail must have weighed on her mind. He wanted to apologize to her, but he didn’t know what to say. He’d taken her out of the Werrilocia estate because he’d thought the fresh air outside would be better for her, but it felt as though he’d needlessly tired her out in doing so. Xixu made a mental note to buy more konpeito later.

“I’ll arrange for anything you need. Please, get some rest.”

“Thank you. I’ll do that.”

Her features relaxed, and he couldn’t tell from her words or her expression

which of her selves currently had a stronger presence.

What he did know, however, was that she was in low spirits. Sari turned her gaze away from him and toward what lay outside the window. Her long silver eyelashes shimmered in the light, and the outline of her very being seemed faded. Suddenly, he heard her exhale a short breath.

“Xixu.”

“Yes?”

“Stay by me, as much as you can. That way—” She cut herself off, shaking her head as though she was trying to cast off her unease.

Xixu nodded. “Don’t worry. Next time, I’ll protect you.”

When Sari heard that, a faint smile graced her face.

4. Ostentation

The blanks in Sari's memory were not a new development. She had also experienced them a number of times in the past. To her, they were simply a natural part of who she was.

She was not human, but instead a peculiar singularity, lingering in the world through the means of blood and power. She had been multifaceted from the beginning, and that was what caused the blanks in her awareness.

However...she felt as though those blanks had become less distinct as of late. While in the past they had been a clearly defined absence, they had begun to change. Now, she *knew* something was there, but it was out of reach—like memories within a dream.

When Sari woke up in the morning, in her guest room in the castle, she sat up in her bed and gazed outside the window.

She thought she might have dreamed about something sad. Her cheeks were cold and still traced with dried tear tracks.

Regarding Marquess Garaq's soirée, Xixu had said "You don't have to go," and Vas had told her curtly, "There is no need for you to attend." It seemed they each had reason to be unenthusiastic about her attending.

After she had finished making herself presentable, Sari turned to her other cousin, who had helped her throughout the entire process. "Don't you need to get ready too?"

"It won't take me that long," Fyra said. "Besides, I'm going late anyway."

Sari thought she could hear scorn mixed into the offhanded words, but it wasn't directed at her. The young head of the Werrilocia was puzzled.

"Haven't you been involved in the soirée preparations this whole time?"

"Oh," Fyra said, tone prickly. "Have I now?"

It was an obvious rebuff, and Sari decided to back down. She didn't know what the circumstances were, but it would be overstepping for her to comment

on matters of the aristocracy. Fyra and Vas were young but capable, and they worked for the good of the Werrilocias. If she could not put her faith in them, then she was unfit to be the head of the family.

Sari stood from the dresser chair. “I’ll go on ahead then. In the event something goes wrong—”

“I’ll do exactly as you instructed.” Fyra winked. “I know.”

Sari forced a smile, then left through the door. Awaiting her on the other side was a young man in navy blue full dress—her escort.

“Sorry for the wait, Xixu.”

“It’s fine, you were right on time. I’ll show you the way.”

A carriage had been arranged to convey her to Marquess Garaq’s estate. Xixu led Sari to it, and as she stepped aboard, she examined her red kimono. It was a florid garment quite befitting of a young woman, kindly provided to her by the king. The makeup she wore was based on a unifying theme of pale pink, and altogether her beautiful appearance had a balance of both allure and innocence.

Whether it was more accurate to say Xixu was examining her or Fyra’s artistry was open to debate, but he was visibly impressed. “You seem different today too.”

“Mm-hmm. I have a few goals in mind for tonight.”

“Is one to give off the impression that you’re a courtesan?”

“Yes. I also want to look like a virgin.”

“...”

How much of the silence that had befallen the carriage was her fault, and how much was his? Xixu’s expression had frozen as though he’d put on a mask, and Sari, believing she had realized why, went on to explain.

“Oh, I mean, I am one, but what I’m hoping is to make people who don’t know me *think* that.”

Xixu seemed to consider that for a moment. “For what purpose? Are you

looking for potential guests?”

“Huh? Uh, no. No. Definitely not. Um, it’s potential livers that I’m looking for.”

“‘Potential livers’?”

In her attempt to explain the situation, she’d ended up coining a ridiculous new phrase. Realizing how flustered she was, Sari decided to start again from the beginning. She told him about how young courtesans had been being abducted recently—leaving out the part where she’d heard of it from her meeting with Eid—as well as the name of the nobleman suspected of being the cause.

“Baron Nedos is having young courtesans abducted?”

Xixu’s expression suddenly morphed into a grim frown, as though it was the first time he was hearing of this. He seemed to know of the baron in question. Sari shook her head slightly.

“So I heard, but it’s not certain he’s the culprit yet.”

“But what does he plan to do with them?”

“I told you. Livers.”

“I would appreciate it if you elaborated—that’s the one word I’m the most confused about.” Xixu looked a little fed up, but Sari wanted to believe that she was just seeing things. When she’d first heard about it, she had been confused too. She took a moment to arrange the right words in her head before explaining.

“I was told that, recently, something called ‘elixirs of youth’ have been secretly circulating among the aristocracy.”

“‘Elixirs of youth’?”

“Yes. They’re said to be concocted by boiling the liver of a young doe, but the truth is—”

“It’s the liver of a virgin.”

“Correct.”

It was a sickening story, but there *had* once been a superstition in the

southern region of the country that said if you had an ailment in a particular organ, eating the equivalent organ sourced from a child would cure you. So perhaps, to the ignorant, the elixir of youth sounded entirely credible.

Xixu's features contorted in disgust, but then he seemed to realize something. He looked at Sari questioningly. "But normally, a courtesan wouldn't be a virgin."

"Mmm. It's hard to tell how necessary that part is, since some of the women who were abducted were actually just serving girls, but apparently there's a different, unconventional method of creating the elixir."

"I would've thought it was already an unconventional kind of activity."

"Right? The unconventional of the unconventional is just the conventional. Um, but as for the method, it involves pulling the liver from the young woman while she's still alive, and ingesting it."

"How...distasteful."

Xixu's expression twisted, going beyond grim to the point that he looked as though he found everything in his line of sight abhorrent. Sari's reaction when Fyra had told her had been much the same. She calmly continued.

"So in the end, as long as they get a young woman, they likely don't mind whether or not she's a virgin. The customer might, but it's a difficult thing to check, and it could be that they just value the spectacle of the victim being cut open while alive more."

"I suppose nobility wouldn't care who a courtesan from an inexpensive brothel is."

"According to Fyra, they started out abducting girls from normal homes. But since enough of those would draw the royal authorities' attention, they changed targets. Usually, if a courtesan goes missing, you'd assume she just ran away."

"It's true that this is the first I'm hearing of this..." Xixu bowed his head deeply in assent, but then looked up, almost as if he'd been jolted by the rocking of the carriage. "Wait, Saridi. Don't tell me you're trying to..."

“Yes. I’m hoping they’ll target me.” She raised a red sleeve demonstratively.

Xixu’s features tautened. “Knowing all that, you still want to act as bait?! It wouldn’t work anyway—they wouldn’t lay a hand on the proprietress of Pale Moon!”

“That’s why I’d like you to introduce me as an acquaintance of yours and apprentice courtesan.”

“...”

He stared at Sari intensely as though there was much he dearly wished to say, but she pretended not to notice.

If she avoided the problem just because it was dangerous, she’d be no closer to finding a solution. Fortunately, Fyra had told her, “If you wish to poke your nose into this, feel free,” so it should be fine for her to set a little trap. With that said, if she was asked why she wanted to involve herself in this matter, she wouldn’t have been able to give a clear answer. She just had a feeling that if she could clear away the fog in front of her, she could relax a little, in some way. Even if it was just a substitute for another matter she couldn’t solve, Sari didn’t think she’d be able to forget what she’d already heard.

Grimacing, Xixu opened his mouth to speak...but refrained from saying anything. After repeating this process several times, he eventually lapsed into silence. When the carriage’s horses slowed their pace and came to a stop, evidently having reached their destination, the young man finally breathed a small sigh.

“His Majesty has charged me with a bothersome task to see to during tonight’s soirée.”

“Huh?”

“So, I’m sorry, but I won’t have the time to assist you with your plans.”

The words he’d uttered in an exceedingly sour tone were somewhat anticlimactic to Sari, who’d been expecting more resistance. She’d had no intention of burdening him with this matter in the first place, since it was something she’d chosen to involve herself in of her own accord, and it had nothing to do with him. As long as he could help her get inside, she had plans in

motion that would allow her to manage on her own.

Sari smiled and looked up at the young man. “That’s fine. Thank you.”

Xixu frowned slightly, but he said nothing. The carriage door opened from the outside, and he held a white-gloved hand out to her to take.

※

Marquess Garaq’s manor was located a short distance away from the Werrilocia estate, in the same district.

It was dusk when Sari alighted the carriage, and she looked up to see a residence cast in dark shadows.

The soirée had already begun, so the entrance was thrown open, and numerous lights lit the gardens, but she had no doubt that under normal circumstances, the manor exuded an eerie tension. Unconsciously, Sari’s free hand pressed against the spot over her liver.

Xixu walked half a step in front of her as he escorted her to the main entrance, and he gave his name to the man stationed there. Sari was relieved to see that, just as planned, she was being treated as Xixu’s companion. As they entered the manor, she whispered in his ear.

“Should we split up?”

“No, we should greet the host first.”

With a turn of his head, Xixu indicated the spacious foyer in front of them, overflowing with dazzling illumination and brilliant color.

The gentle strains of stringed instruments could be heard weaving through the chatter. From here and there came the sounds of laughter, accompanied by the smells of wine and face powder, and the ostentatious lights reflected throughout the foyer in a kaleidoscope of different ways. As she surveyed the aristocracy and their ornamental companions, Sari affixed a faint smile to her face.

It was a smile every woman of Irede knew how to wear—a mask that hid their true intentions. Even should they cast off their vivid kimonos and thin under-robes, they would still be left with this smile. Their guests would never see what

lay beyond. It was for this reason the men who purchased a night in Irede could lose themselves in a brief moment of peace.

Xixu noticed her expression and narrowed his eyes. However, he said not a word as they walked through the guests and deeper in, heading for a group of people making pleasant conversation in front of the main staircase.

Upon noticing Xixu, a plump, older woman in a black gown spoke up in surprise. “My. What an honor for you to have graced us with your attendance.”

“His Majesty has requested that I pass along his regards to all present today.”

The assembled nobility showed two kinds of reactions to the less-than-warm greeting of the prince.

There were those who smiled slightly, as though they’d remembered something amusing, and those whose expressions went blank, as though they had reason to be wary. Sari examined their reactions one by one from behind Xixu, and while he greeted Marquess Garaq, she spotted Baron Nedos among them. He looked to be several years older than the king, and he had a hand on his ample beard as he watched her with great interest.

If she had already caught his attention, then this wouldn’t take long. Sari made a conscious effort to look shy. As she did so, the woman in the black gown asked Xixu a question.

“So, who is your young companion?”

“Ah, right.”

The young man looked back and met her eyes. His expression, as usual, was tinged with a slight astringency. But was it just her imagination, or was there an uncustomary anger there too?

Sari reflexively swallowed her breath. Xixu put his hand on her shoulder, and looked back at the group of nobles.

“She’s a courtesan who I’ve become close with during my time in Irede. I intend on buying out her contract in the near future.”

“Huh...? Xixu?”

That wasn’t the story they’d agreed on—but it was already too late to say

anything. No wonder Xixu had backed down so easily after she'd told him of her intentions to use herself as bait.

Now that she knew what he'd been planning, Sari couldn't help but let out a groan, and despite the onlookers, her perfect smile twisted out of shape.

※

"What are you trying to do?"

For the soirée, Marquess Garaq had made his foyer and the upstairs guest rooms available to the attendees. Sari was in the former, standing in the shadow of a pillar and looking up past the staircase at the second floor.

There were no guests up there yet, and the only figure she could see walking about was a maid in gray attire. The look on her face seemed downcast, but because of the dim lighting, it was hard to tell for sure. Sari considered all this in an attempt to regain her composure—but her fists still stayed clenched in an anger she couldn't control.

"I don't think you need me to answer that," Xixu replied coolly.

If she wasn't imagining things, then he was in a bad mood too. The atmosphere between them had suddenly become precarious, ready to explode at the slightest touch. They faced each other in the shadows of the dazzling soirée, each unhappy with how matters had developed.

"After what you told them, nobody will even think of trying to do something to me," Sari said.

"That was my intention," Xixu said.

"How could you just—"

"You did the same thing not too long ago."

Sari's eyes widened at the cold rebuttal, and she immediately grasped his meaning.

To protect Irede's newest shadeslayer, she'd loaned him her decorative cord—meant for her guest—during the recent turmoil. Fine, so she hadn't explained its significance to him. But it had been an *emergency*. Sari flapped her fists agitatedly by her sides.

“That was because I thought you were in *danger.*”

“That was my motivation too.”

“...”

“Don’t needlessly involve yourself in every matter that crosses your path, Saridi. If anything happens to you, the people of Irede will suffer for it too.”

“But, the livers—”

“I’ll look into that myself later.”

Evidently, just hearing the word “liver” was enough to turn Xixu’s expression sour. Sari’s own features became sullen when he interrupted her, no longer any trace of a smile remaining.

He sighed down at her. “There’s no need to be in such a bad mood. I’m ignoring half of His Majesty’s orders, doing this.”

“Huh? What did he tell you to do?”

“He told me to choose a wife.”

“What...?” Her thoughts chilled in an instant.

Perhaps realizing his mistake after looking at her, Xixu’s expression faltered. But before he could open his mouth to say anything more, Sari’s murmured reply came quicker. A murkiness clouded her blue eyes.

“You’re getting married, Xixu?”

“No, well...”

It wasn’t strange that he would. Back when she’d hardly known a thing about him, Sari had specifically ruled him out of being nobility because he’d chosen to not marry and become a shadeslayer. However, he was in fact the king’s half-brother—it was actually more unnatural that he hadn’t married yet despite being over twenty. Sari *knew* this, but somewhere along the way, she had simply come to assume that marriage was an event that would never come calling at Xixu’s door.

Her thoughts were on the verge of disarray, but she pulled herself together and looked up at the young man. “If you get married...you’ll return to the

capital, right?”

“No, that’s not... Saridi...”

“You’ll retire from being a shadeslayer of Irede?”

Sari reached her right hand out and grabbed Xixu’s sleeve. She could see neither affirmation nor denial in his dark eyes. That struck her more viscerally than verbal confirmation ever could have. A festering irritation began to spread through her, growing by the moment.

Before she could understand the reason behind it, Sari withdrew her hand. “Okay.”

“Saridi?”

“Thank you for bringing me this far.”

Her sweetly smiling visage was that of the proprietress of Pale Moon, and her elegant, gentle demeanor was that of when she’d first met him. Xixu’s expression turned grim.

“Saridi, wait.”

“I can handle the rest on my own. Do excuse me.”

He reached out for her when she quickly turned and headed into the foyer proper, but she evaded his hand and pushed her way into the crowd of people and conversation.

She didn’t look back. She maintained her faint smile, straightened her posture, and became one with the atmosphere of the night. Even if he made to pursue her, the sheer number of people in the foyer meant catching up was a forlorn hope. Sari was careful to choose a meandering path as she made her way through the crowd.

When she neared the entryway, a woman stepped in from outside, almost as though she’d been waiting for Sari.

The woman approached Sari, looking in a different direction all the while, and came to a stop in front of her. She wore a deep blue gown, and her ashen hair hung loose. The usual half-mysterious, half-sinister air about her had vanished entirely, and clear in her eyes was an inviolable pride.

Fyra Hanel Werrilocia, representative of the Werrilocias, whispered in a voice only the head of her family could hear. “You’re alone? Did you have a lovers’ spat?”

“It doesn’t matter. More importantly, an unexpected development has occurred. Despite all the preparations, they might just avoid me now.”

“Oh?”

After what Xixu had said, she’d lost the ability to give the impression she was a virgin—the basic prerequisite the culprit would be looking for. Even if she hadn’t, no one in their right mind would dare to touch a courtesan favored by the prince.

Internally, Sari clicked her tongue and cursed the young shadeslayer. However, her straying thoughts were reigned back in by the sight of Fyra’s smile.

“Did the shadeslayer do something? Well, even if he did, I’m sure it’s nothing you can’t handle.”

“You’re asking for the impossible. Right now, I’m just a courtesan.”

“You’re not ‘just’ anything, Everie. Deep down, if you command it, there’s nobody you cannot make your prisoner.”

Fyra’s pale hand reached toward Sari’s earlobe. Her graceful fingers traced along it at a distance that made it difficult to tell whether she made contact or not. It sent a lukewarm shudder through Sari, as though a tongue had crawled along the nape of her neck, and she shot Fyra a cold glare.

“Don’t be silly. If I could do that, nothing would ever give me any trouble.”

“I wonder. Perhaps it *is* impossible—for the head of the Werrilocia family, who’s only around for show. But *you* are always on the side that gets to make the choice. Isn’t that right, Saridi of Pale Moon?”

Fyra giggled and walked past her. Sari watched as she went, incredulity in her gaze, and only looked away once her cousin had disappeared into the throng of gathered aristocracy. Then, Sari once again walked into the center of the crowded foyer.

There was simply no way she had the power to make anybody her prisoner. That was not within the realm of the maiden's abilities. If it *was,* then the sticky, viscous irritation she was feeling would never have arisen in the first place.

Sari forced herself to take a deep breath. Her emotions settled, and she became distinctly aware of her surroundings. The sound of friendly conversation was mixed with the drifting scent of wine. She thought she could sense a number of gazes directed at her, and she didn't stop walking as she traced them one by one. From somewhere, she heard the syrupy laughter of a group of women.

She wasn't sure when it happened, but she could no longer hear the music. Sari realized this was because she'd shut it out of her own mind. Tracing the final gaze upon her, she looked to her left, at a spot by the wall.

The man leaning there, separated from the liveliness of the foyer by a thin veneer, was Sari's target—Baron Nedos.

The courtesan in her red kimono met his eyes through the gap in the crowd, tilted her head slightly to the side, and smiled. She cast her allure lazily at him, in the shape of herself. It would obey its own nature and entwine around his very soul.

The baron, from his position against the wall, narrowed his eyes at her slightly. The appraisal in his stare clung to her slender form, adhesive and carefully masked.

Sari could feel his silent gaze willing her toward him. Maintaining her smile, she blinked slowly.

As her long eyelashes fluttered back up...she issued a command, and simply willed it to be.

Come.

※

She did not ask a man for his love. If he desired her, he would have to approach her himself, kneel before her, and entreat her with all his heart.

Sari herself did not know this. But it was engraved into her soul—immutably,

irrevocably, *she* was the one who chose. That was what it meant to be a woman of Pale Moon.

※

Baron Nedos's breath appeared to catch in his throat for a moment. He pushed off the wall and passed a woman who called out to him, but he failed to notice. As though he were possessed, his eyes never left Sari.

Under his intense gaze, she kept watching him and slightly parted her scarlet lips. Listlessly, she released a sigh into the air. It was a meager gesture, but captivating all throughout. Her unseeable breath slid along the floor of the foyer until it reached the tips of his feet, silently inviting him forward.

Sari closed her eyes and stood still, awaiting him. Barely a few seconds passed before somebody placed a hand on her left shoulder. However, it was quickly removed.

She opened her eyes to see Baron Nedos grasping the hand of an unfamiliar young man. The one who had touched her had to have been the latter of the two. The baron, with all the ease of the seniority that came with age, smiled at the young man.

"She already has another companion. You wouldn't want any trouble later, would you?"

The smartly dressed young man looked between Sari and the baron, visibly flustered. But Sari kept her eyes looking up at the baron. She had summoned, and was awaiting, no other man but him.

The young man, evidently realizing she was ignoring him, gave a slight bow to the baron and scurried elsewhere.

Sari expressed her gratitude in a voice laden with melancholy. "Thank you."

"Why are you alone? I saw His Highness go out into the gardens a short while ago."

"We had a slight difference of opinion. I am, however, relieved that I am finally free."

"Oh?"

Sari could hear the minute shift in the man's tone. She affected the demeanor of a naive young girl, and placed a dissatisfied expression on her pretty face.

"I came all the way here, only to be kept in a birdcage. It's suffocating."

"But what a gilded birdcage it is. You would spend your entire life in the lap of luxury."

"A life like that would just be dull. Imagine—sleeping in the same place forever!" She looked away in a huff.

The baron smiled wryly. "Did you express that to His Highness?"

"I did. He said, 'If that is how you feel, then so be it.'"

Xixu was absent from the foyer, so she could use whatever means of deception she wanted. He had his own task to see to, so they could just do as they each respectively pleased. If he wanted to meet a gaggle of noblewomen and choose a wife, then he was free to do so.

Something hot squirmed inside Sari, but she tried not to let it show and concentrated on maintaining her courtesan guise. The baron's eyes caressed her entire body, evaluating her.

"So you dislike boredom?"

"Yes. We courtesans need a touch of 'poison,' don't you think? I'm no different. I'd like to know what that tastes like too."

"And what if it is more than just a touch?"

He was testing her. Sari could sense it on her skin, but she pretended not to notice. She looked up at the man with an immature, arrogant smile.

"If tasting poison is what kills me, then fine. It will be just what I've always wanted."

"Very well," the baron said after a pause. He nodded his assent and took her pale hand. Her eyes widened, and he indicated toward the back of the foyer. "Then I shall show you something interesting."

The bracelet on her left arm clinked softly. As the baron led her by the hand, Sari declared mildly, "I'm looking forward to it."

In the depths of her memories, someone whispered: *Are you sure you should leave his side?*

※

How had it come to this? The young man who'd lost sight of Sari amidst the colorful soirée reflected upon the past few days, his thoughts disconcerted.

"Where did I go wrong...?"

He'd made many trivial blunders, but he thought he'd taken the best action available to him at each turn.

In spite of this, he had failed to keep to his liege's command and allowed his companion to slip away.

Remembering Sari's demeanor when she'd parted from him made Xixu want to hold his head in his hands. At first glance, it had seemed nothing but polite, but there were people in the world who, when they were truly angry, did not show it. In his experience, the king and his maiden were prime examples. Sari had acted similarly earlier. Xixu would rather have been on the receiving end of her divine self's prickly temper. He couldn't say it was *better,* but he *was* gradually becoming more accustomed to it.

Xixu surveyed his surroundings, still hoping to find Sari somehow—and then noticed a shadow flit into the edges of his vision.

"Is that...?"

Beyond an open door, a large, black bird was passing by outside. The sun had already set, and nobody else seemed to notice the bird flying overhead in the darkness.

Xixu, immediately seeing the bird for what it was, turned and began heading outside. He didn't have his usual military sword with him, as this was a soirée for the aristocracy, but the ornamental scabbard he wore did contain a katana of its own. Though the fine gold engravings on the scabbard gave the impression that it did not contain a weapon meant for actual use, it did, and particular attention had been dedicated to ensure the sharpness of the steel edge of its blade. Conscious of the hilt at his waist, Xixu exited into the gardens in pursuit of the bird. He spotted it at once, its wings skimming around the fires

of the braziers.

When Xixu saw how many people were around, he placed his hand on his ornamental scabbard and withdrew a needle that had been fitted into it, as long as the length of his palm.

The bird circled low and perched on the shoulder of a young man in a circle of other guests. None of them displayed any surprise; a regular person would not be able to see the bird. It and those of its kind stayed unseen as they gnawed away at peoples' hearts, calling forth misfortune.

Xixu approached the young man, feigning natural unawareness by not looking directly at the bird. Just as he passed behind him, he swiftly raised the hand he'd used to conceal the needle, in a gesture that resembled a grab for the black bird's neck.

A moment later, the bird itself vanished without a sound, reduced to shadows. Once he'd confirmed that they were scattering into the darkness of the night, he left before anybody could question him.

"To think there was a shade here..."

It wasn't at all rare for shades to be loitering around a large city, but it was bothersome that one had mixed into the soirée.

The corrupt essence that gave shades their strength gathered easily at events such as these, and if the shades began to affect the guests' minds, it would result in all manner of inconvenient quarrels. If a host was thoughtful, they would sometimes arrange for a shadeslayer to be on hand, but much of the aristocracy weren't very enthused about the idea of swords being brandished in front of them.

Glad that he'd noticed the shade, Xixu examined the state of the other guests.

As far as he could see, nobody was acting suspiciously. There was no sign that anybody had been influenced by the shade, or was coming after Xixu. He returned the needle in his hand to its place in his scabbard.

He wondered how the "enemies" who were ostensibly attending the soirée would make their approach.

That problem was what the other half of the orders he'd received from the king were concerned with, as well as Xixu's primary objective. He had been entrusted with the duty to once again become bait and observe the reactions of their targets. Considering the risk this directive could entail, perhaps it was actually a good thing that he and Sari had separated. He couldn't have her being abducted again. If they moved separately, then she would also likely have somebody from the Werrilocia family with her.

He had only interacted with the Werrilocia siblings for a mere day or two, but he could see that they respected Sari in their own ways. Their behavior toward the girl herself was a little warped and thorny, but they would surely treat those who sought to harm her with no mercy.

Therefore, it was better that she was with them, rather than him. This was what Xixu told himself, but it did nothing to abate the gloom clinging to his thoughts. Perhaps he really should go talk to her at once.

However, even if he was able to find her, he couldn't think of anything to say which would restore her mood. Her brother would be able to mediate if he were here—at the cost of some unwanted meddling—but Xixu could not even hold onto that naive hope, because they were not at Pale Moon.

He brooded, brow creased into a deep frown, but abruptly raised his head. He realized he'd walked around the back of the manor. There were fewer lights here and no guests. Bait or not, standing in a place such as this would be far too conspicuous and only invite caution.

Xixu shook his head slightly and turned on his heel. But then a shadow crossed his upper peripheral vision.

"What?"

He looked up...and was stunned speechless. A bird-shaped shade, larger than the one he'd just erased, was flying around above the gardens. And it wasn't alone—almost twenty shadows waited on the roof, window sills, or trees, watching the ground below as though carefully searching for prey.

Xixu came back to his senses when he saw a shade in the form of a mouse scamper out of a nearby hedge. "Something's wrong here..."

With the exception of in Irede, where shades took physical form, it was not immediately dangerous when shades gathered in large numbers in one place. The bigger issue was that *something* was here that was making them manifest and drawing them in.

Shades were fond of the corrupt essence emitted by people. A soirée where the guests each had a skeleton or two in the closet was a breeding ground for that essence, yes, but not to this extent. As far as Xixu was aware, the only locations where shades gathered in such numbers were battlefields or other such places that had just seen major conflict.

The unremarkable nobles' gathering all of a sudden seemed to Xixu like an unfathomable den of vice. He surveyed his surroundings.

"This is an issue... I need to get Saridi home."

He couldn't allow anything to happen to her, but it would be even more problematic if *she* did something. Sari had said that she was "unable to bring much power to bear against humans," but that only applied so long as she hadn't already turned her back on them. If worse came to worst, she could reduce the entire capital to rubble. Xixu set off at a quick stride toward the inside of the manor, but suddenly, he recalled what she'd said earlier.

"But as for the method, it involves pulling the liver from the young woman while she's still alive..."

"It couldn't be..."

Was that happening *here,* somewhere in this manor? If so, the situation was far more complex and grave than he'd initially estimated. Xixu stopped and looked back. One by one, he studied the shades in closer detail, trying to discern where they were looking.

The crisp sound of somebody stepping on grass came from behind him. "Oh? Your Highness."

"...Mr. Zaras."

When Xixu turned upon hearing the title he was not particularly fond of, he saw standing there the proprietor of the teahouse he had visited yesterday with Sari: Tesed Zaras. Xixu, faced with the owner of one of the establishments that

had attracted his liege's suspicion, braced himself internally as he gave a polite greeting. The old but not quite elderly man, holding a drinking cup, smiled warmly.

"Thank you for your visit yesterday. May I ask where the young lady who accompanied you is?"

"There were some slight complications."

He didn't want to outright confirm whether or not he'd brought Sari to the soirée, because that had the potential to put her in danger. Of course, there was every chance that Tesed knew he'd introduced her earlier and was asking him a leading question.

The older man smiled genially and spread his arms in a wide gesture. "Is that so? Well, I just thought I might have seen somebody who resembled her earlier. It looked as though she was headed somewhere rather unpleasant."

"What...? She was?" Not much time had passed since he'd separated from Sari. Had somebody *already* lured her away?

The older man laughed, his eyes creasing into thin lines. "I do hope she isn't taken advantage of by any misbehaving adults. There's a rather distasteful spectacle that takes place here, you see."

Was that a threat, or a warning? It was evident, at least, that the older man knew it had been Sari who he'd seen, and was implying that she was in danger.

She was the maiden of the town of myth: a sacred being, both a god and a courtesan. But in reality, she was a girl who cared for people deeply and was earnest in everything she did. The smallest gestures made her happy. She expressed her gratitude as easily as breathing. At times she was short-tempered, at others she was forgiving. She was a little uneasy about her own future, but determined to bear her duties regardless.

He knew her delighted laughter, and he knew her lonely smiles. He also knew that neither the people of Irede nor the Werrilocia family would ever be able to see her separate from the duties she'd been born to inherit.

That was why he had thought that he, at least, would safeguard the time she had to be herself—to be free.

But this was the result. He had allowed her to fall into the hands of malefactors a second time. Regret and cold anger took over his thoughts. Xixu clenched his fists tightly and stared fixedly at the older man.

“Where is she?”

“Shall I show you the way, Your Highness?”

Xixu had no reason to refuse.

※

Baron Nedos led Sari toward the basement of the manor. As she descended a poorly lit staircase, she began to feel ill, recalling a recent memory of a similar time.

“Is something the matter? You look unwell.”

“Do forgive me. The air’s a little unpleasant.”

It was an excuse, but also the truth. The scent wafting up from the bottom of the staircase was a chaotic mix of sweet and sickening. Now that she had noticed it, Sari felt as though she was going to throw up. She covered her nose and mouth with her hand. The baron, below her on the staircase, smiled and retrieved something from his breast pocket.

“It *is* the basement, so not much can be done about the poor air. Here, wear this. It should help a little.”

The baron held a white flower brooch out to her. The flower appeared to be real, and while the large ornament was somewhat out of shape—likely because it had been in his pocket—when she took it, its invigorating fragrance tickled her nose. Sari examined the brooch carefully—it had a pin attached to it.

“I’ve never seen this flower before.”

“It’s an import from the south. Besides, it has to be rare. That flower is the mark that grants guests entry into the basement.”

“Ah... Then I’ll have to wear it somewhere where it’s easy to see.”

After some thought, Sari pulled one of the ornate hairpins out of her silver hair, slid the flower brooch onto it, then returned it to its original place, fixing

her hair as she did so. She had only done it to avoid pinning a hole through the kimono the king had lent her, but apparently it served well as a hair ornament too. The baron looked up at her, surprised.

“It looks very becoming on you. Though now it might be difficult to discern it as a mark.”

“I’m sure I can count on your help to explain,” she flirted innocently.

The baron gave her a conceding smile, and they resumed walking down the staircase.

Before long, Baron Nedos beckoned her over to an entryway from which purple-tinged light leaked out. Beyond it lay a spacious atrium that stretched even further down.

Sari looked down from over a balustrade. A brief few words could never be enough to describe the view before her. Not because the sight was difficult to put into words, but because there was just *so much* to take in.

The basement was a size larger than the foyer above ground, and three stories worth of height were segregated into “playgrounds” where the guests gathered on multiple levels of flooring. Because of this, the various areas were neatly compartmentalized, and everybody was guaranteed an unobstructed view.

Some areas had large tables that facilitated gambling, and others had pedestals atop which girls that might as well have been naked danced. All the nobles who watched on, drinking cups in hand, had white flowers pinned to their chests.

It was no riddle that this obscenity was the source of the sweet and sickening scent. Sari imagined how deep Xixu’s frown would get if he saw all this and almost burst out laughing. On the surface, her expression was a mask of surprise. The baron peered at her, smiling.

“What do you think? Is it to your liking?”

“It’s wonderful,” Sari said, without any delay. She smiled charmingly, and curiosity sparkled in her blue eyes. “What will you have me taste first?”

“Hmm. What do *you* want? I’ll fund you, should you wish to gamble. If you would rather put on a show...well, I won’t stop you, but I imagine His Highness wouldn’t be pleased.”

“Oh? But he has nothing to do with me anymore,” Sari said dismissively, as though she were tossing away a toy she’d grown bored of. She looked at the baron with blatantly flirtatious eyes. “In the first place, he doesn’t know what being a courtesan means, nor what to do with one. He’s quite boorish. He wished to buy out the contract of a young girl like me.”

“A testament to his integrity, I imagine.”

“Even so, I’m a woman born of Irede. I was raised to become a courtesan. To be carried away in the midst of that—the gentlemen of the capital are so arrogant, don’t you think?”

She pouted, and the baron forced a smile. Sari did not miss the calculation in his eyes.

Little by little, she revealed her immaturity. She wouldn’t be candid about it, but she would divulge just enough so that he had a grasp on who “she” was.

She was an apprentice courtesan of Irede. She admired the glamor of the capital, and also felt hostile toward it. She was dissatisfied with the young man who’d brought her here, considering him a stick-in-the-mud, but was a little in love with him too. Above all, she was curious, with immature ambitions. She was the type of fool who could easily go missing at a soirée such as this, with guests such as these, never to be seen again.

There was no need for her to make any of that explicit. She would leave intentional gaps for him to fill in. It was easy to make the other person think they were superior when one did that. They would think: *I know who this girl is.*

In reality, the courtesans of Irede—even the younger girls—were not so simpleminded. They were all women of the night, masters at their craft, and almost never allowed their true selves to show. It might seem like they revealed what lay inside, but even that was a guise—because in doing so, it was easier to influence others in whatever manner they wished. For this reason, most of their guests carried false impressions of Irede’s courtesans.

Borrowing upon what her predecessors had established, Sari slowly led the baron along. Without realizing, he would come to think that he could make use of her.

Baron Nedos brought her to a table and took two of the wineglasses arranged upon it. The wine in them was light pink, with floating white flower petals, and the baron offered one to Sari.

“Here, please have a drink.”

“Thank you.”

She considered the possibility that it was drugged, but as far as she could tell from a taste with the tip of her tongue, it was nothing more than ordinary fruit wine.

Holding their wineglasses, the pair observed the next table over, where players were gambling over a game of playing cards. A man of ample proportions, a sophisticated old woman, and several flamboyant noblewomen watched the black-suited dealer’s hand movements with focused attention. Diagonally behind them, a number of almost-naked girls were entwined with each other in a shallow bathtub filled with wine, cheered on by their enthusiastic onlookers. At the table next to them, female guests surrounded a robed fortune teller.

The baron began introducing Sari to the separate playgrounds in succession. The pair descended the levels, swimming through the sordid atmosphere.

It was fortunate that she’d worn a kimono. The other guests wouldn’t be able to get her to undress so easily. She had already seen a number of noblewomen who’d stripped their underclothes, perhaps influenced by the alcohol. As Sari cast sidelong glances at their foolish appearances, she handed her empty wineglass to an attendant.

“Are you all right?” the baron asked, eyeing her small frame. He’d examined Sari like this several times already, checking in on how she was feeling, and it reminded her of a physician’s inspection. He indicated a couch by the wall. “You must be tired. Perhaps you should rest for a spell?”

“Yes... Thank you.”

So far, Sari hadn't seen anybody's liver being gouged out. Nobody had tried to do so to her either, but there *was* a matter that attracted her suspicion.

Ever since she had stepped foot in here, the air had seemed off.

It wasn't the sickening scent of wine and sweat and other, more obscene bodily fluids, but the atmosphere itself. It felt as though everybody, en masse, was intoxicated, and as time went on it was only getting worse. Sari hid her suspicion as she surveyed the room, wondering what the true cause behind the inexplicable air was. Then, she spotted a black shadow far away, near the ceiling.

"A...shade?"

The spider was the size of a human infant, but it was just a shadow with no physical form. Left alone, it would not provoke any kind of change so quickly. In fact, it had likely just been drawn here by the stagnant air.

Sari tore her gaze away from the spider—and almost collided with a woman who'd suddenly appeared in front of her. She stopped just in time, and bowed to the woman.

"Pardon me. I wasn't watching where I was going."

The woman standing in Sari's way was old, plump, and wearing a black gown. She looked familiar, and Sari realized it was because she'd been there earlier when Xixu had introduced her to Marquess Garaq.

The woman looked down at Sari, misgivings in her eyes. "Baron, do you think it prudent to bring His Highness's precious butterfly here?"

"His Highness parted with her himself. Apparently, they had a falling out."

"My, is that so?"

The woman ran her gaze all over Sari's body. There was nothing but greed within it—not the disdain most noblewomen had for courtesans, nor even curiosity. Just a bottomless hunger. Sari felt an instinctive sense of repulsion. The woman's fat fingers seized her chin.

"Has His Highness laid a hand on you?"

The blunt question was exactly what Sari had been waiting for. She could

finally complete the detour Xixu had forced her to take.

“Why should I have to tell you?” she asked irritably. She didn’t need to give a straight answer to hint at the truth.

The woman snorted and laughed. “So you haven’t known a man. Silly thing. Still, this is quite opportune.”

“What’s ‘opportune’?”

“Baron, I’d like her.” The woman looked past Sari, at Baron Nedos.

Sari turned to the man, expression doubtful. “Baron?”

“She’s such a pretty little dear,” the woman said. “She’s sure to be far more *potent* than the other girls. Well?”

“She’s...”

The baron hesitated, appearing as though he was trying to think of a way to turn down the demand. In contrast, the woman seemed entirely unmindful of him. Perhaps out of excitement, her words were gradually getting more inarticulate.

“Surely it’s fine,” she said. “I want *this* girl. I’ll have her. I mean, look at her.”

“Please wait, madam,” the baron said.

“Ah, I could just gobble her right up!”

The chill that ran down Sari’s spine was not because the woman had grabbed her kimono’s collar, but because the look in her eyes was clearly not that of somebody sane. Her pupils quivered as they drifted in differing directions, and her mouth had slackened to reveal yellow teeth and drooling saliva.

Sari was frozen in mute shock at her grotesque appearance. Meanwhile, the woman, with baffling strength, forcibly pulled open her kimono, exposing her pale chest.

Sari’s mouth was on the verge of opening to say something to stop the woman’s hand, but another voice cut in, resonant and cold.

“How unsightly.”

Sari felt as though she’d been pierced with an icicle, and swallowed her

breath. From the side, a snow white hand seized the hand on her kimono.

Elegant, yet oppressive, Fyra stepped between Sari and the woman in the black gown, and looked down at the latter with naked disdain. “Have you lost all sense of decency?”

Fyra dominated the vicinity with her lofty presence as she confronted the woman. Behind her stood Marquess Garaq, the lord of the manor, and he looked over the pair nervously.

The woman let go of Sari’s kimono and turned to Fyra. “Impudent bitch. Are you getting in my way?”

Fyra laughed scornfully. “Such *vulgarity.*”

The woman immediately attempted to grab Fyra, but she took a step back and evaded her. Baron Nedos swiftly stepped behind the woman and held her back.

“Madam, I suggest we put this to rest and head for the chamber now. You cannot choose her, but there are plenty of other girls.”

“I want *her*! She’ll make me beautiful, I know it!”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible. She...”

The baron trailed off, but Sari only heard his silence as the words, *“...can be used.”* She looked at her cousin, who was still staring at the noblewoman with contempt; in every way, Fyra held herself like a queen. Sari did her best to repress her ingrained aversion to her cousin.

Here and now, she had to treat Fyra as a stranger.

Marquess Garaq must have invited Fyra down here. On her chest she wore the white flower that signified her as a guest. A red-haired courtesan on a couch nearby, perhaps having sensed the friction, watched the proceedings with open curiosity.

The baron managed to pull the noblewoman away. He signaled Marquess Garaq with his eyes, and he hurriedly stepped over in response. The pair restrained the woman from both sides and began to lead her away.

Fyra looked sidelong at them and said, “My. Do you intend to leave me

behind? Or are you implying that I should follow along?”

The baron glanced back at Fyra, irritation flashing across his features, but it made way for a pensive expression when he noticed Sari beside her, looking inquisitive. The two men had a brief, whispered discussion, and at its apparent conclusion, Marquess Garaq nodded at Fyra.

“V-Very well. Please come along.”

“And me, Baron?” Sari asked. “I’m rather interested in this talk of ‘becoming beautiful.’”

“Right...” The baron smiled yieldingly. “You may come too.”

Sari had been taken aback by the noblewoman’s sudden frenzy, but she was getting the feeling that her plan had come to fruition.

She and Fyra walked side by side behind the marquess and the baron, who were soothing the woman between them as they headed toward a door further into the back of the atrium.

The other nobles in attendance paid their group no mind, either having lost interest, or never having cared about a minor squabble in the first place. As Sari watched their surroundings carefully, Fyra silently handed over her own thin shawl. Sari thanked her with a look, accepted it, and put it on, covering the front of her kimono, which was open wide enough to expose her chest.

They passed through the door and into a spacious, lengthy passageway beyond. At the end, there was a locked door, which continued into a set of stairs that led further down. After this lengthy journey, they finally reached a single chamber. As the baron ushered the noblewoman inside first, he turned to Sari.

“This may surprise you at first. Also, not a word to anyone.”

“I understand.”

Sari nodded, and the baron beckoned her inside. She stepped through the doorway with Fyra and was inundated by the stifling fragrance of flowers. Grimacing reflexively, Sari looked around the room—and her breath caught in her throat.

About half of it was exactly what she'd expected.

The excessively large chamber was roughly as wide as the atrium they'd just left, and a number of black, iron-barred cages were lined up against the walls, leaving an empty space in the chamber's center.

Within that space was an elevated stage, upon which stood an altar wide enough for a person to lie down on. The altar was fashioned from black stone, and it looked as though it may have served the purpose of making religious offerings. Carved in its side were three different customized grooves, which stored large bladed implements.

The baron must have let go of the noblewoman, because she ran over to one of the cages. Inside were several girls around Sari's age, wearing only thin, see-through shifts, and they shrank away from the woman, who was clutching the bars of the cage. Their eyes quivered with terror, as though they knew all too well what was going to happen to them.

The noblewoman, her eyes bloodshot, carefully examined each girl as though she were savoring them. "Wh-Wh-Which one...should I pick?"

Her attention had been completely diverted toward the contents of the cage. Of the other cages, another held only boys, yet another, burly men, and more still contained serpents and beasts. It was a menagerie reminiscent of a display case. Fyra, who had been silently looking over the room, directed a cynical smile at Marquess Garaq.

"This is what you wanted to show me? What a fine hobby you have."

"No, this, I..."

Sari didn't spare a single glance toward the flustered man as he shook his head. Her attention was solely focused on the girls cowering away from the noblewoman's gaze. The marquess, taking notice of this, placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Is something amiss?"

"Who are those girls?"

"Merchandise. Not like you."

During their exchange, the noblewoman seemed to have made her choice. She forced her thick arm through the bars and pointed at the petite girl cowering furthest back in the corner.

“I-I want *her.*”

“Very well,” the baron said, raising his hand.

Three men entered from another door, dressed in the attire of manservants. At the baron’s direction, they went to the cage of girls and dragged the noblewoman’s choice out, bringing her to the altar in the center of the chamber.

“N-No! Please!”

The heartrending shriek echoed throughout the chamber—a scene straight out of a nightmare. The girl was lifted onto the altar and shackled to it while the noblewoman stood to the side, practically salivating.

Sari turned to the baron beside her, eyes piercing. “What are you going to do to her?”

“You want to become beautiful too, don’t you?” The gaze he directed at her was once again that of a physician, searching for any kind of change. When Sari stared back, unblinking, doubt flickered across the baron’s face for a moment, but it soon gave way to an unfathomable smile. “Well, just watch. It shall soon be over.”

“No. Wait.” Sari pushed his hand from her shoulder, and indicated toward the girl on the altar with her eyes. “Baron... If you intend to harm her, then I won’t stay silent.”

The tone of her voice changed. The only ones to notice were Fyra and the baron. Fyra, who had been occupied with the flustered Marquess Garaq, dropped her cold smile and returned her attention to Sari. Feeling her cousin’s gaze on her, Sari continued.

“What a courtesan sells is her nights, not the flesh and blood of her own self. I will not abide by you ignoring that.”

“‘Courtesan’?” The noblewoman seemed to find fault in Sari’s words. She

turned her head to look at Baron Nedos. “They’re courtesans? Not virgins?”

“You would take her word over mine?” the baron returned.

“Whether she does or not is of no consequence,” Sari said.

As she spoke, she lightly pushed the baron aside with her left hand. Her slender arm should not have possessed much strength, but nevertheless, the man toppled backward wordlessly. Sari didn’t bother to watch him fall as she stepped toward the altar. The men around it cast doubtful looks at her. Without stopping, she raised her left hand and pointed at one of them.

“Bind.”

The spell pierced the man’s chest like an unseen arrow. He immediately crumpled, and seeing him go down changed the expressions on the faces of the other two. One moved forward in an attempt to restrain her—but before his thickset arms reached her, they were struck down from the side by a slender metal rod.

“Ngh...!”

“Don’t touch her with your filthy hands,” Fyra scoffed as she twirled a retractable cane.

Meanwhile, Sari used her power to deal with the other man and the noblewoman. This close to the new moon, she didn’t need to focus on not killing them—they would just have difficulty moving their bodies for a short while.

After she’d incapacitated them all, Sari retrieved the key to the shackles from the ground where it had fallen and used it to free the girl on the altar. The girl, her face streaked with tears, clung to Sari desperately.

“H-Help me...”

“Everything’s okay now.”

There was no need for any further investigation. All that was left to do was free the captive girls, report this to the royal authorities, and be done with it. Sari rubbed the back of the girl clinging to her and examined the other cages. The occupants were watching the conflict outside with deadened eyes. They

seemed off to Sari in a way she couldn't put her finger on. The same sickness she'd felt in the playgrounds above filled the air.

The baron pushed himself up off the ground and glared at Sari standing by the altar, clear sarcasm in his eyes. "Now this is a predicament... Has it had too much of an effect? I must admit, I never would have expected you to have such a 'desire.'"

"I never cared for attaining beauty. I'm quite happy with how I am now."

"I believe you. But... No, perhaps it hasn't had much effect at all?"

"What are you talking about?"

The manservants had not yet risen from the ground. Fyra was standing over them holding her metal cane, a sadistic smile on her face. Seeing her made Sari feel somewhat uneasy. Sari tapped the scraped and scratched hands of the girl clinging to her in an attempt to get her to release her hold, but she only hugged Sari with increasing strength.

Sari's worry that something was wrong deepened. The baron shrugged theatrically.

"You must be feeling as though you're the only one who's been left out. I suppose that's what would happen if you put it in your hair."

"My hair...? Ah, the flower?"

Sari quickly put a hand to her head and pulled out her entire ornate hairpin, white flower still attached. Its invigorating fragrance assailed her nose, but that was it. Nothing about it seemed out of place.

Yet, Sari recalled that she'd seen the flower everywhere in the playgrounds, not just pinned to the chests of the patrons. She herself had drunk wine with the white petals floating in it. When she realized that the sweet, cloying scent filling this chamber was also that of the flower, Sari tossed her hairpin away.

The baron's tone was relaxed. "The scent of that flower has the ability to free a person from their inhibitions. Everybody has a desire or two secreted away in their hearts. The flower makes them come to the surface, little by little, without the person noticing."

“‘Free their inhibitions’...?”

If that was true, then the reason Sari was fine had to be because she wasn’t a “person.”

Due to the fact that either her mind, desires, or flesh—or even all three—were not that of a human, the abnormality had failed to take root, allowing her to maintain her self-awareness.

Sari looked sideways at her cousin. Fyra’s smile as she pointed her cane at the downed men had more delight in it than usual. Was she sane, or under the influence of the flower? Sari wanted to check, but the thought of doing so scared her. She returned her gaze to the baron and found her words again.

“Even so, I still—”

“If you’re awaiting somebody’s aid, then I would advise you not to bother. In any case, you won’t need it before long.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. Here, look.”

The man turned and opened the door behind him. When Sari saw who was standing there, relief overcame her, and she cried out the name of her companion.

“Xixu!”

However, she immediately realized that something was wrong with him. His dark eyes had a frozen, dulled look in them that she’d never seen before. There was no trace of the usual sourness in his demeanor. His expression lacked any kind of emotion, making it seem fake, and reaffirming that his base features were indeed handsome.

Seeing the white flower brooch on the young man’s chest was like a sudden blow to Sari.

“No...”

There was no change in his expression. He didn’t even look at her. This, more than anything, sent a chill through her heart.

Sari almost took a step forward before remembering the courtesan girl still clinging to her. The girl's eyes were hollow as she refused to loosen her hold, seemingly driven by a sole motivation: her desire to be rescued.

The baron smiled at Sari. "I don't know how it is in Irede, but many of the young courtesans in the capital, at their core, are fiercely dependent on others. They are at the very bottom of a deep, dark pit, and that is precisely why they wish that someday, someone will come along to save them. That is what makes them so convenient to use, whether it be as companions for the guests upstairs, or to be devoured down here."

"'Convenient to use'...?"

She now knew why he had been having courtesans abducted, but all it did was worsen the sickening feeling in her chest. Sari silently apologized to the courtesan girl and struck her with her power. The girl's slight frame slumped onto the altar.

Her movements freed, Sari turned back to face Baron Nedos—and Xixu standing beside him.

The young man stood in place, looking as though his spirit had been drained from his body. The baron took one glance at him and smiled again.

"His Highness the prince is famous for being a hard-headed bore. At first, I had planned to invite him here after taking you hostage."

"Is that why you tried to have me abducted?"

"Yes. Though that fell through. Still, you played the part of hostage excellently in the end, so there's no issue."

"I..."

If Xixu had heard that she was down here, there was no chance he *wouldn't* have come after her.

Sari wanted to say that he should have just let her be, but she knew he wouldn't have even considered that. The result was that he was now the hostage instead. Sari felt an indescribable sense of guilt. In the depths of her memories, her own voice whispered: *I knew I shouldn't have left his side.*

But it would not help her now to regret what had already been done. She had to get through this herself. Timidly, Sari studied the young man.

“Xixu...? Xixu, you’re okay, right?”

“I suspect the man that you know is no longer there,” the baron said. “Every person has hidden desires. Once they have been unveiled, a person may appear entirely unrecognizable. Though I, for my part, believe that what lies underneath is the natural way a person should be.”

The baron laughed in a satisfied manner and turned to the silent young man, continuing his address toward his handsome features. “Isn’t that right, Your Highness? I’m sure you have a desire you’ve been stifling for goodness knows how long. Say, removing the high-handed king from power and improving this country for the better yourself, for example.”

Sari took a sharp breath. So *that* was his aim.

The baron wished to depose the king who constantly enacted reforms to old conventions, and install his own puppet on the throne. Moreover, if he brought the members of the aristocracy attending this soirée under his influence, it would be equal to having half of the capital in his grasp.

Sari shifted her gaze to Marquess Garaq, who was still restless and fidgeting. He had to be another ringleader in this plot, given that he had a place such as this concealed under his estate. Seemingly unable to bear the tension in the air any longer, the man, who had been sending glances at Fyra, hurried over to Xixu’s side.

“Y-Your Highness, please, once you ascend to the throne, could you—I would greatly appreciate it if you could—ah, the Werrilocia...”

“‘Werrilocia’?” Sari repeated.

Why was he bringing up her family’s name? Surprised, Sari looked at her cousin, but Fyra merely continued to smile coldly down at the unconscious men on the floor.

The baron must have seen the confusion on Sari’s face, because he said amiably, “The foundation of our new country should be firm, you see. As an example, the ancient nation of Werrilocia is said to have passed down

techniques that allowed them to communicate with a god and obtain their divine protection."

"A god's divine protection...?"

Sari almost pointed at her own face out of sheer reflex, but managed to contain her reaction to a surprised blink of her eyes. The baron, oblivious, continued his speech with the ease of one who was entirely comfortable with the situation.

"We, too, wish that protection for our country. The Werrilocia storehouse is a repository of old inheritances. If we obtain those, it should strengthen our influence significantly. Though, Marquess Garaq has another interest too—namely, that woman there."

"You mean...?" Sari turned.

Fyra must have heard the baron, because she finally looked up. "My, he must have strange tastes indeed if he desires *me.* But I'm afraid he's not my type. He's utterly boring on the inside and out."

The merciless bisection made Sari wince, but it seemed to spur on the man in question, because he placed his hand on Xixu's right shoulder. Anxiously hunched forward, he looked up at Xixu and pleaded in a voice oozing with anticipation and impatience.

"Your Highness, *please.*"

The next moment, he was thrown to the floor like a ragdoll.

Sari was unable to do anything but watch blankly. This had all just been one sudden development after another, none of which she could keep up with. Though she'd been struck dumb—*again,* and she didn't know how many times this made it—she gathered her senses and reassessed the situation.

First, Baron Nedos was still standing in the same position, looking as dumbfounded as Sari was. Her cousin, holding her metal cane, was watching Xixu with an expression that looked like she wanted to whistle. Xixu himself was looking down emotionlessly at the marquess he'd struck down. A gloved hand soundlessly drew an ornamental sword, and a low voice rang throughout the stillness of the chamber.

“Again and again I clean up your kind, and yet you keep coming back. It’s *aggravating.*”

It took Sari a moment to find her voice. “Xixu?”

“His Majesty has a policy of secrecy, and so he seems to be willing to let you move freely while he observes you...but it is glaringly obvious to me that disposing of you at every opportunity is the better option. Your very existence is intolerable.”

His dark eyes glared at all those present. His gaze was cold-blooded—so unlike his usual self—and it resembled the sharp, steel tip of a blade scrutinizing its enemies.

The baron must have finally realized what Xixu’s “desire” was, because his face stiffened and he backed away. “Your Highness... You appear to have misunderstood us.”

“‘Misunderstood’?”

“All we want is—”

The baron cut himself off and adroitly turned on his heel. With surprising agility, he sprang at Sari and pressed a knife to her slender throat. Sari, whose attention had been preoccupied with Xixu’s transformation, cried out in pain at the baron’s unrestrained strength.

“Ngh! Hey!”

“Your Highness. Please calm down and hear me out. For her sake, too.” As the baron spoke, he kicked one of the nearby manservants on the ground. When the man broke out of his light daze and opened his eyes, the baron tossed a ring of keys at him.

“Open them.”

The manservant’s startled expression froze at the short command, but he quickly seized the keys and ran toward the cages.

He moved out of view from where Sari stood, so she couldn’t tell which cage he was headed toward, but Xixu and Fyra would be able to see. Fyra had her metal cane readied, and she tracked the manservant closely with her eyes. Xixu,

on the other hand, returned the baron's gaze without a hint of concern.

"I have no need to hear anything from you. All there is to do is dispose of you, as well as those upstairs."

The baron grimaced. "Wait, Your Highness. Please. Don't you think this girl would want you to listen too?"

"No, I'm fine..." Sari said.

"Saridi."

The sheer power in the name Xixu called her by—her name as the maiden—pierced through to her very soul. Sari reflexively swallowed her breath.

Xixu stared directly at her. "*I* have something I'd like *you* to listen to. Why did you stick your nose into this despite knowing the risk it posed?"

"Xi-Xixu? I—"

"And as for *His Majesty*, purposefully dragging you into all of this... I can only assume he ignored everything I had to say. His complete lack of sense is astounding. It's due time he ceased with his nonsense."

"..."

Evidently, his anger was aimed in every direction. She didn't know how broad the definition of "human desire" awakened by the white flower was, but for Xixu, it must have been his anger at all the unreasonable individuals around him. Sari, realizing that *she* was included in that, went pale, opening and closing her mouth wordlessly. Being honest, she was more afraid of Xixu right now than the blade pressed to her throat. Her heart was still suffering the aftershocks from Xixu calling her name earlier.

Sari turned her eyes to her cousin. "Wh-What do we do?"

"First, we kill the man clinging to you. We can figure out the rest afterward, I imagine."

"That's easy to *say*..."

Since the baron was holding her from behind, she didn't have a good angle to make use of her power. Neither did she possess the strength necessary to tear

his arms away. When she saw Xixu begin to approach, she almost jumped.

“N-Not good! Let me go! He’ll cut through both of us!” she cried at the baron.

“He wouldn’t...”

“He *would*! He’s *so* mad at me—I can tell!”

From Sari’s perspective, Xixu had fallen into their enemies’ trap and had been enthralled by the flower, but from his perspective, *she* was the problem—she had ignored his warning to stay away and had ended up as a hostage down here.

As Sari struggled to free herself, the baron’s entire body shook. “Ridiculous. This can’t be. All I had to do was make the prince my puppet, and then everything...everything would have...”

His mutters gradually became more and more inarticulate. In his trembling hands, Sari saw the same madness that had taken the noblewoman. She twisted in his grip, which had slightly loosened, and looked up at him.

The baron’s expression had been normal until a few moments ago, whereas now his quivering pupils were looking in separate directions.

The scent of the flowers was especially thick, so the baron must have fallen under its influence. Perhaps his desire to attain power by using Xixu had originally been kept in check by reason, and he had never even intended to allow it to manifest.

Sari, seeing that Xixu was getting closer, exchanged a look with Fyra. She waited for her cousin to nod slightly—then pushed the baron’s arms up as hard as she could.

“Wha—”

The baron seemed to return to his senses for a moment when his hostage slipped out of his arms. However, that was when Fyra struck him in the face with her cane. Sari ignored the man as he bellowed and went down, and raised her left hand toward Xixu.

“Bind!”

An invisible force streaked into the young man’s chest. But Xixu only grimaced

slightly, and his stride continued unimpeded.

“Oh, right,” Sari said. “I guess Xixu must be used to that by now...”

“Everie? We seem to have more trouble on our hands.”

As she backed away from the approaching young man, Sari turned to look at where Fyra’s metal cane was indicating.

Her feet froze in place. Of the numerous cages, the one at the furthest back was wide open.

The powerfully built men emerging from it were approaching them with an unsavory look in their eyes.

“You’re kidding me...” Sari said.

All matters considered, though, of the group of ruffians approaching from behind and the shadeslayer approaching from in front, it was definitely the latter she was more afraid of. Sari ran over to her cousin’s side.

“Fyra, we can’t beat Xixu. We should get out of here.”

“Why don’t we lead him upstairs for fun? It’d be wonderfully cathartic if we had him massacre everybody up there, don’t you think?”

“...”

“Oh, and the country would fall apart in the process. That would be the perfect chance for me to restore the Werrilocias to power. I can’t wait to see you as queen, Everie.”

“No, um... Ugh...”

She *knew* Fyra had been acting stranger than usual. What she was saying wasn’t beyond the extent of her typical jokes, but currently, she seemed dead serious.

Xixu must have heard Fyra’s open confession, because he raised an eyebrow. “Are you planning treason?”

“I am,” Fyra said. “It sounds terribly fun. First, I’d like to start by seeing your face contorting in agony.”

“H-Huh?!” Sari exclaimed. “Um, wait, you two, please don’t fight...”

Did neither of them have any desire for peace? Sari agitatedly shifted from foot to foot, wanting to bury her head in her hands, but she didn't have the time to escape from reality right now. Coming to a decision, she turned to face the group of ruffians and raised her hand at the man in front. But just as she focused her power, he broke out into a run.

While Sari was still caught in the throes of her surprise, he stooped over, plucked a knife from the waist of a downed manservant, and thrust its point right at her.

Sari, with a sudden intake of breath at being caught off guard, leapt back and barely managed to avoid the knife. Fyra stepped in the way, and her metal cane whipped forward. The crunch of the man's nose breaking overlapped with her delighted laughter.

"Darling, I'll break every bone in your body!"

"Fyra—"

Don't overdo it, was what Sari had been about to say, but a sudden premonition made her jump to the side. She turned back to look, her balance still unsteady, and saw Xixu's hand reaching out to where she'd just been.

If she had remained unaware, he might have grabbed her and pulled her in by the back of the neck. A chill ran down Sari's spine. She could still hear Fyra's laughter from by the altar.

"Xi-Xixu," Sari said. "Calm down."

"You're the one who's agitated."

"That's true, but you have your *sword* out..."

It felt like he would skin her and string her up if he caught her. Even with just his bare hands, Xixu was easily strong enough to snap a girl's neck.

Her own imagination causing her to shudder, Sari put more distance between herself and Xixu. Three ruffians went for him in haphazard formation, but he maintained his glare toward Sari as he cut them down with ease. She keenly understood what Eid had meant when he'd said six men weren't a threat to Xixu.

At the thought that she could end up like those ruffians, Sari grew even colder. Her consciousness, compelled by her frigid body, transitioned. The eyes of the young man staring at her no longer caused apprehension to well forth, but dissatisfaction.

“Xixu. That’s quite enough. Behave.”

“I would advise you to behave first.”

“See if I care then, when you return to your senses and come begging for my forgiveness.”

“You don’t think you’ve made *any* kind of mistake of your own? After ending up down here? What happened to your clothes?”

“This is just...!”

Holding the loosened front of her kimono closed with her right hand, Sari snapped the fingers of her left. Light burst forth and snaked into the air, striking a group of men who were closing in on Fyra.

She had a rough understanding of everything that was happening in the spacious chamber without needing to see it.

However, Sari was not consciously aware of this expansion of her senses. Neither did she pay any mind to the girls she knew were cowering in their cage, or the large snake she knew was slithering out of the open door of its own. Nor to the cage beside that one, where a giant golden wolf that hadn’t been there before had appeared unnoticed and was staring fixedly at her.

Sari could also sense that somebody was observing the proceedings from the other side of the doorway Xixu had entered through. But for the moment, all of her attention was directed at the young man before her.

She snapped her fingers several times. “Before lecturing me, why don’t you reflect on your own circumstances? What are you planning to do, striding about in such a bloodthirsty manner? If you truly mean to massacre everybody, shall I lend you my assistance?”

“That isn’t what’s important right now. I cannot let you continue to simply do as you please.”

“Do you think you can stop me? You, a human?”

“Saridi.”

When he called her name, Sari jumped in place. When she realized what she’d done out of sheer reflex—all too late—she flushed bright red. Embarrassment and anger swirled in her chest.

“You...”

The heat on her face felt as though it were spreading throughout her entire body. She *had* to say something back, but couldn’t find the right words. She almost unleashed a tirade of insults one would usually hear in a quarrel between children, but she barely held it back between her clenched teeth.

Xixu held his left hand out to her. “Come here.”

Sari hesitated. “You’re going to skin me.”

“I won’t. Just come.”

Sari stubbornly shook her head at his repeated beckoning. The furrow in Xixu’s brow deepened.

It was the first time that baleful expression of his had been directed at her. Her face stiffened, and on the inside, she shrunk back. At the same time, however, she questioned the irrationality of her having to back down—*she* was the sane one here, after all.

Sari made up her mind, and removed the bracelet from her left arm. “I’ve grown tired of dealing with your temper. Sleep for a while. I’ll find a pond to throw you in later.”

All she had to do was knock him out with a slightly more forceful application of her power.

As she raised her left hand, Sari glanced in the direction of the altar. Fyra was standing atop it, kicking a man off and into the path of the oncoming snake. It was a ghastly spectacle, but it didn’t evoke any particular kind of emotion in Sari. She returned her gaze to Xixu—only to scream shrilly as she was suddenly looking down at the floor.

“Hyah!”

“Don’t talk.”

She kicked her feet in the air. All it had taken was the one moment where she’d taken her eyes off of him, and Xixu had caught her. Sari, who was being carried under his arm, saw Xixu raise his sword at a ruffian that had thrown himself at them, and hurriedly curled into herself to avoid being entangled in the exchange. All she saw afterward was fresh blood as it splattered across the floor.

When the ruffian fell, Sari vehemently voiced her objections at the way Xixu was manhandling her—this was no way to treat a god.

“L-Let me go! I’ll get mad!”

“Then that will make two of us. Settle down. Do you want me to punish you?”

“...”

The image that came to Sari’s mind was of him spanking her as though she were a child. She’d never been subjected to that before, even when she was small. The blood drained entirely from her face. She bit her lip and decided to suffer a small humiliation to avoid a larger one.

In a faint voice, she said, “I’m...I’m sorry.”

“Are you?”

“Yes...”

He set Sari down on the ground. But before she could breathe a sigh of relief, Xixu picked her up again, this time slinging her over his shoulder. Sari, now looking down at the floor from an even higher vantage point, immediately placed her hands against his back to steady herself. Her field of vision moved in tandem with Xixu as he surveyed the room.

“I-I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Can you open the cages? We’ll free the captives.”

“I think I can. But I don’t know if they’ll go. The flowers must have gotten to them. The girl from earlier was acting strange.”

You’re acting strange too, she wanted to add, but she refrained. She didn’t

know what he'd do to her if she did.

Sari, the cold in her body having vanished elsewhere, looked at her cousin, who unsurprisingly seemed to be running low on stamina. "If only we had more people..."

"Then shall I lend a hand?"

The sound of the light voice coincided with the entry door opening to reveal a red-haired courtesan. Recognizing her from the playgrounds upstairs, Sari's eyes widened. Fyra's voice called out from behind her.

"Resenté?"

"Hey." The courtesan raised her hand in a casual gesture. "Here I am. Looks like you're all having fun."

Two men stepped up from behind her and entered the room. The expressions they each made when they caught sight of Sari being carried like luggage were indescribable. She cried out in surprise upon seeing them.

"Vas? Eid? Why are you here?"

"I was directing this entire venture, you see," the red-haired woman said, pointing out a cage to Eid. "I heard you were quite eager to join, Miss Princess, so I didn't stop you. You'll have to forgive me for that."

Eid, in his usual kimono, turned and headed for the cage containing the courtesans, disregarding Sari as though she didn't exist.

That was when Sari finally realized who the red-haired courtesan was. "Oh. Resenté Disram... You're Fyra's lover, and..."

The courtesan was the proprietress of her own establishment in the capital and had been suspicious of Baron Nedos from the beginning. It had to have been her who'd hired Eid as a bodyguard, and she must have infiltrated the soirée in order to expose what was happening herself.

Xixu was glaring at Resenté suspiciously, and in his place, Sari asked the most pertinent question. "Um, are you sane?"

"Never been saner. Because of who I am, this kind of thing doesn't affect me. I can't speak for these two though."

“We’ll be out of here soon enough,” Vas said, holding a handkerchief over his mouth and nose. With his other hand, he displayed a bundle of documents. “There’s more than enough evidence here for our purposes.”

Sari hadn’t asked him for his help, but he had evidently been working behind the scenes anyway. She bowed her head toward her cousin.

“Thank you...”

“Given the obvious failures of my idiot sister over there, I’ll overlook this incident. Now, would you care to explain why you’re...there?”

“Please don’t ask...”

She had been no help at all, and on top of that, now had to endure the humiliation of Xixu carrying her in front of everyone. She didn’t even have the energy to bother making excuses anymore.

“Let’s go, Xixu,” Sari pleaded. “I’m sure everything will be fine now.”

The young man remained silent. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Should she bring up the king, or would that only make matters worse? As she wavered, a male voice spoke up from further back in the chamber.

“We have trouble. I didn’t think it would come down this far.”

“What would?” Sari twisted to look at Eid, and upon seeing what he was indicating, immediately had the answer to her question.

High above, a massive spider clung to the ceiling. The shade was as large as a grown man and must have been drawn here by the essence of the place. Resenté and Vas didn’t appear able to see it—they were casting their eyes about in different directions. Sari’s position made her unable to focus much power, but she raised her left hand regardless.

“Bind.”

Her unseen power first pierced Eid’s chest, then the spider. The latter crashed to the floor with a weighty thud, and Eid pulled it toward himself with the ease of familiarity. Sari relaxed; she knew he could handle it.

“A shade?” Vas asked her.

“Yes.”

“I see.”

His response was apathetic, but Sari, who had known him for so many years, could hear something else behind it.

“What is it?” she asked. “Tell me.”

“It’s nothing of importance. The situation upstairs has merely devolved somewhat.”

“Devolved?”

Sari’s first thought was that somebody had gone berserk in the playgrounds. However, Vas’s answer exceeded her expectations.

“The scent of the flowers leaked above ground, and it also appears that shades are leading people astray. Over half of the guests have lost themselves, and a brawl has broken out.”

Sari blinked. “What?”

“My, that sounds fun.”

Sari’s head sank despondently when she heard her female cousin voice her irresponsible thoughts. If she could be granted one wish right now, it would be to jump forward in time to when it was all over. The prospect of the trouble to come made all the strength in her body leave her. She let the arms supporting her upper body go limp, and she dangled upside down against Xixu’s back.



“I know it’s my own fault...but I’m so tired...”

She couldn’t do much about the problems that were piling up, one after another. The most she could manage right now was releasing the captive people here and helping them leave. Sari rallied her willpower and pushed herself up.

“Xixu, put me down.”

“I don’t trust you enough to put you down.”

“But I apologized...”

He was treating her like a hazardous material to be quarantined and a prisoner to be confined, all at the same time. Sari slumped back down.

Resenté laughed happily. “You two are adorable.”

“What part of this is adorable...?” Sari mumbled.

“Enough playing around, please. I suggest we leave.” Vas, who had grabbed his sister’s arm and was pulling her along, pointed up.

Sari thought leaving as soon as they could was the most ideal course of action too, but when she looked over to the cages, she saw that Eid was having trouble moving the courtesans. They had inhaled the scent of the flowers, so it would be difficult to direct them around.

Resenté moved to help him, and Xixu, still carrying Sari, followed. They passed the unmoving large snake on their way there. Sari couldn’t tell whether it was alive or dead. She didn’t want to think about it, so she averted her eyes.

A courtesan girl who Eid had freed from the cage was behaving similarly to the girl Sari had freed earlier, clinging to his arm and trembling. Eid’s beautiful features appeared irritated as he looked down at the girl, but he also seemed just the slightest bit at a loss.

Resenté stepped up to them and patted the girl lightly on the cheek. “Come on, we have to go. If we drag our feet, this man here will lose his senses too.”

Eid looked at her for a moment. “Did you lie about that medicine you gave me?”

“No, it works. A little bit.”

Ignoring the acrid look on Eid’s face, Resenté indicated toward the entrance. Contrary to her relaxed tone, her movements were brisk, and the girls—perhaps because discipline was ingrained into them—began to follow her orders. In the meantime, Eid opened the adjacent cage filled with young boys.

“I know where the back entrance is, so we’ll take them out that way,” Resenté said. “Though it will take a while for the flower’s influence on them to dissipate.”

“Then the only problem left is the one upstairs...” Sari murmured.

Vas made a face. “That is none of your concern. They are reaping what they sowed.”

“The people above ground haven’t done anything wrong.”

“They’re no different,” he pointed out coldly. “It is simply a matter of opportunity—in another time and place, they would have ended up the same.”

Vas was making no attempt to hide his intentions of leaving here as soon as possible. Behind him, Fyra wore an ominous smile that suggested she would barge upstairs and go on a rampage if merely given the opening. Sari wanted to get her outside quickly, and if possible, keep her away from Xixu too.

After some thought, she looked at Eid. “How bad is it up there?”

He frowned as though he meant to ignore her. But after being rebuked by Resenté’s gaze, he opened his mouth.

“Bad. You know how people become when shades get to them. They take their grudges out on each other. Things are a lot easier to clean up in Irede.”

“Mmm...”

Even if people became influenced by shades and started swinging sharp objects around, one couldn’t just cut them all down—they were still *people.*

To a person of Irede, the shades of the outside world were more troublesome if given enough time to deteriorate a situation like this. Just the idea of having to slay the shades clinging to the ceiling above a brawl was exhausting.

Sari looked down at the young man carrying her. “If we can just do something about the shades, it should limit the casualties.”

It had originally been the king who’d recommended that Sari attend this soirée, and he had also instructed Xixu to search for a wife here. In which case, it was safe to say that whatever occurred would find its way to his ears—especially since the mayhem had leaked above ground. The king was a shrewd man.

Vas looked exasperatedly at Sari, who was looking up at the ceiling again. “What do you intend to do? Don’t tell me you mean to go up there and deal with every shade, one by one?”

“Of course not. But...”

They *could* do it if they gathered every shade down here.

During the recent turmoil in Irede, a countless number of snake shades had attacked Sari and drank her blood.

One could say that had been due to the influence of the shaman, but the inherent nature of a shade was no different in Irede than it was anywhere else. That Sari’s power could still sew and bind them here was further proof. She reasoned that, to them, her blood was like a flame to a moth. Having reached a conclusion, the most unique maiden on the continent nodded.

“Help the people who can be helped and go upstairs first. Leave the other cages locked, since things could get dangerous. We’ll dispose of all the shades here.”

“What? You know I’m not going to help you,” Eid said.

Ordinary people couldn’t see shades. Not even Fyra and Vas, who were related to Sari by blood. So it was entirely reasonable why he had warned her the way he had.

Sari nodded. “I know. You’ll need as many of you as possible to guide these people out, and we can’t have you staying here and losing your senses, Eid.”

“So long as you understand...”

“But you can do it, can’t you, Xixu?”

Sari placed her hands on the broad shoulder of the young man holding her. Beneath his jacket, she could feel his tempered physique. The young shadeslayer, half-brother and loyal retainer of the king, looked up at the maiden.

“Yes.”

When she heard the answer she’d been expecting, Sari smiled.

※

It took until the evacuation was more or less over for Xixu to finally put Sari down.

All throughout, Vas had been reluctant to let her stay, and Eid had called her an idiot multiple times, but in the end, Resenté had taken them away after talking them around. That she had juggled that with keeping Fyra in check too had Sari convinced she herself was no match for Resenté. The red-haired woman exemplified exactly what it meant to be a capable proprietress, and she had made Sari keenly reflect on her own inexperience.

Sari stared up at the young man standing opposite her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He was expressionless, still under the influence of the flower, and she couldn’t tell what he was thinking. However, it didn’t seem as though he was going to skin her, at least, and Sari had more faith in his abilities than anyone.

He was affected by his lack of experience currently, but in the future, he would be the most skilled shadeslayer there was. Sari knew this because she had grown up watching the shadeslayers of Irede.

She pulled a small knife out of the sash of her kimono. “Xixu, lend me your hand.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just my own blood might be too dense—it could give the shades strength.”

That was why she would mix her blood with his to call them here.

Sari cleanly ran the blade across her own palm first. When she saw the

crimson line swiftly begin to well forth, she made the same cut on Xixu's left palm. They aligned their wounds and entwined their fingers, holding each other's hand tightly.

His touch felt warm and firm. She could sense their blood seeping out, gradually making contact, and mixing. An entrancing feeling accompanied it as it creeped slowly across her skin and along her fingers, until it finally dripped off. Sari exhaled thinly and looked at the drops of blood on the floor. Something stirred noisily in her chest, and she looked back up.

The eyes set within the handsome features of the young man still lacked any emotion.

"Xixu, are you still mad?"

"Yes."

"Ngh..."

Just how much resentment did he habitually keep bottled up? Sari felt guilty that she was responsible for a part of it. Thinking back, she could only question why she had been so irritated by something so trivial—now, she only felt remorse. As her head drooped, Xixu spoke to her in a quiet voice.

"Next time, we'll talk first."

"Okay..."

"And don't leave my side."

He adjusted his grip, clasping their blood-smeared hands more tightly together. Gentle warmth, and the slightest touch of pain. Here, now, that was all there was. Sari blinked and looked up at the young man.

"I'd like to say the same."

"Oh?"

Then why had she left? It seemed so strange to her now, but perhaps that was just human nature.

Sari, feeling as though she had come a little closer to understanding how her mother had felt, said in a hoarse voice, "Stay with me. I won't let anything hurt

you.”

She wouldn’t lose him, not to anything. She would give him strength beyond that of a divine blessing. This was how the maiden of Pale Moon repaid the man who was her guest. In the ancient town of the night, it was a pledge stronger than a vow of marriage.

Yet, when Xixu heard it, he looked sincerely doubtful. “What are you saying?”

“I...”

“*I’ll* protect *you*, Saridi.”

Xixu unraveled their entwined fingers and pushed her behind himself.

At some point, the ceiling had grown dark. The lights had not gone out. The smell of Sari’s blood had drawn the shades in, and the ceiling was a writhing mass of them. Snakes, spiders, insects, birds, and more had gathered together so tightly that their outlines melted together.

Eventually, perhaps unable to bear its own weight, the melted throng of shades warped and sagged. A viscous shadow of indeterminate form dripped to the white floor and began oozing toward Sari and Xixu. More and more falling shadows joined it as it advanced, rapidly increasing its size. At last, it became a gigantic, amorphous mass, large enough to engulf one of the cages in the chamber whole.

It was less repulsive than it was simply mystifying.

Looking at the shade, Xixu muttered, “They *are* easier to clean up in Irede. When they’re human-shaped, they can’t get this big.”

“We’re really rubbing off on you. Shall I sew it to you?”

“It’s fine. Stop your bleeding.”

Sari nodded at the young man as he advanced with his sword in hand. She put pressure on her cut as she made enough distance to not get in his way.

She had nothing to fear. She trusted him. And she had no intention of letting him get hurt anyway. The girl who was a god looked at her fingertips, smeared with shared blood.

Even if death was a fate no man could avoid.

“I’ll decide when that time comes.”

She would not let anyone else take him away.

※

The large, indistinct ball of shadow stopped in the middle of the spacious chamber.

The shades of Irede had forms that mimicked humans, and depending on the individual shade, could also have inhuman physical strength and agility. In contrast, the shades elsewhere were shadows that took the form of animals, and they tended to move accordingly.

So how would this ball of shadow move? As Sari watched on with some curiosity, Xixu stepped up to it, looking entirely unconcerned, and struck at it with his sword.

However, his blade skidded across the shade’s surface when it made contact and was pulled along, its wielder’s hand going with it.

With excellent reflexes, Xixu pulled it back and then used it to knock away the sudden speartip that had been thrust out at his face. The speartip, which had formed abruptly from the ball of shadow, resembled the beak of a bird.

When a fanged jaw came for him next, Xixu jumped back to avoid it.

Sari’s eyes widened at the series of unexpected attacks. “It can make all those?”

“It must be because it’s an aggregate of many different shades. It doesn’t seem unreasonable.”

“Will you be okay? Should I help?”

“No need. Keep yourself safe. If anything comes for you, call for me.”

“Okay.”

There was no fervor in his voice. She knew that there wouldn’t have been even if he were in his right mind.

He readjusted his grip on his sword and moved once again toward the ball of

shadow. Sari watched him go, trusting in his upright and dignified figure.

The black ball of massed shades reacted to Xixu's approach with thrusting horns and fangs. He dexterously baited and avoided each offensive, cutting off each of the protruding parts with his sword.

The parts scattered when they fell, and the ball of shadow steadily grew smaller. Disinterest in his eyes, Xixu warded off an insect leg that attempted to skewer him.

"There's no end to this."

"But it's shrinking. I think if you just keep at it, it'll vanish."

By Sari's estimation, that would take just under ten minutes. This was a lot less dangerous than she'd expected it to be. It seemed Xixu was more merciless with his swordwork when he'd lost his senses.

In contrast to her thoughts, Xixu shook his head. "This is bothersome. It's a waste of time."

"You say that, but..."

He wasn't thinking of charging upstairs and running wild before the royal authorities arrived, was he? If he was, then she had to buy as much time as she could down here. Without letting it show, Sari wondered if she should sabotage him.

Unaware of her underhanded scheming, Xixu stepped closer toward the ball of shadow.

"Huh? Xixu?"

"It's time I get this over with."

As he spoke, Xixu cut down an enormous pair of insect mandibles that snapped at him. Not bothering to spare a glance at the fading shade appendage, he stepped further forward. The amorphous ball of shadow was right before his eyes. Sari watched him silently, wondering what he was going to do.

Xixu did nothing. He simply kept on walking and disappeared soundlessly into the shadows of the ball. She hadn't had a chance to stop him. Sari murmured in

shock under breath.

“Huh? No...”

There was nobody there to reply to her. Sari looked up at the approaching ball of shadow. Her body chilled to its core.

“Um...”

I have to kill it, was her natural reaction. She had to kill it and get Xixu back. He had to be somewhere in there, still.

Without much thought, Sari raised her left hand toward the oncoming shade. She didn’t need to think about how to form her power. It was something rooted in her very being.

Light formed at her pale fingertip—and then the snake on the floor moved its head. It was large and blue-black, and it rose to look at her. When Sari glanced at it, noticing its sinister form, the snake struck.

She was surprised, but not afraid. Sari swung her left hand toward the snake. The upper part of its gaping maw was blown away, but the snake’s body continued forward and coiled around her. Had it been influenced by the shade? Is that why it refused to die? Sari let out a cry of pain as it constricted tighter.

“You...stupid...!”

The ball of shadow loomed in front of Sari. She could feel the cool, slippery touch of snakeskin. Right beside her face was the snake’s jaw, half blown apart. The exposed, light pink flesh glistened.

Sari wrinkled her nose at the smell of gore, but felt nothing more than annoyance. Her right hand clawed at blue-black scales and found a grip. A thin layer of frost formed on the floor around her.

However, before Sari could pour any power into her hand, the snake’s body thumped to the floor. As she tried to comprehend what had just happened, the massive ball of shadow abruptly convulsed...and vanished.

The young man standing where its center had been looked at Sari with displeasure in his eyes. “I told you to call for me if anything came for you.”

“Xixu...”

There was a single, silver needle embedded deep in the neck of the snake's limp body, visible in a crevice between the scales. In all likelihood, it had been imbued with a maiden's spell. Intricate patterns were engraved onto it.

Xixu didn't have a scratch on him. Sari looked around the chamber, now free of the presence of shades.

"How are you safe after that?"

"I just had to sever through the center where it was all connected, and it scattered."

Sari cocked her head. "You make it sound so easy..."

Xixu returned his sword to its scabbard and walked over to her. Before she could say anything, he had hoisted her over his shoulder again.

Sari squawked. "This again?"

"We're returning to the castle. I need to talk to His Majesty."

"You're going to cause *more* casualties?"

Sari knew this was only going to become more of a tangled mess, but she didn't feel like going out of her way to stop him. More than one person bore responsibility for this ordeal. The king was Xixu's relative, so he could stand to bear some of the burden. In the first place, he had it coming for telling Xixu to find a wife. A sacred offering didn't make a vow of marriage to the god, so they had the right to take a wife, but that didn't mean she didn't find it unpleasant that the king had instructed him to do so at the same time. The king would just have to put up with Xixu venting his anger on him.

"Saridi."

"Ngh..."

Sari shuddered. Were his words powerful because he was saying her name or because he was the one saying it?

Sari looked up at the back of his head as he carried her. "Yes?"

"Currently, I have no plans to marry."

"Okay."

“His Majesty’s orders are always unreasonable.”

She didn’t know what the intent behind Xixu’s words were, but he had said it, so it must be true. Sari nodded slightly. But soon after, a different question weighed on her mind, and she voiced it.

“Was your order to be with me unreasonable too? Do you want to return to the capital?”

She had asked so directly because her curiosity had outweighed her apprehension. In this respect, she thought she was rather childish. However, if she didn’t ask now, she would never be able to. Sari pushed herself up with her hands. Xixu continued walking as he looked up at her face.

“You think it isn’t unreasonable?”

“Yes. There wouldn’t be any meaning if it wasn’t of your own will, Xixu.”

Although a woman of Pale Moon chose her guests, that did not mean she ignored her guest’s own volition. Without the consent of one’s partner, an agreement could not be formed. Even Sari, the proprietress, was no exception to this.

In the first place, receiving an unwilling offering was contrary to the origins of the practice. Then again, Sari had not read the records of every past maiden. It was possible that some of the documents in the storehouse contained histories she couldn’t even imagine.

Sari was pulled back from the digression in her thoughts by the realization that she was feeling increasingly despondent. Perhaps she had worn herself out. As she debated slumping back down, Xixu’s voice struck her ears.

“I don’t intend to return to the capital.”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“I have to protect you.”

He’d been ordered to do so by the king, no doubt. Though Sari was relieved, she also felt a sense of restlessness, rattling around inside her like a pebble. Or perhaps it was discontent. A shadeslayer of Irede existed to slay shades, not to protect the maiden.

“You really don’t have to...” she mumbled.

“Did you say something?”

“No.”

Sari wanted the regular Xixu to hurry up and come back. She was worried this one would punish her at any moment.

Next time, she would take his advice more seriously. As Sari reached this resolve, she almost slipped off Xixu’s shoulder, and he hefted her back up. She went half limp, and he began ascending the stairs.

“By the way, Saridi.”

“Yes?”

“From what you’re saying, it sounds like you’re going to choose me as your guest.”

“...”

She couldn’t find any words. Her blood instantly felt boiling hot. She flushed bright red and, unable to say anything, simply opened and shut her mouth, making flustered noises.

She had *not* made a final choice. She *had* thought that she might choose him, but she most certainly hadn’t come to a firm conclusion.

To begin with, she had thought it was too early for her to choose her guest. That was why things between her and Eid had become so complicated.

But now that Xixu had mentioned it, she realized that she must have sounded like she was saying she would be happy to receive him so long as he was willing. Sari was so embarrassed that *Xixu himself* of all people had pointed her unconscious mistake out to her that she folded in on herself in agony and clawed at his back.

“Th-That was...a figure of speech...”

“A figure of speech? What would you do if somebody misunderstood you?”

“Apologize...”

“You haven’t, yet.”

“I’m sorry.”

Would this only serve to make him angrier? Sari wanted to peek at his face, but the position she was in made doing so difficult. She just knew she’d have muscle aches later. She went completely limp and tugged on Xixu’s clothes.

“Are you mad?”

“Not particularly.” His response sounded indifferent. Evidently, the flower that exposed peoples’ desires wouldn’t be enough to tell her what she wanted to know.

Sari spared a fleeting thought for how she might end up if the flower’s scent worked on her, but given her current humiliating situation, the only prospective futures she could imagine were ones where she met with fates even more humiliating. What would Xixu say after he returned to his senses? After imagining it briefly, Sari felt silently grateful that it hadn’t affected her.

“Xixu, you’re not going to go massacre everyone, are you?”

“Your cousin is the one who wants to do that.”

“As her relative, I’m sorry...”

“You don’t need to apologize on her behalf.”

The young man carrying her reached the top of the stairs and began walking down a narrow passageway. Sari couldn’t help but wonder about the continuation of their conversation from earlier, and she tugged at the hem of his clothes.

“Even if it takes me a while to pick my guest... Will you wait for me, Xixu?”

“Of course. How you feel is what’s most important.”

Sari was relieved to hear the same answer he always gave. His kindness was the same as that of his usual self. The words he’d spoken to her until this point *had* been his true feelings.

The issue was, he wasn’t being kind in any other aspect right now. What if he really did bring her to the castle like this? As Sari worried to herself, he continued to carry her along.

Using the path Resenté had told them of, they headed toward the back entrance, hearing the sounds of the mayhem from afar. The door had been left open, but as soon as they emerged into the rear garden, a kimono-clad man blocked Xixu's path.

Eid, who hadn't changed his attire despite having left Irede, looked at them with his remaining left eye. "You're still carrying her? Put her down already. We'll be in public after we leave through the back gate."

"No."

Sari groaned pathetically when she heard Xixu's curt reply. She couldn't see Eid from where she was, but perhaps that was a good thing. It felt like the surrounding air had gone cold.

Eid was right, though. She couldn't go into public being carried like this, with her kimono loosened out of shape. Her head was beginning to feel numb. She shook it and wondered what she would have to say to Xixu to get him to put her down.

"Um, Xixu..."

"You harmed her. I can't put her down in front of you."

The arm that was holding her up tensed. Startled by his plainly antagonistic posture, Sari began to turn pale.

It would be a problem if a fight broke out here. No matter how distracted onlookers were by the chaos out front, a commotion at the back gate was sure to be seen by somebody. Even if it wasn't, if these two clashed, there was every chance someone would die.

Eid's temper had always been unstable, and it was Xixu who'd blinded his right eye. If the two fought head-on, it wouldn't just end in blood—it would end in bones and viscera. Sari, looking around at the shadowy vegetation nearby, made her voice as calm as she could manage.

"Um, Xixu, it's fine, so please put me—"

"Haven't you learned your lesson? You have a bad habit of trying to get along with everyone."

“You think that’s a bad habit...?”

“When you should be angry, *be* angry. Otherwise, you may as well just stay inside Pale Moon.”

Xixu’s voice sounded more incensed than cold, and Sari found herself at a loss for a reply. Although this may not have been the best setting in which to voice his concerns, what Xixu was trying to tell her was right. A person who could not take care of themself would only be a burden on those around them. His blunt scolding made Sari feel like she was a small child again.

“I’ll be more careful in the future...”

“Then make sure you stay still.”

The sound of him adjusting his grip on his sword overlapped with Eid’s sigh. Sari stiffened. What did she have to do to stop this? She opened her mouth to say something, anything—and then heard a familiar laugh.

“Sounds like his words have more of an effect on you than mine, Sari.”

“What...?”

A hand reached out from the darkness. Xixu made to turn, noticing it, but it had already reached the back of his neck.

Sari couldn’t tell what had happened. Only that she had been yanked off of Xixu’s falling shoulder and that she was now in another man’s arms.

The man laughed when he saw her widened eyes. “You’ve learned a good lesson. Are you hurt?”

“Thoma!”

“You’re late,” Eid said. “I almost drew my own sword.”

The two men carefully examined Xixu, slumped on the grass.

The wind in the rear garden did not carry the scent of flowers. The smell of blood and sickness that she’d already grown accustomed to had also vanished. Under the moonlight, all that was present in the air were silence and the vestiges of fatigue.

※

“Imagine my surprise when, after I came back to the estate to prepare for the fete, I found Vas at my door.” Thoma was carrying Xixu’s limp body. “I didn’t know what was going on.”

“I’m sorry...” Sari said in a small voice. She hadn’t expected to be a burden even on her brother.

She felt as though, in the past few hours, she’d made a year’s worth of apologies, but that likely just went to show how reckless she’d been these last few days. Vas would be sure to lecture her about that later.

Sari walked alongside her brother and Eid down a gravel path to the back gate. It almost seemed as if time had wound back. The bitter regret that accompanied her wistfulness was undoubtedly the fault of her own immaturity.

As Sari put her emotions in order, her brother turned to her and pointed to a carriage stopped beyond the gate. “First of all, we need to get this guy back to the castle.”

“Okay.”

“So this is it, Sari. If there’s anything you want to say, say it now.”

Sari stopped in her tracks. She knew what her brother was saying. He was advising her to not leave things unsaid between her and the man she’d known for so many years.

Standing before the gate, she looked up at the man who’d lost an eye. In the aftermath of the shaman’s plot, he had already left Irede, and when he saved her yesterday, she hadn’t been able to find the right words.

This might be her last chance. The thought bolstered her confidence.

Thoma, still carrying Xixu, waited by the gate—a short distance away, but too far to hear hushed voices. Sari studied the man who should have been familiar to her. Only the patch over his right eye reminded her that this wasn’t Irede. It was the only thing that felt wrong, and Sari’s heart ached.

She took a deep breath and began. “Thank you for rescuing me.”

“I didn’t plan on it. I was just doing what I was hired to do.”

“Then please give me a little of your time.”

She hadn’t thought of what she wanted to say. But it was already there.

It was something she’d always known. Sari thought back to her past self.

“I loved you. I’m sure of that now. But not as a potential guest. I depended on you.”

She’d taken advantage of him in the cruel way only a child knew. Eid had been close to her, someone she could act freely around. Thoma too, but it had been different with him. When she’d become the proprietress and had come to know the constraints that accompanied the role, the presence of her childhood friend, a shadeslayer, had been freeing.

Sari had only realized this after it had all fallen apart.

“But I’m the maiden of Irede,” she continued. “I can’t choose a person who hates the town as my guest. Nor will I ever leave it.”

Eid allowed a few moments to pass before responding. “You don’t think that’s just what others have told you? Isn’t Irede just tying you down?”

“It isn’t, Eid. I *am* Irede. We can’t be separated.”

If he hated Irede, then he hated her. She had certainly done her fair share of wearing him down, in her ignorance.

Then, in the end, Eid had hurt her. It had been poetic justice for what she’d done. Neither of them had been able to take the time to reach a compromise.

The man looked down at the girl of Pale Moon, all the emotion in his eye shut away. “I think Irede trapped you too.”

“It didn’t. I chose this myself.”

“Then what would you do if I destroyed it?”

“I would stand in your way before you could.”

And she would not lose to anyone. Defiance flashed in Sari’s eyes. It resembled that of a child, but with far more pride. It was a gaze that many courtesans concealed, and Eid’s beautiful features twisted in loathing. She faced his unadorned contempt and accepted it.

After several moments, Eid spoke. “Do what you want.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t drag me into anything stupid again.”

A curt dismissal. He turned on his heel and left through the gate. As the night enveloped him, Sari called out after his back in a clear voice.

“Be well.”

He didn’t respond. He may not have heard her. But Sari accepted that that was fine.

※

When they boarded the carriage, Thoma reached his hand forward from the opposite seat to rub his sister’s head.

Reassured by its warmth, Sari gave him a bittersweet smile. “Sorry. I’ve been nothing but an idiot.”

“Everybody’s an idiot, so long as they’ve still got breath in their lungs. Just don’t worry me too much, okay?”

“Okay.”

“That includes the Eid thing. Some courtesans are weak to guys like him, but I wouldn’t recommend it. He’ll pull you along while you’re with him, and you’ll turn out rotten.”

Sari looked down, chastened by the advice. “Grandmother said the same thing...”

Back then, when her grandmother had warned her, she hadn’t understood. But now she finally did...a little. In her relationships, she and her partner could not stand where they faced one another’s shadow. Because by nature, those who dwelled in the night found shadow a more intimate companion.

Bit by bit, the bumpy carriage ride seemed to take Sari from the past into the present. She leaned back against the leather-covered seat.

“I think, if nothing had happened, I might have chosen Eid. If only he’d been just a bit more willing to face the future.”

“Then he wouldn’t be him.”

“That’s an awful thing to say.”

But it was probably true. If there were a time Eid could change, it would be now, after he’d left Irede. It was spoiled of her to wish for that, but she hoped he could find a different way of life all the same.

Thoma pulled Xixu’s body, which had almost slipped off the seat, back up. “If nothing had happened, I still think you would’ve chosen Xixu.”

Sari paused. “I haven’t chosen him.”

“Yeah? But you like him, right?”

“...”

She wished he wouldn’t say it like it was as easy as adopting a kitten. She wouldn’t go so far as to say the choice would affect her *entire* life, but it was significant nonetheless.

Sari glared at Xixu, slouched against the carriage seat. The drug Thoma had administered in the back of his neck had left a dark, bruise-like mark. He and Eid had been waiting to capture Xixu from the beginning. And now Xixu was being treated like a dangerous object. Sari stared at him, recalling the day they’d first met.

“Xixu’s too decent, isn’t he?”

He was an honest person, unsuited to a town of the night. Sincere, and too serious. Poor to adapt at times, but that was a testament to how straightforward he was.

It was as though he was the inverse of Irede’s nature: a person who lived in the light of day. Perhaps that was why she found herself charmed by him.

Thoma’s smile was tinged with irony. “He is. For better or worse.”

“He’ll be out of place in Irede.”

“That would happen wherever he goes. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m not... I *told* you, I haven’t chosen him!”

She smacked her hand down on her knee for emphasis, and her brother laughed, waving her off. Was he going to treat her like a child or not? She

wished he'd be consistent.

Thoma slapped Xixu on the shoulder. "Spend as much time as you'd like thinking it over. But don't hold back because of some excuse you've made up, Sari. If you want something, say so. Though, don't end up as 'clingy' as him. That'd be trouble."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sari looked away in a huff and spotted the moon through the carriage window, thin as a line of thread hanging in the clear night sky. The new moon would soon arrive, and with it, the reopening of the storehouse.

5. Ties

As usual, the audience chamber was filled with flowers.

Gathered from across the continent, the flowers, each in their respective pots, pridefully displayed the brilliance of their colors at full bloom. Some were delicate white flowers given the epithet of “snow jewels,” and others were deep crimson and blossomed on vines. Amidst the flowerpots, which the king treated with more care than his riches, a single small pot sat atop a central pedestal within a round glass cover in order to prevent the scent from leaking out.

The maiden of Irede lifted her head and nodded. “Yes, I believe that’s the flower.”

“Hmm. And what do *you* think?”

Xixu, who had been contemplating other matters, had a slightly delayed reaction to his liege’s question.

Nevertheless, he was quick to say, “I believe so too.” Yet, the response he received from his half brother was a knowing smile that seemed to have read his thoughts. It reflexively made him want to grind his teeth together.

Xixu’s memory of yesterday’s soirée terminated partway through. He remembered accepting the invitation of a teahouse proprietor and descending stairs to the basement. He had been given a white flower...and then the rest was hazy. When he had come to, he’d found himself in a room in the castle, with Sari peering down at him worriedly. After she’d told him what had happened, he’d been speechless.

He had fallen under the influence of a flower that freed a person’s desires, yet he didn’t remember a whit of what he’d done.

When he’d asked Sari, she had forced a smile and danced around the subject, only telling him that Marquess Garaq and Baron Nedos had been involved, there had been captives downstairs, and they had been rescued.

He’d dearly wanted to know whether he’d had anything to do with the

terribly askew state of her kimono, but after her rough explanation, she'd hurried back to her own room. In the end, he'd spent the rest of the time between then and today unable to grasp the chance to hear a more detailed recount.

The king nodded, looking as though he'd had his suspicions confirmed. "As I'm sure you know, there have been a number of individuals dabbling in unsavory conduct in the city as of late. After I had them looked into, we discovered that almost all of them were addicted to this flower. The degree varied, and unfortunately, there were those among them who would have lived quiet lives if it hadn't been for the flower's effects."

The king's tone was mild, but if one listened closely, the words *"But they will be disposed of regardless"* were all that could be heard.

For Xixu's liege, this had become an opportunity to purge any latent conspirators all at once. Xixu pitied them somewhat, but the past could not be rewritten.

He had many personal matters on his mind, but he placed those thoughts aside and asked the king, "Has the source of the flowers been found?"

"It was the flower market I sent you to. The man who managed it went missing yesterday. His father-in-law, a teahouse proprietor, too."

"You mean..."

Xixu recalled the older man who'd shown him the way to the basement. If memory served, Tesed Zaras was well connected both within and outside the capital.

Yet, he had never been the source of any disturbances. Until now, he had been considered an entirely harmless individual. As Xixu pondered, he heard Sari speak in a reserved tone.

"When I was underground, I noticed somebody beyond a doorway observing us. I initially thought they had come to help, but when I asked later, nobody knew who it was. At a guess, it was the person who brought His Highness downstairs secretly watching the proceedings."

"I suppose it *was* Tesed, then," the king said.

As for the flower itself, Sari said she'd been told it came from the south. However, that would still need to be verified.

After they finished their report, the king thanked them and bade them to make their leave. Xixu, though, interjected.

"There is a matter I wish to discuss."

"Go on."

The king's answer came immediately, accompanied by a perfect smile. Perhaps he had been expecting this. Regardless, Xixu pretended not to notice and continued.

"Due to my own failure, I was unable to carry out Your Majesty's orders yesterday."

"I've already heard, but there's no issue. I'm satisfied with how the incident was resolved, and you can simply make up for it at another occasion. You've already received a number of inquiries since this morning, from the families who wish to have another chance to introduce their daughters to you, given yesterday's debacle."

"..."

Xixu knew the king was doing this on purpose, and that was what made it infuriating. Before his liege's *exemplary* character, it took all of his effort to feign composure. He schooled his face into a neutral expression, and bowed his head.

"Regarding that command. If I am to obey it, then it may interfere with another you have entrusted me with. I apologize for my inadequacy, but I would request that I be able to devote my efforts to the more significant—"

"So she's more important to you, and you want to prioritize her. I see, I see."

"..."

Why was it necessary for him to rephrase it? Xixu had the sudden urge to pick up the flowerpot in front of him and throw it somewhere, but he kept himself in check with his usual restraint. For some reason, beside him, Sari looked pale, but he ignored that. He had the feeling it would only wear away at him further.

Xixu bowed, said, “Yes, Your Majesty,” and refrained from saying everything else he so dearly wanted to.

No matter how it was phrased, it was a simple truth that Sari was important to him. He admired her sincere determination to reach out and help others, and was glad nothing had taken that from her.

In the end, he wanted to be more faithful to her than to his liege’s commands. He wished for her efforts to be rewarded and for her to be able to smile happily, and he would do his own part to make that happen.

Upon hearing Xixu’s answer, the king nodded, visibly in such a good mood that it was almost off-putting. “Very well. Do as you wish.”

“You have my gratitude.”

The king was sure to thoroughly poke fun at him after Sari left, but Xixu had already resigned himself to it. Repeating a mantra of patience within his mind, he raised his head. At that moment, the girl beside him spoke.

“Um, I also have a small request to make. Is that acceptable?”

Sari’s back was straight, and since he was at her side, he couldn’t read her expression. When Xixu frowned dubiously, she turned to him and gave him an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, could you go on ahead? I won’t be long.”

“You want me to leave first?”

Xixu was taken aback. He looked to the king and saw that he was nodding in agreement. Xixu felt uneasy, but it wasn’t as though he could just stay. Still skeptical, he bowed once more, and left the audience chamber.

※

After seeing the young man off, Sari turned back to the king.

“My request is the same as his.”

When her clear voice reached the throne, the king’s elegant features broke out into a smile very unlike the knowing expression he’d directed at Xixu. Sari felt it was slightly unpleasant. She supposed this was how the king usually

stoked Xixu's resentment. The humiliating experience she'd suffered through the previous night made her voice come out thorny.

"Please don't tease him so much, Your Majesty. It may find itself coming back to you one day."

"Do you give that advice out of experience, Miss Proprietress?"

The king chuckled, but Sari's lips hardly so much as twitched. Cold power dwelled within her blue eyes.

"I am not joking. Please listen to me seriously. If you mean to provide him to Irede as a shadeslayer, then I ask that you refrain from urging him to marry. There is a limit to mischief, and I would see that you keep to it."

She exhaled a long, thin breath. The cold air spilled out into the chamber, centered at her feet. The first to notice the change was the king's maiden. Her expression changed, and she placed a hand on the king's shoulder. He seemed to take notice too, at that, and he looked into Sari's eyes.

It was the day preceding the new moon, when her power was at its weakest, but her existence was placid and immovable. Slowly, a presence far from human reared its head. A graceful yet weighty voice fell upon the king and his maiden.

"If you wish to win my favor with an offering, then refrain from making any unnecessary additions. Don't push other women at him. It's *irritating.*"

The spreading night essence caused flowers in full bloom to wither in succession. The sight visibly startled the king, and his face drained of color. He looked to be on the verge of tears, seeing the pitiful remnants of the flowers he had so diligently cared for. His previous smile was gone, and it seemed that he would let out a sob at any moment. The maiden beside him bowed deeply.

"Our deepest apologies. I swear this will not happen again."

"Mmm. Do be careful."

Sari, feeling somewhat satisfied, reined in her own essence. She shook the slight dizziness from her head and turned on her heel.

When she exited into the hallway, Xixu was waiting for her. He studied her

with a concerned look.

“What did you talk about?”

“Um, just about flowers and such.”

“Flowers? I...suppose it doesn’t matter. More importantly, did I do anything to you last night?”

“Don’t ask. I don’t want to remember.”

“...”

※

Preparing to return to the Werrilocia estate for tomorrow’s storehouse reopening, Sari changed into a black dress in her room in the castle, complete with a veil. Given her destination, she could not show her face. She headed toward the back entrance, where a carriage had been arranged, and found Xixu waiting there for her.

When he saw her, he opened the carriage door. “I’ll escort you.”

She was about to thank him and step aboard when she heard the sound of rapid footsteps. Soon enough, a young woman came running from out of the castle.

“Your Highness! I’ve been looking for you!”

She was clad in a green dress, which she was holding up as she ran, and from her appearance, she must have been nobility.

Sari looked up at the young man beside her. “Who is she? Someone you know?”

“From His Majesty’s documents...”

“Oh.”

In which case, she was one of Xixu’s marriage candidates. The woman ran forward at a pace that suggested she was going to embrace him, but when she neared, she appeared to finally notice Sari’s presence. She stopped and glared at the veiled girl with open displeasure.

“Who are you? I have matters to discuss with His Highness.”

She obviously wanted Sari to leave—a fact that Xixu seemed to note too, because he looked weary. Before he could speak, however, Sari stopped him. She reached a gloved hand out to touch his face.

“I’ll handle her.”

“You’ll *what*? Who are you? Which family are you from?” The woman scrutinized Sari without a hint of restraint, appraisal in her eyes.

Xixu seemed on the verge of saying something, but unable to decide what. Sari embraced his arm with both of her own and smiled.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I’m the head of the Werrilocia family, Everie Saria Werrilocia. His Majesty has been kind enough to allow me the honor of making His Highness’s close acquaintance.”

“What...? Werrilocia?”

The woman froze in place, and Sari found her dumbfounded expression rather amusing. She had never used the Werrilocia name publicly before, but she doubted there was a single member of the capital’s aristocracy that did not know of her old and noble family. Occasionally, the name would even prompt a greater reaction than it perhaps deserved.

The woman’s countenance twisted in a mix of frustration and bafflement. “Surely not... Y-You must be lying. Nobody knows who the head is, and—”

“My, are you insulting our princess? I admire your nerve.”

The bewitching voice came from the other side of the carriage. Sari sighed under her veil.

Moving at her usual confident stride, Fyra stepped out of the shadow of the carriage, accompanied by Vas, and the pair looked at the young noblewoman with respective, imposing bearings. The woman evidently recognized them, because she began to look rather unwell.

Vas’s exasperated gaze stopped on Sari. “She has a poor constitution and thus does not normally make public appearances, but I guarantee you she is the head of the Werrilocia family. Of course, if you find that difficult to take on faith...I’m certain we can find another method to prove it to you.”

“N-No, that will be fine. More than fine.”

Sari wondered what her cousins usually got up to in their daily lives in the capital. The mere sight of them had entirely taken the wind out of the young noblewoman’s sails. She bowed to Xixu, saying, “Pardon me,” and disappeared into the castle almost at a run.

After a few moments, Xixu looked at Sari, unease on his face. “Was it all right for you to say that?”

“That much should be fine. I needed to vent a little frustration after yesterday, in any case.”

“Again, what did I...?”

“Right, let’s go! Fyra, Vas, what about you?”

“We came in our own carriage,” Vas said. “To ensure you don’t run off.”

“I won’t, I promise...”

Sari shook her head lightly and boarded the carriage. Silently, Xixu followed after her.

The air was clean, with no scent of flowers. The storehouse reopening didn’t seem much of a burden at all to her now. She lifted her veil and examined the young man sitting in the opposite seat. A warm emotion rippled peacefully within her.

“Xixu. You protected me.”

He had remembered a trivial promise and shown her around the capital. He spoke strictly but honestly with her when she acted headstrong and endured her temper. She was a courtesan and a god, and he freely accepted her as such. Naturally, and as though it were a matter of course, he stayed with her, giving her the time she needed to become an adult and choose her guest.

What he protected, above all, was her way of being. But he was surely unaware of that.

Xixu nodded, appearing somewhat confused. “I’m glad to hear that. If I did anything impolite, please tell me.”

“I *told* you, you didn’t! Don’t worry. I’ll always make sure to hold you accountable.”

“I...feel as though that would only be more of a burden on you. Though, I would of course assume responsibility for my actions.”

Hearing his entirely serious and genuinely remorseful reply, Sari couldn’t help it—she burst into laughter.

She giggled, looked up at Xixu’s bewildered face, and smiled happily.

“Then when that time comes, please be a good husband for me, okay?”

For the sake of the new contract they may one day exchange.

Thus, the young god waited for the day she would bloom for one—and only one—other.



Afterword

Hello, I am Furumiya. Thank you for picking up *A Pale Moon Reverie.*

This story is a romantic fantasy set on a stage inspired by a mix of Eastern and Western culture, an alternate world where tales of firsthand encounters with gods still linger. Within the book, differing cultures and values intermingle in a manner that leaves borders unclear. The heroine lives in a pleasure town reminiscent of bygone eras of Japan. A town offered as a gift to a god. A place eternal and unchanging, filled with human joy and sorrow.

The heroine, who was born and will die in this town of the night, clashes with the protagonist, who has lived his life under the light of day. I would be delighted if you enjoyed the way they match and mismatch. Ah, and the story is moderately bloody too. I think it will make many round trips between being a brutal and easygoing read. I hope you enjoy it.

Furthermore, this book was published in the second lineup of the new DRE Novels label. When I was approached, I said, “It takes some time to write a fantasy with its own worldbuilding, but I currently have two completed works online. Please examine those, and if neither match your preferences, I will write a new story.” The response was, “We’ll go with this one,” and so *A Pale Moon Reverie* was chosen.

I wrote the story quite a long time ago—over ten years—but I started with the desire to have the main pair be the type that looked great in a picture, and it had always been my dream to see the two in an illustration, so receiving such beautiful depictions of them deeply moved me. If possible, I’d like to take this story all the way to its finale, so I would be overjoyed if you decided to continue with it.

Now, my thanks.

To my editor, I am truly grateful to you for contacting me and giving this work form. Thanks to your diligent support, I was able to give these characters a wonderful debut. The sheer amount of work you do dazzles me, but I will do my best to keep up and to make the DRE Novels label exciting. For now, and for the

future, thank you!

To Teruko Arai-sensei, I am moved beyond words by your gorgeous character designs and illustrations! Thanks to you, even the kind-of-rotten characters feel like they'll be forgiven purely due to how attractive they are. Thank you for so vividly capturing the beauty and allure of the town of myth!

Furthermore, to everybody who read the web version: thanks to your continued support, this book was able to be published! Thank you always! I greatly look forward to seeing you shocked by how attractive the characters are in the illustrations! Woohoo!

Finally, I would like to thank you, everybody who picked up this book, from the bottom of my heart. As a child, when you catch a glimpse of the shrine at night on a festival day and wonder if it's connected to a different world, a captivating town—that place in your dream would be Irede.

I would be overjoyed if you watched over the inhabitants of the town of myth as they lived their slow, ever-so-human lives, working their hardest every day.

Until we meet again, in some other time, in some other place. Thank you.

Kuji Furumiya

Extra Chapter: Ball Game

As a shadeslayer, Xixu generally patrolled the town three times a day. The other militia members called that frequency ridiculous for a single person, but Xixu thought it was more secure, since in this town, the mood and flow of people changed with the hour.

He was completing his usual patrol before dusk when he was caught by a group of children at an alley on the edge of a main street.

“You suck, Mister Shadeslayer!”

“Give me a little time to practice...”

The game they had roped him into involved forming a circle and kicking and bouncing a string temari ball, but since he had only touched it for the first time a few minutes ago, he couldn’t yet tell where it would bounce. He didn’t know how much strength to use either, so currently, he was the weakest link.

As Xixu struggled valiantly with the old string ball, he heard a giggle from behind him.

He turned, and reflexively sent a pleading look to the heavens. “Saridi... Why are you here?”

“I was out shopping. Let me join.”

Sari left her shopping with Xixu, took the ball from the children, and began bouncing it on the ground at an even rhythm.

The sight of her small frame stooped over and bouncing the string ball with her pale hand almost appeared to be an artist’s rendition of the scene. The children cried out in delight.

“Princess, you’re so good!”

Sari laughed at the compliment. She bounced the ball lightly, then nimbly lifted her leg up and over it. Xixu was startled when he saw her leg slip out from her pale blue under-robe.

“Wait, Saridi, that’s enough.”

“Huh? Why?”

Because she was not a child running about town, but the town’s very god. She should not expose her leg so freely in front of a common soldier like him. Then again, it was also improper of him to prevent her from doing what she wanted.

Xixu came to the obvious conclusion. “You should change your underclothes. I’ll stop by the militia station nearby and pick up a pair of work shoes for you.”

“Isn’t that a bit much?!”

“Ah, and you’ll have to raise the hem of your kimono. I’ll borrow a needle and thread too.”

“Don’t make a big deal out of it! I was just feeling a little nostalgic!”

Sari returned the ball to the children and pulled on his sleeve. “More importantly, could you help me with the shopping? There’s too much for me alone today.”

Xixu paused before saying, “All right.”

They walked together, side by side, as the sky gradually began to tinge red. Smiling at the fading voices of children, Sari made a gesture as though she were bouncing a ball.

“All the courtesans who grew up here know how to play.”

Xixu imagined her as the child he’d never seen. Her tiny hands bouncing the ball must have been just as earnest back then too. A small part of him wished he could have seen it.

“I should get some practice in...”

“You’re not suited for it, Xixu. You’re too tall.”

The girl laughed at her own ruthless declaration. The joyful sound of it melted into the sky as it slowly began to shift toward night.