
A Pale Moon Reverie
2
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illustration: TERUKO ARAI


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A Pale Moon Reverie: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Third Tale

1. Catch

Long ago, in the realm of an ancient nation, a titanic blue snake awoke from its slumber beneath the earth. Such was the length of its body that it could have coiled around the land itself, and when it slithered aboveground, it sought to devour the very sun blazing brightly in the heavens.

The people were dismayed. Though they attempted to stop the snake, they were not its match. So, at last, the ancient nation's king beseeched the gods for their aid.

It is said that the sole god who answered the plea demanded fair compensation for cutting the snake to pieces. The god's desires were three: fine drink, to delight her tongue; music, to excite her heart; and human touch, to warm her being. Thus, the king had a town built and devoted to her, and soon, the realm of man knew peace once more.

So was born Irede, the pleasure town of myth, and so has it flourished for these past thousand years. Even now, this town dedicated to a god stands unchanged, its fine drink, masterful performing arts, and holy courtesans as famed as they were the day of its founding.

And yet, among the people of this illustrious town is secreted yet another marvel. From the age of myth hence, a god has resided there, her being kept incarnate along a bloodline of beautiful women. In accordance with the old contract, each of these manifestations one day welcome a guest into their beds, and give birth to a child who will become the god's next successor. This line of succession between mother and daughter does not dilute the god's presence, for she is the god of the moon, herself one of the constants of creation.

Such is the path these women have chosen throughout the ages, and so have they lived their lives beside humanity.

What this line of unbroken choices may one day invite is, as of yet, still unknown. Today, as the girl who is a god once again awaits the guest whom she

will choose, she once again dozes in a reverie.

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On the night of the new moon, the air that drifted out of the opened storehouse seemed to be as thick and musty as time itself, the endless passage of months and years condensed together. The interior, lit only by a fitted skylight, was dark enough that even eyes which had grown accustomed to the night could not readily make out what lay within.

Holding a small paper lantern, a girl—the owner of the storehouse—peered inside, scrutinizing the interior. Her silver hair, reminiscent of moonlight, was hidden underneath a black veil, which also concealed her blue eyes and clean, elegant features. She was the head of the estate upon whose land the storehouse rested, and she had hidden her face because of the dual identities she possessed: the proprietress of a courtesan house passed down along a mythic bloodline, and the head of a noble family in the royal capital.

In her role as the maiden, the girl was known as Saridi—Sari, to those close to her—and she had recently returned to the Werrilocia estate, her family home, to be present for the traditional yearly storehouse reopening.

In all the years previous, she had simply watched on as the contents of the storehouse were reorganized, but this time, Sari was looking for something. As the opened doors were secured in place, she crossed the threshold and stepped into the interior.

Wicker storage baskets were piled high to her left and right, filled with a variety of objects that she had already half-forgotten from the year before. The Werrilocia family, inheritors of the blood of an ancient king and the most historied family on the continent, similarly possessed a great many miscellaneous curiosities. A catalog existed, in a fashion, but the storehouse contained many items that were not listed on it.

What Sari was looking for was one such unlisted article. She surveyed the storehouse interior, head turning to and fro—and then a hand was placed on her shoulder from behind.

“You’re in the way,” a young man with ashen hair said flatly. “Please step back.”

“‘In the way’...?” Sari pouted slightly.

How cold. I am *head of the family, if only in name.*

Then again, if anyone had the right to speak to her like that, it would be him and his sister alone. After all, it was her two cousins who actually managed the Werrilocia household.

Vas, her male cousin, had attractive, androgynous features, but his expression always radiated a frigid chill. Sari shuffled to the side, as he’d so firmly requested, and watched as Vas immediately began issuing directions to a number of servants.

Just like that, the yearly cleaning of the storehouse had begun.

Sari, along with her female cousin, Fyra, watched over the proceedings as wicker baskets were carried out into the garden one by one. Before long, Sari caught sight of a familiar wooden box being brought outside too. She perked up and hurried over, then glanced up at her cousin.

“May I open this?”

“Do whatever you wish,” Fyra said matter-of-factly. “Everything here is yours, after all.”

The Werrilocia family had possession of the storehouse and its contents for the sake of convenience, but in truth, they belonged to none other than the maiden who was the head of the family.

Sari nodded, opened the wooden box, and retrieved several aged notebooks from within. They were untitled, but each and every volume contained the handwritten accounts of previous generations of maidens. Sari flipped through them briefly, then bundled them under her arm.

Fyra watched her inquisitively. “What are you looking for?”

Sari shrugged. “Just something about how to use my power.”

She was self-aware enough to realize that, as of late, her power had been straying from the domain of what the maiden’s powers should be. The divide between her two consciousnesses had been becoming less clear, flickering betwixt and between.

Sari, a god in entirety who had been born and raised amidst people, had two aspects: her human face, which she had cultivated her whole life, and her true nature—her divinity. She was, so to speak, a god who was living her life pretending to be human. By all rights, her divinity should have manifested for the first time when she welcomed her one and only guest, and through the act of union with her partner, integrated with her human aspect.

However, Sari's divinity had awakened during a certain prior incident, and she had not received her sacred offering of warmth. In other words, she currently possessed far too much unstable power.

"Reasons aside," Sari said, "since I have power, I need to be able to use it properly."

Fyra's eyebrow rose. "It's nice that you're motivated, but are you not going to direct some of that drive toward choosing your guest?"

"Ngh... Just...give me a little more time, please..."

Sari could only choose one guest in her entire lifetime, so she wanted to make a choice she could be confident in, but she was already sixteen. Seventeen was an age where it was entirely natural for any ordinary courtesan to receive guests, and at which even daughters of nobility would be entering political marriages. So it was perhaps unavoidable that she was being prodded with candid advice by her relative.

Then again, only a select few people of Irede knew of Sari's true nature as a god. Not even her cousins Fyra and Vas were aware of the full truth—that the guest Sari would receive would, ultimately, be the half of her body that tied her to the world of man. Through an old contract—the most significant one of all—god and human would be tied, and Sari would bear a daughter who would be the embodiment of the god. It was not something to be taken lightly. Indeed, it was a matter of utmost secrecy—and a matter of Irede.

Perhaps because of that, Fyra readily backed down from the issue. "Well, if nobody has proven themselves worthy of your attention, then it can't be helped. Though, should you find yourself at your wits' end unable to find somebody, I could choose for you."

"No, thank you..."

Sari had a feeling that would only result in a man who was her cousin's puppet coming along, and that was something she wanted no part of.

"If I were to choose, I..." Sari muttered, but trailed off.

She knew what came next, vaguely, but could not manage to put it into words. It wouldn't take form. It was too complicated, in several different ways. One issue, for example, was that it had been foreseen that the person she was currently the most interested in would die in the future protecting a woman.

Sari looked up at Fyra beside her. "Am I... Do I drag those around me into danger a lot?"

A smirk danced around the older woman's lips. "So what if you do? Danger should be a cheap price to pay, if the reward is being by your side."

"That's...not what I was asking..."

What Sari truly wanted to know was if it would be her who exposed the man in her thoughts to danger. She wanted to know if keeping him by her side would lead to what the king's maiden had foreseen. However, that was a matter that even that maiden, the possessor of unerring foresight, had not been able to affirm. And if that was so...surely nobody would know, until the time came.

The future Sari was desperate to know was unclear. Yet, more unclear were her own emotions. To make matters worse, she wasn't even sure how he felt about her.

Sari exhaled softly and lifted her gaze to the night sky. Above her lay the same darkness that had shrouded the world every night before, but tonight, she felt as if it masked something she vitally needed.

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At the northern tip of Irede, the town of myth, was a single manor that served as a courtesan house. Of the three sacred offerings, the warmth of human touch was the purview of this establishment, which traced its origins along a mythic bloodline. Here, the women chose their guests.

This courtesan house, oft spoken of for its holy courtesans, was the home of the town's singular maiden, her true nature that of a god.

Long ago, a daughter had been born from the body of the god of the moon, sired by a king who had offered himself to her as warmth. Their daughter had also been the god, her blood unweakened, and in time she had received her own guest, and had given birth to the next god in turn. Thus, through the means of blood, and from behind the closed doors of this courtesan house, have the women descended from the god's line maintained the peace in Irede for a thousand years.

Saridi, the current maiden, was sixteen. Ever since her grandmother's passing, she had managed the courtesan house Pale Moon as its young proprietress. It was the duty of Xixu—who had been sent from the royal capital to assume the post of shadeslayer—to be of assistance to her.

The young man had dark hair, dark eyes upon a set of handsome features, and a tempered physique. He was still clad in his militia uniform and wearing his military sword when he stopped by Pale Moon in the evening, just as the sun was about to set. As he stepped up to the old wooden gate, he caught sight of a friend there, and his brow scrunched together in slight dismay.

The man, who just so happened to be Sari's brother, soon noticed Xixu and turned around.

"Oh?" he said, a cheeky smile drifting to his lips. "Come to see Sari? I wasn't sure you had it in you. Bravo, bravo!"

Xixu sighed. "I just came to bring her the militia reports..."

Rightfully, the only times Xixu, a shadeslayer, should be calling upon Sari were when he was requesting her assistance to hunt down a shade. Yet, somewhere along the way and without knowing why, he had found that he'd become the militia's primary point of contact to her. When he'd asked Sari about it, she'd said: "It's probably because you show up at the militia stations at fixed times. That's actually quite rare in Irede." So, in the end, he'd reasoned that it was fine, since he was being useful to the town.

Given that, Xixu most certainly hadn't come to Pale Moon to obstruct Sari's work. Her doting brother Thoma, however, evidently did not share the same opinion. The next head of House Radi—the sacred house that still served as purveyors of fine drink for the god of Irede—laughed and slapped Xixu on the

back.

“You came at just the right time,” he said. “Let’s ask them to set dinner out for us. I just stocked Pale Moon up with some excellent rice wine; you should give it a taste.”

“You know I don’t drink that much.”

“It’s fine, I’ll handle that part. Besides, Sari will be happy to see you.”

Just on cue, Xixu heard a girl’s voice call his name. When he glanced over at the entryway, there she stood—the young proprietress of Pale Moon. With her silver hair glowing in the moonlight and her usual white kimono arranged primly about her form, she was the image of both elegance and innocence.

Sari’s features, their youthful loveliness reminiscent of a flower bud swaddled in a blanket of large petals, bloomed into a wide smile at the sight of Xixu.

She dashed straight over and jumped at him. “Welcome!”



“Do you have to be so energetic...?” Xixu lamented, looking down at the girl whose arms had wrapped around him.

“You hardly ever stop by!”

After he peeled her off, Sari gave him a beautiful smile. She had now fully cast off the guise she’d worn in the capital, her dress discarded for a kimono and the veil that had hidden her face abandoned altogether. Seeing her like this, Xixu was reminded of the nobility inherent in who she was. She was a god, the proprietress of the world’s oldest courtesan house, and a young lady of noble birth, who had inherited the blood of an ancient king.

Sari, however, was focused on more pressing concerns. “Have you come for my help with a shade?” she asked charmingly. “Or are you here for leisure?”

“Not leisure... I just came to bring you these reports.” Xixu handed the documents over to Sari, who thanked him and accepted them.

Thoma, who had left the pair behind as he walked over to the entryway, called out, “Sari, ready a meal for him, would you? Ah, and me too.”

“Mm-kay! Go ahead and wait in the proprietress’s room.”

A maidservant who had been standing inside the entryway, which had a hard-packed clay floor, handed Thoma the appropriate room tag.

The proprietress’s room was tucked away in the deepest part of Pale Moon, and originally, was intended for Sari to receive her guest in. Its purpose had become a bit derailed, though, when Sari’s divinity had manifested, and Xixu had been forced to step forward as her sacred offering of warmth for lack of another readily available choice.

At present, the relationship between him and her had been returned to a—for all intents and purposes—blank slate at his request. Sari herself had expressed that she was not yet a full adult, and so could not choose her guest. Xixu was of the opinion that, since whoever she chose would be the sole partner she would have during her entire life, it was best that she only decided only after exceedingly careful consideration. Furthermore, it was out of the question for him to rob that freedom of choice from her. Whether it took ten years, twenty, or more, what mattered was that she made a decision she was

happy with. That was a natural right she possessed, and should anybody attempt to infringe upon that...he would fight tooth and nail to defend it.

As someone older than Sari, Xixu thought it obvious that he should conduct himself in such a way. It seemed that this line of thinking, however, was somewhat lost on Thoma. As was proved by the man's next words.

"Don't get me wrong, your strange sense of decency is all well and good, but what are you going to do if it makes Sari pick another man?"

"I...don't see what I could do about that," Xixu replied as they awaited their evening meal in the tatami-mat area within the proprietress's room. "It's up to her."

Thoma, holding a teacup, gave him an amazed look. "What's that supposed to mean? Do you not actually want to become her sacred offering? If you don't understand how adorable she is yet, then set aside half a day. I'll happily tell you all about it."

"Why are you pressing the issue so much...?"

"Well, she's my precious little sister," Thoma replied. "If she has a wish, of course I'd want to grant it."

"Still, you shouldn't just decide what's in her heart for her. Also, she's only sixteen."

Xixu knew what Sari was like, even without a lecture from Thoma. He'd seen how she stood undaunted under the many weighty responsibilities she bore, and how she earnestly strived to fulfill her duties. He knew how determined and compassionate she was, and how much she loved Irede and the people who lived here. He knew it all, and he knew it well.

That was precisely why Xixu felt he could not add to Sari's burdens. Thoma, however, did not seem to understand that.

As Xixu drank tea with a sour look on his face, maidservants brought in their evening meal. He thanked them and took up his chopsticks just in time for Sari to appear. She came in alongside another maidservant who was carrying a large platter.

When the platter was placed in the center of the table, Xixu was surprised to see that slices of raw fish had been exquisitely arranged upon it. “How did you come by fish this fresh?” he asked.

“A guest brought some in,” Sari replied. “He said he’d gone fishing. You know that big lake to the east?”

“From there? Impressive.”

Xixu knew there was a lake nearby from the maps he’d seen, but he’d never visited the place himself. If memory served, it was located in a forest that was a little to the southeast of Irede, and between the town and the royal capital.

Still thinking, Xixu reached out for a piece of fish with his chopsticks.

Sari, who was setting out the plates she’d brought, smiled as she watched him. “I’ll bring you some tea when you’re finished,” she said.

Thoma perked up. “Oh, me too, Sari.”

Sari gave her brother a look. “You’ve been nothing but mean lately, Thoma, so no.”

“Hey, come on, that’s not true,” he whined. “Xixu’s the only one I’m picking on.”

“And I’d like you to stop,” Xixu said with a sigh, a sullen grimace settling over his face. He turned his focus to retrieving slices of fish and placing them onto a small plate.

Sari, on the other hand, scowled at Thoma and rose. However, her gaze soon drifted toward the inner room. Thoma noticed and looked up.

“What’s wrong, Sari? Something on your mind?”

She shook her head. “Not really. I was just thinking I should practice my kagura dancing later, since I haven’t recently.”

“Kagura dancing?” Xixu asked. “You?”

In Irede, the performing arts were under the purview of the Midiridos Troupe, the third of the three sacred houses. Xixu had seen their displays and musical performances during his patrols, and had absentmindedly come to assume that

it was they who were responsible for all the performances in the town.

That assumption had evidently made its way onto his face, because Sari smiled. “All courtesans do that kind of thing. Starting from when we’re apprentices, we play music, sing, and dance. You’ve heard them practicing their shamisen while patrolling the back streets, haven’t you?”

“I have. So those weren’t Midiridos performers?”

“Mm-mm. Midiridos’s musicians aren’t allowed to have their music be heard by the public until they’re recognized as fully fledged, so all the practicing you hear walking around town is from courtesans. I practiced too, when I was small.”

“That sounds like a lot to handle. Although, I think I’d like to see you dance sometime.”

The moment Xixu expressed that offhanded thought, Sari dropped the tray she was holding. It landed with a loud crash and clatter. Thoma, beside her, was desperately stifling his laughter. Baffled by their reactions, Xixu—as usual—frowned.

“Did I say something wrong...?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Thoma chuckled. “No, it’s not your fault. It’s just that the maiden’s kagura dance isn’t for everybody’s eyes to see. It’s a ceremonial dance she does when she receives her sacred offering, in front of that man alone.”

Xixu paused. “Ah.”

In which case, saying that he wanted to see it could be taken as a roundabout attempt at making an advance on her. Feeling fatigued, he hung his head.

The young maiden hurriedly added, “Um, but I know a few regular dances too! I can show you those any time you’d like!”

“It’s just in your nature to speak before you think, isn’t it?” Thoma said, grinning at Xixu’s pained face. “Though if you’re doing it on purpose, I’m impressed.”

“Why would I do it on purpose...?” Xixu muttered. It felt as though talking to these siblings always resulted in him being led on a merry chase.

Eventually, Sari left their room in a flutter, holding her blushing cheeks. At the sound of the sliding screen closing, the two men returned their attention to the meal set before them.

Thoma smiled, taking a sip of the rice wine he'd poured for himself. "See? Adorable, right?"

Xixu maintained his silence. It felt to him that any answer he could give would be rude. Thoma, however, seemed to take this as affirmation.

The god's brother laughed loudly and took another sip of his clear rice wine. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not expecting you to be a deft hand at this or anything. Just be yourself."

"I came to this town to be a shadeslayer."

"And in that regard, believe me when I say I can't thank you enough for what an excellent job you're doing. Ah, but a word of advice. Don't reject her divine side if you can help it. It'll mean trouble later down the line."

Thoma's eyes were still smiling, but a slight shadow had been cast over them —an emotion that resembled self-derision, or perhaps scorn. Xixu, noticing it, frowned.

"What do you mean by 'trouble'?" the shadeslayer queried.

Most other people wouldn't have asked such an unreserved question, but the man who was sitting across the table from House Radi's young heir was Xixu. Still, Thoma, faced with the direct nature of his friend, was not quick to answer. He smiled, not saying a word, and shrugged lightly.

After some time had passed, Thoma's restless gaze eventually settled on the closed doors of the inner room. "My father...couldn't bear the fact that his partner was a god. On the night my mother took him as her guest, he rejected her other aspect. She cut her divine self off completely, never to manifest again. After that, she left the Werrilocia family to marry into his. Sari...doesn't know."

A single corner of Thoma's mouth lifted. Within that gesture, made by a man who so seldomly bared his true emotions, was a glimpse of stifled anger. To what, and to which of his parents, was it directed? It was a family matter, and not of Xixu's own, so it was not ground easily intruded upon. He frowned.

As though in an attempt to change the mood, Thoma placed his flat, wide drinking cup down, and adopted a starkly different, lighter tone. “Come to think of it, we’ve found a new shadeslayer.”

“You have?”

Thoma nodded. “Though, on that subject, the shadeslayer turnover has been ridiculous recently. If any more of you retire, or even die out, we’ll be in a real bind.”

“I’m sure none of us will be doing any dying,” Xixu replied. “On that matter, why did my predecessor retire?”

Customarily, Irede maintained five shadeslayers. Xixu had come in response to a call that had been put out in the royal capital, but he had yet to ask why there had been a vacancy for him in the first place.

Thoma, taking another sip of his rice wine, replied casually, “Just old age. He barely worked at all in his final half year, laid up in bed as he was.”

Xixu’s eyes narrowed. “Wait. Isn’t there a current shadeslayer in a similar situation?”

“A shadeslayer’s service doesn’t end until they declare it over themselves, so it happens all the time. It’s why it took us so long to call you in—we’d grown used to essentially just having four.”

“That’s...rather easygoing.”

Thoma leaned forward, grinning. “That’s why we were quick to make arrangements *this* time.”

“The quicker, the better, in the future.”

That being said, for the most part, a shadeslayer worked independently and often had little reason to meet with their fellow counterparts. While it would be reasonable to assume that the addition of one more would mean an equivalent reduction in the amount of work handled by the others, Xixu had made it a habit to do frequent patrols of the town. Even if the number of shadeslayers increased, his circumstances would like as not be unaffected.

Thoma watched on, seemingly amused, as Xixu silently worked away at their

meal. “Do you like fish?”

“Relatively.”

“Want to go fishing tomorrow, then?”

“Fishing?” Xixu inquired.

Why would he ask me that? In the first place, tomorrow wasn’t even a rest day.

Thoma, as a person, was mischievous and prone to antics, but he rarely acted without thought. It was best to assume he had an ulterior motive. Xixu, who had never once held a fishing rod in his life, glared at the man suspiciously.

“What are you scheming?” he demanded.

“Well, you see...” Thoma said with a cheerful smile, “the shadeslayer we were expecting went missing en route. Want to come look for him?”

There was a long, heavy silence, wherein Xixu did his best to refrain from saying his thoughts out loud.

Shouldn’t you just settle for four shadeslayers at this point?

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“How exactly did he ‘go missing’ in the first place?” Xixu asked, sighing.

Although he wished he could have refused Thoma’s “invitation” by claiming it had nothing to do with him, Thoma had evidently pulled a number of strings at some point; talk of a manhunt had reached as far as the militia commander himself. As a result, the search for the missing shadeslayer had been designated an official field assignment, and it had landed in Xixu’s lap.

Currently, the taciturn young man was astride a horse under the clear blue sky, plodding down the highway that led to the royal capital. Beside him, Thoma held the reins of his own horse, which had a fishing rod neatly fastened to its saddle.

The idea that Thoma actually intended to go fishing seemed preposterous, but Xixu knew it was absolutely within the realm of possibility if he thought the fish might make a good gift for his sister. Xixu resolved to immediately return to Irede alone, should that happen.

Thoma looked up at the cloudless sky. “Apparently, the shadeslayer was traveling to Irede via the capital when he disappeared. He was last seen during the capital’s fete.”

“That was more than two weeks ago...”

Thoma shrugged. “We’re so used to having four of you that we were slow to respond.”

“Then just stop recruiting already,” Xixu snapped, the words he’d been holding back since the previous evening slipping out. He could no longer leave them unsaid.

What I really want to know is why I’ve been dragged into this matter at all, the young shadeslayer thought with an inward sigh. He found himself overwhelmed with the urge to wheel his horse around and leave. But, even so, he could not ignore the fact that a person had gone missing.

“So, what do you propose we do?” Xixu asked, surveying the highway before him. Other travelers had proven scarce so far; they’d only encountered the occasional merchant wagon. “Surely you don’t mean for us to scour the length of the entire highway to the capital.”

“No, I’ve got a lead. If he’s not there, we’ll give up the search.”

“A lead? Don’t tell me...”

Thoma gestured toward the fishing rod attached to his saddle. “The regular of Pale Moon who brought the fish yesterday told me that he saw a man wandering about in the forest surrounding the lake. The description he gave matches the shadeslayer we’re looking for.”

Xixu remained silent, processing this information. The matter had taken a sharp turn toward the suspicious, and beyond that, even if they managed to find their missing shadeslayer by the lake, the fact that the man had spent two weeks “wandering about in the forest” certainly did not speak well of his abilities. It was worth asking if he would be of any use at all.

Perhaps the most prudent course of action here is to pretend I never heard anything and return to Irede.

Although Thoma’s eyes never strayed from the path in front of him, he smiled, seeing through Xixu immediately. “You’d better not be thinking of running off. I’ll make sure you meet a very embarrassing fate if you do.”

Xixu sighed. “I won’t.”

“We can catch some fish for Sari while we’re at it; I’m sure she’ll be delighted. It’ll be adorable.”

“You realize then she’ll have received fish two days in a row, yes?”

At this stage, it’ll be faster to just get this over with than try to resist, Xixu decided, readjusting his grip and spurring his horse forward.

The forest in question was roughly an hour from Irede, if one hurried. Xixu wasn’t sure how long the search would take them, but he prayed that the fishing would not take longer.

The two men continued their journey down the highway, passing a number of tourists and merchants who were heading to Irede, and reached the lake before noon. Ensconced in the midst of a forest, it occupied approximately the same amount of land as Irede itself, and its waters flowed out into a thin stream that ran northeast before finally feeding into the sea.

Owing to the lake's downstream location from Irede, its waters were on the clearer side, and it had grown a reputation for the way its mirror-like surface reflected its picturesque surroundings. This had led to a trail being established for those who wished to take the detour; it branched off from the highway and led all the way to the water's edge.

As Xixu tied the reins of his horse to a tree a short distance away from the expansive lakefront, he scanned his eyes over their vicinity. "I don't see him..."

"Me neither," Thoma replied. "But if our fisherman managed to spot him, he couldn't have been too deep into the forest."

"I'm going to head into the trees and look around. I'll take the north side of the trail, so you—"

"Then I'll go fishing."

Xixu's eyes narrowed. "So *you* take the south."

The sun would set before they could do a thorough search through a forest of this size, but if they split up and kept to the areas near the trail, it wouldn't take them long at all. After leaving Thoma with a warning—*If you slack off, I'll tell Sari*—Xixu headed into the trees.

As the young shadeslayer pushed through the damp vegetation, he kept a close eye on his surroundings, looking for any signs of a person. Overnight dew still lingered on the foliage around him, and it soaked into his clothing. Even through his gloves, he could feel the coarseness of the tree trunks he was pressing his hands against. If a person in his position were barehanded and wearing a kimono, they'd be a mess of scratches and cuts in no time.

Xixu paused, the thought triggering a realization in him. *No one ever told me what the new shadeslayer looks like.*

"Damn," he muttered.

I could make my way back to Thoma and ask him, but I could also just have anyone I come across confirm their identity instead.

Still deep in thought, Xixu stepped forward...and froze when the sole of his foot came into contact with something soft. He peered down.

Underfoot and buried in the thick grass was a young man in a kimono, collapsed on his back.

“Now what are you doing down there...?” Xixu muttered, leaning forward to get a closer look.

The man—who, judging by the cast of his features, seemed to be slightly older than Xixu—had a head of brown hair so light it looked almost golden. There was a boyish charm to his face, which lent his whole appearance a childlike air. The faint smile that graced his lips, even despite the fact that he was out cold, did nothing to dispel this impression.

Xixu, almost wanting to leave the man to his own devices, looked back in the direction he’d come from. Thoma was nowhere in sight; he was still searching through the forest, no doubt. Xixu stooped over and touched the stranger’s neck, checking for a pulse. Fortunately, he seemed to be alive. Notably, his feet—bare apart from a pair of thonged sandals—appeared free from any lacerations. Either he was lucky, or he had tough skin.

Xixu tapped the strange man on the shoulder. He was wearing a pale green kimono, which was soaked through with night dew. “Hey, wake up.”

It wasn’t safe for a person to sleep in a place like this, even if they weren’t particularly far from the highway. The possibility of a wild animal attack loomed, and though a part of Xixu wanted to say that a shadeslayer should be able to handle such problems on their own, there was the troubling chance that this man was merely some unrelated passerby.

Xixu glanced at the sword at the man’s hip—a katana. He put more force into his tapping. “Can you hear me? Wake up.”

Nevertheless, the man gave no indication that he would wake. His features slackened into a grin; perhaps he was having a particularly pleasant dream.

Xixu sighed heavily. Carefully, he removed the man’s sword, then hefted his body up over his shoulder. The man wasn’t light—though neither was he especially large—but carrying him was no impossible feat. Xixu, watching his step as he went, returned to the trail, and arrived just in time to see Thoma step out of the trees nearby.

“Found someone new to carry, have you?” Thoma quipped. “Who’s that?”

“I don’t know. He was asleep on the ground back there.” Xixu lowered the man onto the trail, but even that wasn’t enough to wake him from his slumber.

Thoma studied the stranger’s face, appearing to be deep in thought. “Hmm... You think it’s him?”

“You’re not sure?”

“It’s not like I’ve ever met the guy. Ah, well—he has a sword. Let’s just settle for him.”

A look of disapproval flickered over Xixu’s face. “Is there no limit to your irresponsibility?”

“You’re just too fussy,” Thoma said, sounding as though he felt he was making a perfectly reasonable argument. He tapped the man on the shoulder in much the same way Xixu had earlier. “If everyone in Irede were like you, all of our unwritten rules would be enshrined in law by now.”

Despite Thoma’s efforts, the strange man still refused to wake. Faced with this lack of response, the heir to House Radi was quick to give up—he hoisted the man up onto his horse’s saddle and fastened him in place with fishing line.

After a gentle pull to check that he was secure, Thoma nodded. “All right, let’s go fishing.”

“Let’s go *home*.”

In the end, it took until they’d returned to Irede for the man to awaken.

※

It was not a rare thing for Sari’s brother to bring people along with him to Pale Moon. The vast majority of the time it was for the sake of making introductions to the three sacred houses, but, on very seldom occasion, he would bring along somebody rather baffling, for some equally baffling reason or other.

Evidently, today was one of those occasions. Sari examined the man before her as though she were seeing a new species of animal. His hair was unkempt, and he was smiling amiably. Xixu was standing behind him, frowning like he wanted nothing more than to leave.

“So...” Sari began. “This gentleman is our new shadeslayer?”

“I’m Nerei Fadt!” the man said brightly. “I was wondering what kind of woman Irede’s maiden was. You’re so cute!”

A few moments passed before Sari responded. “...Thank you.”

She didn’t quite know how to maintain her bearings around the strange new man—his excessively cheerful demeanor made him a mismatch for Irede for an entirely different reason than Xixu. Though she smiled on the outside, internally, Sari was at a loss.

Thoma must have noticed, because he threw her a lifeline. “It’s not set in stone yet; he still needs to pass the shadeslayer assessment. We found him collapsed in the forest though, and he says he hasn’t had anything to eat. See to him, would you?”

“To the best of my ability,” Sari replied, wearing her proprietress’s smile.

What she *wanted* to tell her brother was: “You can’t just take in any stray you come across,” but she could hardly say that about a shadeslayer. And besides that, there was something about Nerei that made going along with him seem easier than resisting—something that made it difficult to just leave him be. The vague, unbidden feeling somewhat unsettled Sari. Her wandering gaze met Xixu’s.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Um...no. It’s nothing. Thank you.”

Xixu had a reputation in town for being less than perceptive, but he always noticed when Sari was feeling uneasy or off-balance. It made her happy, though this time she herself couldn’t identify what felt so out of place.

In the meantime, Nerei had removed his sandals and was taking in his surroundings, his head turning back and forth like it was on a swivel. “Wow. So this is Pale Moon.”

“Please follow me, and I shall guide you to an available room,” Sari said. “Feel free to use the time until your meal is ready to bathe. I will prepare a change of clothing for you.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon. Thank you for your kind hospitality.”

“Don’t hesitate to kick him out if you feel like it, Sari,” Thoma said. “I’ve told him where he can find the militia.”

“Please don’t recommend such discourtesy,” Sari replied, putting a touch of ice into her tone.

Her brother laughed, then made his departure, taking Xixu along with him. Sari felt reproachful toward Thoma for that—she wished Xixu could’ve stayed awhile—but she knew her brother enjoyed Xixu’s company too, and that was why he was always quick to drag him around from place to place. Still, as his little sister, Sari thought Thoma could stand to share Xixu with her a little more. She knew, however, that this was not a thought worth voicing—the answer Thoma would give her was obvious: “Why don’t you just invite him over yourself?” She couldn’t, though. Despite how she felt about the matter, she did not wish to get in the way of Xixu’s work.

Such being the case, Sari was left alone in the entryway with Nerei and a maidservant. The same inexplicable, oppressive feeling from earlier began to nag at her again. However, as both the proprietress and the maiden, she could not make a poor showing of herself before someone she was meeting for the first time. She pushed her feelings down and led Nerei inside, where she began ascending the stairs.

As the prospective shadeslayer followed behind her, he commented cheerfully, “I heard that the courtesans choose their guests at Pale Moon. Can I ask where they all are?”

“They are in the reception room below,” Sari explained. “I would be happy to show you there afterward, should you wish to visit. I believe it would be best to do so after you have finished changing, however.”

“Ah, good point. I doubt they’ll think much of me looking like this.”

Sari’s only reply was a smile. While she *was* the proprietress, if she were to be honest, her grasp on the preferences of Pale Moon’s women was shaky. Some chose their guests by appearance—or at least seemed to—and others chose guests who had no common traits between them at all. There were also courtesans whose methods of choosing their guests were exceedingly

questionable, but as it had not yet resulted in any major issues, Sari had let them be.

God's handmaidens were, after all, free. Although, something Sari *did* know was that they avoided shadeslayers.

As Pale Moon's proprietress made her way down the well-polished hallway, she asked the man behind her, "If I may ask, what were you doing in the forest?"

"Well, that's the thing," Nerei said. "I don't really remember. One moment, I was thinking that I may as well take the chance to admire the lake, and the next, I was already here in town."

"How peculiar."

From what Sari had heard, news of Nerei's whereabouts had cut off over two weeks ago. How much of that time had he spent wandering the forest? The mystery behind it all had her feeling uneasy again.

Yet, at that moment, the man clapped his hands together, seemingly having recalled something. "Come to think of it, I have the feeling I saw some kind of strange animal."

"Pardon?"

"It was this great, big, golden... Huh. What was it again...?"

Sensing that Nerei had fallen deep into thought, Sari stopped and turned. For the first time, the smile had vanished from his reddish-brown eyes. There was a sharpness in them now that struck her with the keenly; this man truly *was* a shadeslayer. Perhaps Nerei was like Eid—a person with two natures: one within, and one without. Sari prayed that he would be able to either reveal what lay within, or mask it completely.

Nerei, noticing her gaze, raised his head. "Hmm, I can't seem to remember. Maybe it was a dream."

Then, just like that, his amiable smile returned.

※

Despite every militia member who saw Nerei appearing as though they

shared the same thought—*Can someone who seems so vacant really be a shadeslayer?*—he managed to pass the assessment without incident.

For the first time in a decent while, Irede had its five shadeslayers. Its maiden, however, was entering a period of respite, because as the moon waxed full, so did her power, and so waned her ability to control it.

Even compared to the maidens of past generations, Sari's power was notable. Those who knew of her hidden circumstances, and thus of her mother's renouncement of her status as god and subsequent abandonment of her family, had surely thought, at least once, that the girl had been born with her mother's share of power as well. Yet none spoke of this to Sari, because they all knew of the heavy responsibilities she had borne from a young age, and of the pride she took in the way she lived.

During an early afternoon in which the sun cast gentle rays down upon Irede, Sari was in her room, absorbed in the task of reading the notebooks she had retrieved from the Werrilocia storehouse—an activity she had taken to using her free hours to pursue. There was still plenty of time before the lantern was to be lit, signaling that Pale Moon was opening for business.

As Sari studied methods detailing how to establish large-scale boundaries, the voice of a maidservant calling for her made her look up.

"Miss Proprietress, a shadeslayer is requesting your assistance."

"I'll be right there!" Sari called back.

There was no need to give any thought as to who it was that had called upon her—Sari already knew.

She hurriedly sprang up and examined her reflection in her room's full-length mirror, and fixed her hair and kimono, both of which had strayed slightly out of place. Then, she retraced her lips with rouge and retrieved her bracelets from their small box.

Thus prepared, Sari set off toward the entrance, half running. When she reached it, she was greeted with the sight of an uncomfortable-looking young man, military sword at his hip.

"Xixu!"

“Sorry for the bother.”

“It’s fine,” Sari said, taking his arm. “You’re doing me a favor by being a test subject.”

Xixu sighed, following along as the young girl set a brisk pace. “When you put it like that, it only concerns me more...”

The path outside of Pale Moon was mostly empty; Irede was a town of the night, so that was typical at the current time of day, when the sun was still up.

Hands clinging tight to Xixu’s arm, Sari asked in a low voice, “What does it look like?”

“A boy in his mid-teens,” Xixu replied. “One of House Radi’s apprentices.”

“Oh, so this shade’s a copy?”

Shades were supernatural entities that formed into being in any place where people gathered. Being in close proximity to a shade affected one’s mind, causing it to go askew. Outside of Irede, they were shadows that took on the forms of animals, and only a select number of individuals possessed the ability to see them. Within Irede, however, they took the physical forms of humans.

The shades of Irede brushed against the thoughts of people and changed to take the forms of the individuals within those thoughts. Consequently, on rare occasion, “copies” that looked like existing people manifested. Apart from their red eyes—a trait particular to shades—these copies appeared no different to the genuine person, and it was common knowledge in town that they needed to be dealt with quickly, lest matters take a turn for the troublesome.

Xixu had likely not wanted to bother her by requesting her aid, but a copy simply couldn’t go ignored. As the moon had already waxed beyond half, he—being the only one who knew of her true nature—was the only shadeslayer who could currently call upon her.

Sari counted the days since the half-moon. “It’s only been three days, so it should be fine. I’ve been studying how to use my power too.”

“Okay. I trust you.”

“You should doubt me a *little*. Otherwise, *I’ll* start getting worried.”

Xixu paused. “Maybe I should handle this alone after all.”

“Too bad. Be my test subject.”

As Xixu worked more diligently than the other shadeslayers, he was accustomed to Sari binding shades to him by now. It made him the perfect person with whom she could practice fine control of her power—in fact, he was the *only* person. Sari glanced down to reconfirm the presence of the bracelets she used to suppress her power. She had worn two, just in case.

“By the way, how is the new shadeslayer doing?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Xixu said. “We don’t work together.”

“Irede’s rough on newcomers. We basically leave them to themselves.”

Xixu gave a soft hum of agreement. “I remember how troublesome that was for me, so I imparted the bare minimum to him. That being said, I’ve heard that he’s taken to making frequent appearances at courtesan and gambling houses while on patrol. I doubt it’ll take him long to fit in.”

“That just sounds like he’s slacking off on the job.”

Among Irede’s past and present shadeslayers, there were some men who outright lived in courtesan houses, but that was no excuse to gallivant about at one’s leisure. Sari did not have the authority to meddle in the affairs of the militia, but if Nerei was acting intolerably, someone would be sure to caution him.

Still, thinking of the new shadeslayer brought with it a flash of unease. Sari’s expression scrunched into a grimace. “Xixu... Are you okay with him?”

“In what way?”

Evidently, Xixu didn’t understand what she was trying to convey. Then again, neither did she, really. Sari shook her head faintly; an inexplicable gloom had settled over her emotions.

Xixu frowned slightly. “Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Nothing definite, at any rate. Perhaps that was only to be expected, since

she'd only met Nerei the once. Sari shook her head more vigorously, dispelling the uneasiness within herself.

She and Xixu made their way to a main street. Even in the afternoon, it bustled with activity. They watched the flow of people from the shadows of a building, looking for any sign of the shade.

Sari, her eyes narrowed and searching, kept her hold on Xixu's arm. "The person it copied was the boy who came to Pale Moon with you that one time, right?"

"Yes. Teté, I believe."

If memory served, the boy had come at Thoma's introduction. Recalling his appearance, Sari nodded. "Do you mind if I try a little experiment?"

"That's why we're doing this, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I was thinking I'd try a different method." Sari hugged the young man's left arm tighter and tighter.

Xixu, who had stayed quiet about the matter until this point, finally brought it up. "Why are you holding onto my arm today...?"

"It's better than being carried over your shoulder."

"Again, sorry."

"But the real reason is so that my presence soaks in better."

Xixu's eyes widened.

Sari, still carefully watching the crowds of people, continued, "I'm currently reading through the notes of past maidens that I retrieved from the Werrilocia storehouse. This is one of the techniques I found. Apparently, I can establish a boundary using something I often wear as the medium."

"And can I ask why you consider me 'something you often wear'?"

"You're with me all the time, aren't you?"

"I have a feeling this experiment will end in failure." Xixu's reply lacked any enthusiasm—in fact, he sounded positively exhausted.

Sari huffed and made a face. "Well, we won't know if we don't try! We're

doing it, and that's that!"

A few moments passed before Xixu finally said, "As you wish."

The clear resignation in his voice betrayed his true thoughts: *If it's bound to fail, we may as well get it over with quickly.* Sari was tempted to launch into a vehement defense of her logic, but this wasn't the time. Giving up, she began weaving the words of her spell.

To Xixu, it must have sounded like nothing more than a string of nonsense. She put focus into her words and power into her focus, linking and infusing to create the "cage" she wanted. Then, like waves pulling away from the shore, the cage detached from her thoughts, coming to rest around Xixu.

He must have sensed its presence, because he began looking around himself. "What did you do?"

"I put a reaaally thin boundary up with you as the center. It's circular, and the radius reaches to about over there." Sari indicated toward the middle of the street. At this size, the cage's boundary would be large enough to cover the entire street if Xixu walked down it, with no gaps.

Xixu gauged the distance with his eyes, then turned back to Sari. "Since it's a 'boundary,' does that mean it'll keep shades away?"

She shook her head. "Then you wouldn't be able to slay them. It's thin, so shades can enter. The moment they do, though, you should both feel a sense of discomfort."

"Ah. So that's how you mean to find it."

"Mm-hmm. Tell me if it enters. I'll close the boundary." Sari put her hands together in a gesture that mimicked trapping something inside.

Xixu appeared quick to understand this time, and there was admiration in his voice. "You're able to trap shades inside?"

"Once I close it, it should be pulled around depending on where the center moves—that being you." Sari paused. "I think."

"Why the uncertainty?"

"I've never done this, okay?"

That was why this was an experiment. She could leave the matter of what applications she could use this technique for to be considered later. Right now, she just wanted to test if it would work.

Xixu, either having agreed or surrendered the issue, checked the military sword at his hip. As always, he wore his uniform meticulously, and had an air of rigidity about him that was a degree firmer than the others of the militia. Perhaps because of the manner in which this bearing paired with his handsome features, Xixu's presence stood out somewhat from his surroundings. It was as though, here in this pleasure town where color and character shifted with each passing moment, he was a single, unchanging constant—as immaculate and upright as a beautifully crafted sword.

Sari stared at his profile, captivated.

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

"Oh..." Sari came back to herself. "Um, I'll go on ahead then. I'll stay slightly in front of you."

"Not behind? You'll miss my signal."

"If I'm in front, I might be able to catch it if it notices you and runs. I always end up having to sprint after you when that happens."

This truth brought a sour expression to Xixu's face.

When a shadeslayer of Irede called upon the maiden for her aid, the pair usually faced the shade in question together. But for some reason, in Xixu's case, what *usually* ended up happening was Sari frantically running around after him. While the other shadeslayers were able to catch their quarry without requiring much physical activity from her, shades were often quick to notice Xixu before that could happen.

Sari very much wanted to solve the mystery of why Xixu was easier to perceive than, say, Ironblade, who had a notably large build, but it wasn't as though she could just ask the shades. Her only option seemed to be to factor Xixu's conspicuousness into their plans from the beginning. Hence, why she was taking the lead now.

"How should I signal you to close the boundary?" Xixu asked.

“Call my name. No matter how quiet, I’ll hear you.”

Sari knew that, even within the clamor of a crowd, she would recognize his voice if he called her name. The gentle thrum of it would reach her, as if it had passed along a fine, invisible thread. She smiled, comfortable in her baseless conviction, the same emotion one felt in the waking hours after an impossible dream.

Xixu stared at her smile for a brief few moments, but soon averted his eyes. “Okay.”

“Mm-hmm. All right, I’ll go on ahead.”

“Saridi.”

She had just been about to step out onto the street when she jerked in place. Turning back, she examined the young man behind her. He had his left hand on the hilt of his sword and looked, as always, ill at ease. In her eyes, he seemed to stand out, somewhat detached from Irede. It was a strange sight; as though he alone had not dissolved into this town, yet was unmistakably here regardless. Sari, still watching the illusion, held her chest to calm her heart, which was threatening to run amok.

“Yes?” she asked.

“If anything comes for you, call out for me,” Xixu said. “I’ll be there at once.”

Sari paused. “I’m happy to hear that, but that particular warning brings back bad memories...”

“Is there something I should know...?” Xixu asked, his voice laden with his usual sourness.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sari replied, something about his tone settling her enough that she was able to regain her composure. “Do your best.”

And with that, the town’s young mistress stepped onto the street.

The main thoroughfare, underneath the gentle afternoon sunlight, had less traffic than it usually did. Sari proceeded along it, heading south. She turned back once, whereupon she caught sight of Xixu on the other side of the flow of people. Her earlier impression was proven correct; he *did* stand out. Sari stifled

her laughter before it could escape her mouth.

In that moment, while her guard was down, she was startled by a sudden voice that came from her side.

“Has something tickled your fancy, Lady Sari?”

“Oh...”

Upon looking over, Sari was greeted with the sight of the head and director of the Midiridos Troupe, one of the three sacred houses. Her robe was scarlet, a black silk cloth covered her mouth, and she carried a flute case under her arm. It was rare to see the older woman walking around outside, but since she was carrying an instrument, Sari had no doubt she’d just completed some sort of troupe business.

That was when Sari realized she’d been caught laughing to herself. Smothering her embarrassment, she attempted to bluff her way out of the situation.

“It’s nothing,” she reassured the other woman. “Just, um, a little bit of... Um...” Sari trailed off, recognizing that she was going nowhere. Giving up the idea of bluffing entirely, she instead changed the topic. “Did you have a performance today?”

“No, I was merely assisting some of our younger members with their practice. I must foster my own successor too, after all.”

Of the three sacred houses, the Midiridos Troupe was the only one that did not maintain their line of succession via blood. Performers and musicians one and all, they took in children who had lost their parents—or perhaps had been sent away by them—as apprentices, raised them, and instructed them in their arts. In their lifetimes, they would never have children of their own blood. Most did not even marry. They devoted themselves in entirety to their art, and it was for this reason their skill was without peer. In every city and town on the continent, the simple mention of the Midiridos name was enough to summon forth would-be employers. Despite this, the performers of the Midiridos troupe refused to enter the permanent service of another. For all of the music they played, and all of the art they performed belonged to a god, and her alone.

To be the apprentice of the director of the troupe meant being the director of the next generation. Sari was curious as to who it might be—they had to be relatively close to her age—but the Midiridos loathed displaying inexperience in public. Until whoever it was agreed themself, she doubted she'd be able to meet them no matter how much she wished to.

The thought led Sari to recall a certain other person. "Have you had the chance to meet the new shadeslayer?"

Although it was an unwritten rule, it was required of shadeslayers to meet with the three sacred houses. The Midiridos director should have encountered Nerei. Sari, secretly nervous, observed her reaction.

The woman nodded. "Yes, I have. He was somewhat strange, that man."

"Right..." Sari swallowed her next words: *I knew it*. She had to push ahead and confirm if the uneasiness she'd felt and the strangeness the Midiridos director had sensed were one and the same. "Um, did—"

"Saridi."

The young man's voice was not loud, but it reached her straight and true. Without hesitation, Sari raised her right hand—and clenched it.

"Bind."

Power flowed from her into the outer circumference of the boundary she'd established. Not a second had passed before it had traced the span of the circle and formed a cage with the young man as its center. Sari turned quickly, ready to bring her left hand up to aim at the shade and strike it with her power, but the sight she was met with caught her by surprise.

She blinked. "Huh? Which one is...?"

Xixu's hand was on his sword, but he had yet to draw it. Two teenage boys stood before him, each a perfect mirror of the other. One of them stood in front, looking as though he was shielding the one behind.

From her position, Sari couldn't make out the color of their eyes. Neither could she sense the presence of a shade. As she hesitated over which one to strike with her power, the rear boy raised his hands past the boy in front,

extending them toward Xixu.

Sari took a sharp breath. “Xixu!”

If that boy was the shade, then Xixu would not be able to cut through it for fear of harming the boy in front. Sari came to an immediate decision—she would strike both of the boys down at once.

However, the boy’s outstretched hands merely came to a stop...and covered the eyes of the boy in front. Out of pure confusion, Sari stopped her power before it left her hand.

Xixu appeared to murmur something to the pair. Then, he drew his sword. Neither of the boys resisted.

Xixu’s blade drew a smooth arc through the air, and the boy in front vanished without a sound.

A brief commotion had been stirred by Xixu drawing his sword on a main street, but the Midiridos director smoothly put it to rest. After changing locations to a private room in a teahouse, she, Sari, and Xixu began their questioning of the boy. Sari took the lead on asking him for his story, as she was the closest to him in age.

And so, as he sniffled and wiped at his eyes, which were moist with tears, Teté, the apprentice craftsman, told them of everything that had happened.

The copy had appeared before him without warning several days prior. At first, Teté had been surprised and frightened of the shade that had taken his form, but once he realized it didn’t appear to be trying to harm him, he was relieved.

Evidently, the copy had been concerned about Teté, and it had asked him if “anything was troubling him.” Teté had been bewildered, but he had been struggling to keep up with the apprenticeship he was not yet accustomed to, and so he had spoken to it of his troubles. The copy had been a good listener, providing affirmation when necessary, and had even proposed several possible solutions. It had felt to Teté as though he were speaking with a close friend.

“But today,” Teté continued, “out of nowhere, he said, ‘I have to go.’”

“Go?” Sari asked. “Where?”

“Rather than ‘where,’ it felt more like...like he was going to vanish. As if he’d been born weak, so he never would’ve lasted long from the start.”

“Born weak?” Sari repeated. She turned the words over in her mind for a few moments, but the sound of Teté’s sniffling soon brought her back to herself. In a calm voice, she continued, “So then you chased after him?”

“Yes. I thought there might be something I could do... But then we met the shadeslayer, and...”

Teté, desperate but unsure of what to do, had attempted to hide the copy’s red eyes, because he’d thought that Xixu wouldn’t be able to cut it down if he couldn’t confirm that it was a shade.

Upon finishing his story, Teté bowed his head low and apologized. Because of the tremor in his voice, the three subjected him to no further questioning and allowed him to leave.

After Teté’s departure, the three of them ordered more tea. Xixu’s voice was the first to cut through the somber mood.

“So there are shades that help people too?” he asked plainly.

The question was answered by the Midiridos director, who had borne witness to the town of Irede for a far longer time than Sari had. “There are,” she agreed, smiling. “Both in the past, and now. They are a rarity, however.”

“Their forms are affected by peoples’ thoughts, so they themselves are affected by people too,” Sari added. “Although most of those irregular shades take the forms of courtesans.”

“I...see.”

Xixu’s voice was contemplative, yet tangled with a mix of other emotions. The sound of it slowly melted away across the well-polished ebony table. Sari, hiding her face behind her tea bowl, surreptitiously examined his pained expression.

Xixu must have felt for the two boys who had shielded each other as they

faced him. But despite his compassion, he had not abandoned his duty. In Sari's opinion, that unyielding persistence was a virtue of his. Even if it differed from Irede's way, there would come times when they would need such straightforwardness.

After the three had taken the time to digest their emotions, Sari recalled something that had been bothering her. "That copy was a little strange," she said thoughtfully. "Its presence was so diluted."

"Are you referring to what Teté said, about it being born weak?" Xixu asked.

"Yes. If it truly wasn't going to last much longer, as Teté said, that means it would have vanished on its own, doesn't it? I wonder how it came to be born that way. I've never heard of anything like it before."

Sari's questions were mostly for the benefit of her own contemplation. She knew Xixu wouldn't have any answers, and she doubted the Midiridos director would either.

Sari looked down, examining her face's reflection on the surface of the table.

"I wonder how..." she murmured.

No answer presented itself. As unease crept up on her again, Sari closed her eyes, feeling as though she were sinking into its depths.

2. Encroachment

After the incident with Teté's copy, reports of shades abruptly ceased. It appeared it was going to be the last shade of the month, though the time seemed to have come earlier than usual. Now that the moon was waxing, along with the power of Irede's maiden, her influence would suppress the frequency of shade manifestations. As a result, the town's shadeslayers would either be taking a period of rest, or working as regular militia members for a time.

Xixu, who had of course chosen the latter option, was patrolling the town just after sunset when he decided to temporarily return to his dormitory in order to take his evening meal. On his way there, he was stopped by an acquaintance calling out to him.

"Hey there! Been well?"

The greeting had come from a man in a kimono wearing a friendly smile—Nerei, one of Xixu's fellow shadeslayers. Xixu merely replied with a plain, "No different from usual." He found Nerei a difficult person to get a read on.

Nerei looked down the dark path that led toward the dormitory, then back at the street behind them, overflowing with the light of a myriad of lanterns. "Are you already heading back for the day?" he asked. "The town's just coming to life."

"I intend on patrolling for a short while longer after I eat," Xixu replied.

"Oh, that's just perfect! Why don't you join me for an evening meal then?"

That sounds exhausting; I'd rather eat alone, Xixu thought, but he could hardly allow himself to be so openly blunt. And, in any case, if Nerei was inviting him along, it seemed likely that he had something he wished to discuss.

"All right," Xixu said. "If you don't mind keeping it brief."

"No problem! Right, let's go!"

Nerei set off at a brisk pace, happily humming a tune as he went. His good cheer could have rivaled that of the drunkards stumbling about town. Xixu was

unsure whether to be impressed or appalled, but was disinclined to make any sort of remark. Instead, he followed after the other man, and the pair made their way through streets lined with courtesan houses and drinking establishments.

Nerei grinned, eying the buildings dyed scarlet by the lantern light. “It’s a dazzling sight, isn’t it? Though I think it could stand to be a little more subdued.”

“It’s a pleasure town,” Xixu said simply.

Although he had a reputation for being hardheaded, that was not beyond his ability to accept. History and culture differed from town to town, and Irede’s character had particularly ancient origins. It was not easily changed, nor something that *should* be changed. Only the town’s young mistress possessed that right. Nevertheless, for some reason Xixu couldn’t fathom, the townscape that night seemed a shade darker than its usual self.

Nerei smiled at a courtesan leaning out through a second-floor window. “You know,” he said, “as someone who came here to take up a shadeslayer position, I’ve run into surprisingly few shades. Which isn’t to say I’m not always on my toes, given that they have physical forms and all.”

“They stop manifesting as the moon waxes. Once the moon wanes under half, the reports will start coming in again.”

“Then I suppose in the meantime, our biggest problem is figuring out what to do!”

Xixu didn’t reply; it hadn’t been the kind of joke that called for one.

Nerei didn’t appear to mind his silence either; he strode onward without faltering. Eventually, he advanced beyond the town’s brightly lit streets and stepped onto a path illuminated by stone lanterns set at scattered intervals. When Xixu spotted a large copse of trees on their right, he realized where Nerei intended on going. Soon after, a paper lantern bearing the design of a half-moon came into view, casting its light over the path ahead.

It appeared that their arrival had coincided with the departure of other guests; two elderly gentlemen were exiting through the front gate. Sari, who

was seeing them off, caught sight of Nerei, and her expression hardened—but the smile that quickly replaced it made it seem as though the moment had been nothing but a trick of the shadow.

“What brings you here today?” she asked.

“Why, I came by to have an evening meal with my senior,” Nerei said.

He took a step to the side, and that was when Sari seemed to notice Xixu for the first time. She appeared surprised at first, then bewildered.

“Xixu.” She blinked. “Welcome.”

“Sorry to interrupt your work.”

Sari almost appeared relieved to hear his usual reply—the corners of her eyes seemed to lose some of their tension. Xixu supposed it could have simply been his imagination, however. Her expression, under the light of the lantern, showed not a hint of gloom.

After calling for a maidservant and providing her with several instructions, Sari smiled at the pair of shadeslayers. “Please, follow me.”

As she turned to head inside with practiced grace, Nerei stepped up beside her as though it were only a matter of course, then reached out a hand and began rubbing her head.

From her smile, Sari appeared troubled, but not out of any sense of aversion. In fact, she merely seemed embarrassed. There was an air of familiarity between the two, and Xixu’s eyes widened to see it. When had they become so close? He only knew of one person with whom Sari was so familiar, and that was her blood-related brother.

Nerei, standing in the entryway, noticed that Xixu hadn’t moved and shot him a puzzled look. “Is something wrong?”

“Ah...” Xixu paused for a few moments. “No, it’s nothing.”

There was no reason for him to be surprised. If a shadeslayer asked Sari to be at ease around them, she would naturally respond in kind. Xixu himself had made a similar request in the past, and had managed to exempt himself from having Sari treat him like a guest. Given that, it wasn’t strange that she had

opened up to the affable Nerei.

Xixu began to feel uncomfortably self-conscious; evidently he'd become conceited without realizing. "What's wrong with me...?" he muttered under his breath, then followed after the pair ahead of him.

Sari chatted pleasantly with Nerei as they proceeded down the hallway, only once turning back to look at Xixu. Though her smile never faded, he couldn't help but imagine in it a trace of unease, which made him feel slightly disgusted with himself.

Sari brought them to the proprietress's room, and Nerei settled into a seated position at the low table with an ease that could only come of familiarity. Their evening meal was soon brought to them, along with rice wine, and Nerei picked up his chopsticks and dug in with good humor. As he drank his wine, he spoke of everything he'd experienced since coming to Irede, moving from one topic to another, but since Xixu was waiting for him to broach whatever business he had to discuss, their conversation was stilted at best.

In fact, by the time they had almost finished their meal, Xixu had come to the belated realization that Nerei might not have had any true business with him at all; it was possible the other man had simply invited him along out of a desire to make small talk.

As Sari walked over to their table to bring them some tea once they'd finished eating, Nerei smiled wide. Sari!" he called, beckoning her closer. "Xixu and I have just had the most lovely conversation."

"Oh? What did you two talk about?"

"We talked about the town—both the good and the bad."

Sari placed Xixu's tea in front of him, then rose and sat by Nerei's side, pouring rice wine into his drinking cup as he talked. Xixu recognized her well in the way she looked up at the other man, her happy expression in profile as she listened to his words with rapt attention, and yet somehow, he also felt as though he was observing a courtesan who he didn't know at all.

Nerei's good mood didn't falter for a moment. He continued talking, occasionally touching Sari's hair as he did so. "To pick things up where we left

off, I was saying that courtesanship isn't inherently a bad profession. It's just that thinking it *should* exist, as though it were a matter of course, is a bit... Well, you know. I mean, some courtesans would have chosen another path in life if they'd been given the choice, right?"

Xixu was caught unawares by the sudden change in topic. The direction it was heading in boded ill, and he frowned in spite of himself, expecting Sari—who took pride in her work—to take offense. However, when he looked at her, he saw that she was still listening attentively, grinning as though she were enjoying herself.

As Xixu stared on in amazement, Nerei continued, without missing a beat, "Trades of the night are questionable just by virtue of what they are. But the atmosphere in this town...it makes you think they're completely natural. That's not how it should be, of course—it's just what everyone's grown up with and is used to."

"Yes," Sari agreed raptly. "You're exactly right."

Xixu, finally unable to bear it any longer, placed his tea bowl down, then picked up his military sword and climbed to his feet. "I'm sorry for interrupting, but I'll be excusing myself now. I have a patrol to finish."

"Oh, is it that time already?" Nerei asked.

He made no attempt to stand, though Sari herself began to rise. Xixu stopped her with just a wave of his hand, then gave a perfunctory goodbye and left the room. A sick feeling that he couldn't describe had risen all the way up to his throat, and he wanted to leave Pale Moon as soon as possible.

As Xixu strode quickly down the hallway, a passing maidservant jumped, as if startled by his expression. He took no notice, however, as his focus was dedicated toward dispelling whatever emotion it was that had stagnated inside him.

He had not considered himself special to Sari. And yet, he had known he was one of the only people she could truly be herself around, in this town so different in character from the capital. He had known he could provide her a place where she could be at ease. Why should he feel sick now, just because a stranger had stepped in to offer her the same thing?

Xixu wanted to click his tongue; his own narrow-mindedness was aggravating.

“Ridiculous...” he muttered. “She has the right to choose whoever she pleases.”

Xixu purposely voiced the words aloud, forcing himself to drive their meaning home. No matter who Sari grew close to, he knew he had no right to object. Yet for some reason, Xixu’s mood only further deteriorated.

By this time, he’d reached the entrance of Pale Moon. A maidservant offered him his shoes, and Xixu put them on. But, just as he was about to leave, a woman’s voice called out to him from behind, making him pause.

“A moment, please.”

Upon turning around, he saw a courtesan who he recognized. It was Isha, Thoma’s lover. She knelt down and formally presented a rectangular, cloth-wrapped bundle to Xixu. He studied it closely, brow furrowed—it was not particularly bulky.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“The proprietress left it in my care recently with instructions to give it to you, should you stop by.”

“Saridi did?”

Something was off. Why hadn’t Sari simply given it to him directly? He had been with her not a short while ago. She also could have had it delivered to his dormitory. Xixu rarely came to Pale Moon around the full moon, so there was little chance he would have received it otherwise. And yet, she had chosen to leave it with Isha anyway.

Xixu doubtfully accepted the bundle. Upon turning it over, he saw that some manner of spell had been written with a brush over where the cloth met at the back—it appeared to be a seal. Xixu’s bafflement deepened.

“Can I open this?” he asked.

“She instructed me to tell you to wait until you had returned to your lodgings,” Isha said.

Xixu considered that for several moments. “All right,” he said finally.

He wasn’t sure what this was all about, but the cloth bundle was evidently not for prying eyes to see. He shifted it under his arm.

There was no sign that Sari was coming to see him off. Xixu tried not to pay that any mind, but the thought clung to him nonetheless. In an attempt to push it away, he asked Isha a question—though it was not the one which would give him the answer that he truly wished to know.

“Does the new shadeslayer come to Pale Moon often?”

Isha smiled and nodded. “Yes. He’s quite pleasant, isn’t he? Thoma often says so too.”

Upon hearing that, Xixu could not hold back the deep sigh that welled up from within him.

With one arm now out of commission, Xixu gave up on his patrol and returned to his room to open the bundle he’d received. He placed it upon his table, unwrapped it—the cloth had been folded several layers thick—and examined the contents.

“Are these...notebooks?”

He flipped through the three volumes and saw that the words within were handwritten—they appeared to be notes that detailed various maiden techniques. To Xixu, they brought to mind the notebooks Sari had mentioned reading once before, which she’d retrieved from her family’s storehouse.

“But why would she give them to me?”

Xixu examined the notebooks and cloth again, expecting to find a letter or note containing an explanation, but none presented itself. He began to rewrap the volumes, but stopped when he felt something hard. There was a silver object sticking out of the edge of the bottommost notebook.

When he pulled it out, he recognized it as the bracelet Sari always wore on her left arm. He knew that its purpose was to limit her power, but he could not begin to guess as to why it had been mixed into the bundle.

Xixu held the bracelet for a while, thinking, but eventually rewrapped it with

the notebooks and left the bundle on his writing desk by the window. He would simply have to go to Pale Moon tomorrow and ask Sari for an explanation.

Yet, despite having come to a decision, Xixu could not shake the bundle from his mind. Still, he knew from experience that at times such as these, it was best to simply go to sleep.

Xixu promptly finished his preparations for the next day, then crawled into his bed. Before long, sleep overtook him, though he rested only lightly. His dreams were plagued by intermittent nightmares and filled with a scattering of strange noises.

That was, until he realized that the sounds he was hearing were real. Stilling his breath, Xixu reached his hand out to his side for his sword—but instead of grasping his sheathed blade, his fingers made contact with something soft and cool to the touch. He hardly had a moment to consider what that thing might be before it slipped into bed beside him.

“Ugh... I *f-finally* made it out...”

The owner of the voice was sniffling and sounded like they were on the verge of tears. The instant Xixu realized who it was, curled up and shivering beside him, he leapt up.

“Saridi?!”

The moonlight filtering into the room revealed a girl sitting atop the white sheets and hugging her knees, glaring up at him resentfully with teary eyes. She was dressed in a yukata—had she been about to go to bed before she’d turned up here?—and her long silver hair was down, her face free of makeup.

“Xixu...” Sari called out softly.

Xixu was struck with the thought that if somebody were to see her like this, here in his room, it would give rise to a very dire misunderstanding indeed. Not to mention, why *was* she here in the first place? Her divine self had barged in uninvited before, but something about this seemed considerably different from then. In fact, Sari appeared to be her usual self. She chewed her lip as she looked up at him. He was still frozen in mute shock.

“Xixu.”

He stared at her for a few moments. “Yes?”

“Become my guest.”

“Pardon?”

Xixu wasn’t sure whether to doubt his ears or his mind, but he was freed from having to make the decision the very next moment as Sari embraced him and his thoughts went blank. She clung to him, her weight half pushing him back down onto the bed, and there was such a forcefulness to her grip that he began to wonder if he’d done anything that would warrant her holding a grudge. That was, until she buried her face into his chest, and began to cry.

“If you become my guest, it’ll all work out somehow,” she said tearfully. “It’ll all be fine...”

“What do you mean?” Xixu mumbled.

His surprise finally brought his mind fully back to life, and before long he reached a conclusion that satisfied him: this wasn’t real. It couldn’t be; the chain of events was simply too illogical. Thus, the only thing that would make sense was that he was dreaming of Sari because of what had happened at Pale Moon.

“Even so, this is just too much...” Xixu muttered.

This was possibly the most pathetic he’d ever been. Even if Sari had turned her interest elsewhere, he must have truly lost his senses if his mind was trying to placate himself with a dream like this. He sighed heavily and put a hand to his head.

Sari, without letting go, looked up. “Xixu?”

“I think...I should just sleep. I’ll forget about this tomorrow.”

“You can’t!”

Still half atop him, Sari grabbed his shoulders and began rattling him back and forth. Xixu’s head jerked around limply; he made no attempt to stop her.

This is turning out to be a rather intense dream, he thought. *Though perhaps that’ll be just the thing to wake me up...*

Just as he was beginning to get genuinely dizzy, Sari finally stopped. “You don’t mind, do you?” she asked. “You’ll agree? I’m going to take your silence as a yes, okay?”

Xixu took a few moments to gather himself. “If this is my dream, I’d like it if you could settle down a little more.”

“It’s not a dream!”

Sari’s expression became indignant. She opened her mouth, and Xixu found himself thinking that the shine of her white teeth was captivating against the darkness of his room. They soon vanished from his sight, though, as she brought her face toward his neck.

Xixu resigned himself to being bitten, but then a sensation shuddered throughout his entire body that rendered him speechless. The lips that brushed against his skin left a quiet sound in their wake, as though they were a living creature of their own. The breath he felt against his flesh sent goosebumps rippling down his spine.

It was, beyond shadow of a doubt, the gesture of a courtesan. Even had his mind not realized it for what it was, the visceral feeling of it was proof enough alone.

Thinking back over the contents of their conversation, Xixu looked down. Sari’s face was rather close. “This...isn’t a dream?” he asked.

“No!”

“I think that would’ve been preferable...”

“Oh, face reality already!” she exclaimed. “Look, I’m right here! I’m real! You can’t just avoid me!”

Xixu set aside the issue of her repeated declarations that this was reality in favor of examining the terribly compromising situation they were currently in. Since she had woken him up after he’d gone to bed, Xixu, like her, was in his sleepwear. That was bad enough all by itself, but his clothes had also been considerably strewn out of place by Sari’s embrace—she had wrapped her legs around him too—and violent shaking.

Xixu began attempting to pry her off. “Let me light the lamp. Then you can calm down and we can talk.”

“No! I’m not letting go!”

“Are you sure this isn’t a dream? None of it makes any sense.”

“If it being a dream means you’ll become my guest, then fine, it’s a dream!”

“I don’t think that’s fine at all... Please let go.”

By this point, Xixu had realized that if Sari was right and this wasn’t a dream, having her soft body half atop him and her slender limbs wrapped around his body was soon going to be a major issue. While striving to keep his thoughts occupied with anything other than her, Xixu grabbed her small shoulders and attempted to extricate himself. Sari refused to budge, however, and maintained her hold on him.

“It’ll be fine!” she said. “It might hurt a little, but it’ll probably be fine!”

“Normally, you’d be the one who it was painful for...”

“Becoming a sacred offering without going through the proper steps is supposed to jolt the heart really badly. But you should be okay, right, Xixu?”

“Wait, what? This is the first I’m hearing of this.”

Sure, she applied her spells to him often, but this was most certainly not a similar situation. To begin with, this wasn’t something that could be decided so easily. It *wasn’t*, but if she kept pressuring him like this, he didn’t know what would end up happening. His confidence in himself was crumbling at an accelerating rate. Xixu, recognizing that he was losing his head, made the conscious effort to regain his composure. Gently, he patted Sari on the back.

“Saridi,” he said soothingly. “Calm down a little. Could you explain to me what this is about?”

Sari jerked at the sound of her name and lifted her gaze up to him. Her blue eyes wavered with unease, and Xixu met them without looking away. The slightest hint of relief showed itself within them before she buried her face in his chest again like a small child. As she cried in quiet sniffles, Xixu silently stroked her long silver hair.

After some time, her head seemed to cool. She separated from Xixu and assumed a formal kneeling position, then bowed her head and apologized.

If this is *reality,* Xixu decided, *then there's no doubt that new shadeslayer has something to do with this.*

Otherwise, why would Sari, who had until only recently viewed Nerei with unease, suddenly become so close to him?

From her seat on Xixu's bed, Sari slowly but surely began to explain. "It was the people around me who first started acting strange," she told him. "Nerei came to Pale Moon with sweets, to thank us for his first visit, and after he had tea in the flower room, all the courtesans he talked to... It was like they adored him."

"Right..."

Xixu had an inkling of what that might have looked like from his encounters with Sari and Isha earlier that day. They had acted as though they were completely different people. Whatever had caused it must have contaminated Pale Moon little by little.

Sari, who now had his jacket draped around her, shivered. Her blue eyes flickered around restlessly before coming to a stop on his writing desk. "Before long, it slowly began to get to me too," she said. "First, I stopped wanting to go outside."

"Of Pale Moon?"

"Mm-hmm. I didn't want to leave its grounds. Whenever I tried, my thoughts and body would get heavy, and bit by bit, it felt like I was becoming not myself. Like somebody else was controlling me."

"So it *was* you who I saw at Pale Moon," Xixu muttered.

Frankly, he'd been considering the possibility that that version of her had been an impostor, given the stark difference between how Sari had treated him, then and now. But evidently that hadn't been the case.

Sari nodded and pointed at the bundle atop his writing desk. "I thought

something felt wrong, so I prepared that. Since I couldn't go outside, I thought maybe it had something to do with Pale Moon's boundary, which was why I tried using my bracelet as a medium that would let me go beyond the boundary to wherever it was."

"Right. Because it's something you wear often."

Since she couldn't have known when Xixu would show up at Pale Moon, her request to Isha had essentially been a gamble. Yet, Sari's plan had succeeded. She had managed to safely escape Pale Moon and make her way to him.

"I included the maidens' notebooks too because I didn't think it would be safe to keep them," Sari explained. "I'm glad it all worked out okay."

"Mmm," Xixu agreed. "I should have stopped by Pale Moon sooner. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. Thank you."

Sari smiled, tear tracks still visible on her face. She looked just like her usual self, and it tore at Xixu's heart to see it. How much had she gone through until this point, scared and alone, while he had been entirely ignorant? It left a bitter taste in his mouth. He *knew* she had been apprehensive of Nerei. Why hadn't he been more attentive?

Xixu regretted ever having found that man in the forest.

"I understand the circumstances now," he said. "But what does that have to do with you bringing up your sacred offering?"

Though he thought it was a topic best avoided, he had a feeling that would only lead to it weighing on his mind later.

"I thought that maybe the reason even *I* was able to be influenced was because my mental state is imbalanced right now," Sari replied simply.

"Ah... I think I get it."

Despite the fact that Sari's divine self had been roused, she hadn't received the last of her three sacred offerings. As a result, she was currently possessed of two natures that had not been properly unified. Whatever it was that was influencing her might have taken advantage of that, so she must have thought

that there was a chance receiving her offering would allow her to resist the encroachment.

But although Xixu grasped this, it was not a matter he could easily agree to. “I can understand the intent behind your actions,” he said, “but just settle down a little and—”

“No.”

“Saridi.”

He’d called her name in an attempt to calm her down, but he was startled when he saw Sari’s eyes suddenly begin to brim with tears. She gripped the sheets tightly with all ten of her fingers.

“I can’t go back to Pale Moon as I am now, Xixu,” Sari pleaded. “Even Thoma and Isha are acting weird. *I’m* acting weird. I let *him* into the proprietress’s room. That’s not *right*.”

“I...”

“I’m just getting worse and worse, and I *hate* it. My own body won’t listen to me. At this rate, I’ll end up as his puppet, doing whatever he says. I *won’t* let that happen.”

Sari fingers clutched so forcefully around the sheets that they could have drawn blood. She stared at Xixu, her eyes clouded with fear and anger. Her gaze, brimming as it was with sheer, terrible determination, was beautiful. Looking into her eyes, it was clear that they belonged to someone not human. And yet, they were also the eyes of the girl he knew so well, who possessed a proud spirit that stood undaunted and refused to submit. Even if unease ate at her, she would hold her head high and move forward as though it were her natural right. And because Xixu knew she would do so even if it meant her own ruin...he knew too that he had to help her.

Xixu, noticing that she was trembling, nodded. “All right,” he said. “Don’t worry. You’re okay now. I’ll do something.”

“Xixu...”

“For the time being, don’t go back to Pale Moon. I’ll look into Nerei.”

Xixu would have to discover Nerei's motivations and what he was doing before he had the means to act. As matters stood, it was as if the man were holding the majority of his friends and acquaintances hostage.

Xixu's declaration did not soothe Sari, however—upon hearing it, her brow had furrowed in worry. "But what if he gets to you too, Xixu?"

"I'll be fine," he assured her. "I'll keep my investigation quiet so that doesn't happen."

In the meantime, it would be best to borrow some assistance from the royal capital. For, regardless of how unstable Sari currently was, it had been proven that Nerei was capable of making even her dance to his tune. Xixu decided to dispatch a number of letters first thing in the morning.

"For today, just sleep," he said. "Fatigue leads to mental weakness too."

"What about you, Xixu? Will you stay here?"

"Yes. Don't worry, I won't go anywhere."

"Will you go to sleep with me?"

"I'd rather avoid any jolting, so no."

Xixu coaxed Sari into bed and sat down by her pillow, holding her pale hand. Her ordeal against the influence on her mind must have truly exhausted her, because after some brief grumbling, she murmured "I'm sorry," and almost immediately drifted to sleep, her breath rising and falling in a faint, even rhythm. Xixu watched over her for a short time, and once he was assured that she wouldn't wake, let go of her hand.

"What's going on...?" he murmured to himself.

An explanation for how any of this was happening eluded him. But although the events so far were sickening, they had at least taken a turn for the better now that he had Sari by his side and a clear target to investigate.

Xixu studied the pale, sleeping countenance of the girl in his bed, who had chosen him as the person she would rely on. He reached his hand out and gently wiped away the tear tracks that lingered on her face. Then, he moved over to his writing desk, sat down, and silently began drafting the first of three

letters he’d planned to write.

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“Are you finished?”

“Almost. Don’t open it yet.”

The sound of rustling cloth was audible from the other side of the sliding screen. Xixu, who was standing outside, heard a noise he didn’t quite recognize—though it somewhat resembled the unraveling of a kimono sash. Before he could dwell on it too long, the sliding screen behind him slid open, and Sari poked her head out.

“Xixu, do you have any pins, or a needle and thread?” she asked shyly. “The hems are too long; I can’t walk like this.”

Sari was wearing a set of Xixu’s personal clothes. The sleeve and trouser hems were far too long, however, and they gave her the look of a child in the midst of a spot of mischief. Xixu glanced down at her, inadvertently getting a direct view through the gap of Sari’s shirt collar—where he glimpsed a white chest binding that solved the mystery of the odd noise he’d heard earlier. As understanding hit him, Sari, evidently having noticed where he was looking, pulled her shirt together.

“Xixu...”

“I... Sorry.”

Xixu recognized that attempting to make any excuses would likely only result in him digging his own grave. Pointedly looking away from Sari, who was blushing and glaring at him, he entered the tatami-mat room and hastily retrieved the box where he kept his miscellaneous tools.

After the events of the previous night, Xixu had decided that their first priority was to provide Sari with a disguise that would allow her to venture outside. Enough time had passed since then that sunlight now shone through the window—though it was still the faint gleam of early morning.

Following a brief period of trial and error, Sari, needle and thread in hand, managed to fold up her sleeves and hems and fix them in place. Then, she tied her long silver hair up and pulled on a cap that she wore low over her eyes.

After checking her appearance in the room’s small, framed mirror, Sari turned

back to Xixu. “Do you think this will be enough for people not to recognize me?” she asked, head tilting to the side.



“From afar,” Xixu replied. “It wouldn’t stand up to close inspection.”

Sari’s lips were red even without any cosmetics, and no matter how tightly she bound her chest, Xixu was sure it would not take much observation to recognize her as a girl in male clothing.

Xixu handed her a cloth satchel, the contents of which were of great importance, and said, “All right. Let’s go.”

“Mm-hmm.”

They exited his dormitory room and began walking down the empty hallway, hoping to make it outside without running into anybody. Unfortunately, after rounding a corner, they abruptly came across an acquaintance. Ironblade, who appeared to have just returned from a patrol, stopped when he caught sight of Xixu and the girl hiding behind him. Xixu held onto the possibility that the large man hadn’t yet noticed Sari, but just as he was about to give Ironblade an innocuous greeting, the other man gave him a deep nod.

“It’s good to see that you two are close, but I would recommend staying at Pale Moon rather than bringing her here,” he said. “Shadeslayers are not forbidden from spending the night outside of their lodgings, after all.”

Xixu took several moments to process the man’s words. “What? No, I...”

“We’re in the full-moon period. Make sure you escort her all the way back to Pale Moon’s gate.”

Ironblade gave a slight bow to Sari, then stepped past the pair, headed for his room. Xixu, struck speechless, almost saw him off without a word, but was returned to his senses by Sari poking him in the back.

In a low voice, he said to Ironblade, “I would ask you to keep this matter to yourself, please.”

“Very well. You have my word.”

It appeared that Ironblade had gravely misunderstood the circumstances, but at least that meant ensuring his secrecy was a simple task. Xixu, very much unsure of how to feel about the situation, resumed walking, pulling Sari along by the hand.

“We’ll have to dispel his misunderstanding later,” he said.

“If we even can,” Sari said. “I have the feeling it’s already rooted pretty deep.”

“Why?”

“Why indeed...? I wish I knew too.”

In any case, what mattered was that their encounter with Ironblade had been resolved without incident. Leery of being discovered once again, Xixu led Sari outside via the dormitory’s rear entrance, and the pair made their way toward Irede’s west gate.

The west gate was both a departure and arrival point; multiple wagons and coaches passed through it each day, journeying to and from the royal capital. Upon arriving there, Xixu helped Sari inside of a large horse-drawn coach belonging to one of the capital’s transit services. There were two parallel plain benches set lengthways inside the passenger cabin, and Sari chose to sit on the edge of one by the entrance, near several wooden crates. She stared at Xixu uneasily, her lap filled with a cloth satchel which contained the letters he had written earlier, and the maidens’ notebooks she’d gotten from the Werrilocia storehouse.

“Be discreet,” Xixu instructed her. “Go to my mother’s home first, then await there for replies from the castle and the Werrilocias. Be particularly careful to check whether the latter have been affected, given the circumstances with Thoma.”

“Okay.”

“Once matters are resolved here, I’ll come for you. Don’t trust anyone else, even if they use my name. I’ll come in person.”

“Xixu...” Sari’s eyes flickered with worry. “Be careful, okay?”

No doubt she’s afraid that I will undergo a mysterious transformation as well, Xixu thought as Sari reached out and touched his cheek with her pale fingers. He took her hand in his, noticing that her fingertips felt cold to the touch, as though their temperature echoed that of the wintry clouds in her heart.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her. “Once I find out what’s happening, I’ll get in

touch and tell you everything I've learned."

"Okay," Sari said. "But don't do anything reckless, all right?"

"Don't worry. I'll beat Thoma's sanity back into him, if that's what it takes," Xixu said, only partially joking. "I just so happen to have been looking for an opportunity to do so for a while now."

Sari giggled, a hint of her usual self returning alongside a hint of color on her cheeks. Xixu found her adorable, though his mood was tarnished by the unpleasantness of reality. That the dignified and beautiful Sari, whose rightful place was at Pale Moon, was now forced to adopt a disguise and flee her own town, bothered him deeply.

I have no time to waste. I need to determine why Nerei is distorting her home as soon as possible.

Sari retrieved a silver bracelet from her breast pocket and handed it to Xixu. "Hold onto this," she said. "Just in case."

"Won't you be in trouble without it?" he asked.

"It's okay, I have two."

Sari pulled another bracelet forward from out of her loose-fitting sleeve and showed it to him. Xixu nodded and tucked the one she'd given him away into his uniform.

"If you run into anything that you can't deal with alone," Sari said, lowering her voice into a whisper, "you should consult the director."

"The Midiridos director?" Xixu asked.

"Mm-hmm. She hardly ever makes public appearances, so *he* probably hasn't gotten to her yet. And she seemed to notice that something was strange about him from the start."

"I see," Xixu said. He felt grateful for the potential ally, but knowing the Midiridos director had caught on right away made him feel a bit ashamed of his own lack of perception.

Seeing that Xixu had paid sincere heed to her advice, Sari relaxed slightly and gave him a faint, almost-relieved smile. She shuffled, readjusting her position

on the thin wood of the seat.

“If it looks like it’s going to be too much for you to handle alone, I’ll help you,” she said. “Just come get me, okay?”

“I’ll do that,” Xixu replied. “Though I suppose that means I’ll have to prepare myself for some heart pain.”

He’d meant it as a joke to lighten her spirits, but Sari immediately went red in the face. She doubled over, hiding her expression as she began to fidget agitatedly. She looked like a child who’d had an embarrassing secret exposed. Xixu felt slightly awkward watching her, but before long, she stilled—perhaps because she’d tired herself out. Then, still bent over at the waist, Sari lifted her head and looked at him. She smiled, though her face was still deep crimson.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Unsure whether or not her reply was serious, Xixu just stared at her, unable to find anything to say.

Once Sari’s coach disappeared down the highway, Xixu headed back into Irede, his thoughts occupied with planning his next move.

Nerei was at the center of the anomaly, obviously, but because of his ability to influence others—even Sari, of all people—it would be risky to approach him directly. It would be best to investigate his movements first. Fortunately, there was no shortage of rumors circulating about the new shadeslayer who’d begun gallivanting around town as soon as he’d arrived. Even Xixu had heard his fair share of them.

With that in mind, Xixu decided to begin his investigation by visiting the courtesan and gambling houses which he’d heard Nerei had gone to, starting with the ones nearby. They were all closed, of course, as it was still early morning, but he could at least confirm where they were located. After that, he’d have to wait for evening to fall and revisit them one by one.

And so, Xixu set off in pursuit of his task. He kept an eye out for any members of the Midiridos Troupe as he went—but after one circuit of Irede, he reached a realization that shocked him. It appeared that, in an unnatural state of affairs,

every business that Nerei had visited—from courtesan houses to even small drinking establishments—had at some point permanently closed down.

“What’s going on here?” Xixu muttered to himself.

No matter how one looked at it, nigh on ten businesses closing their doors in the span of under a fortnight was extremely improbable, to say the least. Nevertheless, their shutters all bore notices stating that the owners intended to cease their trades. Moreover, after an additional round of examination, Xixu realized that it wasn’t just the businesses he’d checked that had closed down—several more courtesan houses had as well.

Thinking back to the previous evening, Xixu recalled that he’d thought the townscape seemed darker than usual, but his lack of interest in Irede’s houses of pleasure must have prevented him from seeing the cause.

Perplexed by the situation he’d found himself in, Xixu began to feel lost. He couldn’t make sense of what was happening to Irede.

“Did the people running those businesses notice something was strange about Nerei?” Xixu muttered to himself. “Or...”

Or have they already fallen victim to him in some way?

Back at Pale Moon, Xixu recalled that Nerei had openly criticized courtesan houses. How humiliated must Sari have felt, forced to agree by his mental influence? Just thinking about it infuriated Xixu, but the knowledge could perhaps be a clue—Nerei’s opinions might have something to do with the changes happening in Irede.

For caution’s sake, Xixu decided he’d head for the northern edge of town next, to visit Pale Moon. It was midday, so he encountered nobody else along the small path, and soon enough, he caught sight of the gate past the copse of surrounding trees. A small part of him was afraid that he would see a notice affixed there announcing Pale Moon’s termination of business, but the old wooden gate looked no different from its usual self. Relieved, he turned on his heel—and immediately tensed up.

Thoma, wearing his sword, was leaning against the bamboo fence nearby. Xixu couldn’t tell how long he’d been there watching him.

“Hey,” Thoma said, giving Xixu a friendly smile and a casual wave of his hand. “Out patrolling early? It’s rare to see you come out this far.”

After several moments, Xixu replied, “If I don’t patrol everywhere, then there’s no point in it.”

“True enough. We’re blessed to have such a diligent shadeslayer in you.”

“Perhaps you should consider practicing a little diligence yourself.”

The contents of their conversation were no different than usual, but Xixu couldn’t help but notice that Thoma’s usual relaxed air was missing, and that something about whatever had replaced it seemed at odds with the everyday tranquility of the town. It felt like he could draw his blade at any moment.

Xixu, conscious of his own military sword at his side, went to pass by Thoma. As he stepped past him, the other man spoke.

“Have you seen Sari?” Thoma asked. There was a chill to his voice.

Xixu stopped and looked at him. He was keenly aware that if either of them were to draw their weapons, they’d only be a pace away from the reach of the other’s blade. And Thoma was *skilled.* At least evenly matched with Xixu himself, if not better. Should they cross swords, it was difficult to imagine either of them would be able to walk away unharmed. But whatever the result, it would break Sari’s heart.

Xixu suppressed his turbulent emotions and did his best to act the part of his usual self. “Has something happened to her?” he asked.

“She’s gone missing,” Thoma said. “I thought for sure she’d barged into your place though.”

“No, I haven’t seen her. Is there anywhere else she might have gone?”

“Not as far as I know.”

Xixu briefly considered trying to prod some sort of information on Nerei out of Thoma, but the other man was sharp even in ordinary circumstances. Rather than forcing the conversation, he decided it would be best to cut it off here and ask somebody else.

Xixu looked to the left and right—there was no one in sight. “All right,” he

said. “I’ll look for her while on patrol.”

“I’m counting on you,” Thoma said. “Tell her to make it back before nightfall. And not to overdo it with her selfish antics.”

The man pushed off the bamboo fence and headed through Pale Moon’s gate. At a glance, his retreating figure appeared no different than usual, but Xixu frowned as he saw him off. Would the usual Thoma ever accuse Sari of “selfish antics”? Thoma, the brother who so obviously adored his younger sister?

Feeling a slight, creeping unease, Xixu left the copse of trees. As he headed back to Irede’s streets, he kept his gaze forward—it felt best to feign obliviousness to the unpleasant sensation that clung to his back. Almost, it felt like he was being watched.

Once Xixu had put enough distance between himself and Pale Moon, he headed toward his next destination: a small teahouse. It was located in a back alley in the southwest part of town, and was the singular establishment in Irede where he was a regular customer. The cozy interior contained only two wooden tables and six chairs, but there was always at least one spot vacant whenever he stopped by. In fact, it was uncommon for him to come across other customers at all during his visits.

When Xixu entered the teahouse, he saw it was empty today as well. He took his usual place in the seat furthest to the back, and seconds later the proprietor appeared. He placed the day’s menu in front of Xixu, then turned to leave.

“Ruhas tea, please,” Xixu called out to the unsociable man. “Also, has anything strange come to your attention lately?”

Xixu knew that a small, unassuming back-alley teahouse like this one might not be able to provide him with any information at all, but those traits also gave him the freedom to poke around. With the changes happening all over Irede, there was every chance that being careless in his investigation would allow a potential enemy to catch wind of him.

The teahouse proprietor, who had a stoop to his back, turned around unhurriedly. “Mmm, not that I recall, no.”

“I see,” Xixu said. “I just noticed that a number of courtesan houses have closed their doors, so I was wondering if anything was amiss.”

“Hard to say. I’ll ask my wife.”

The proprietor left and went into the back of the teahouse.

If Xixu’s memory served, the proprietor’s wife was in her mid-fifties, which placed her at around a decade younger than her husband. She was a former courtesan of Irede, and the proprietor was a tradesman who hailed from the royal capital. As the story went—according to another teahouse customer, herself a courtesan—the proprietor’s wife had retired from her old position after she and her husband had fallen in love, and they had then opened this small teahouse together. Given the proprietor’s wife’s history, it was likely she was better acquainted with the goings-on in town than her husband—that was probably why he’d gone to ask her opinion.

After a short time, the hanging curtain that served to partition off the back of the teahouse parted to reveal the proprietor’s wife. She was carrying a tray with a tea bowl on it, which she placed in front of Xixu.

“Welcome, Mister shadeslayer,” she greeted, giving him a friendly smile.

Xixu hummed his acknowledgement.

“So,” she said. “My husband tells me that you’re asking if there’s been anything strange happening in Irede?”

Xixu nodded, picking up his tea bowl. A refreshing fragrance drifted up from the clear surface of the pale-green tea.

“Hmm, let me think...” the proprietor’s wife said, hugging the tea tray to herself. After several moments, she continued, “You’re right that businesses have been closing down in rapid succession recently. I was familiar with a number of them myself.”

“Do you know why they closed?” Xixu asked.

“That’s the thing. Apparently, they weren’t struggling at all. Everybody I’ve spoken to was just oddly cheerful.”

“‘Oddly cheerful’?”

“Mm-hmm. They were all eager to travel to other towns and open different businesses there. I was so surprised.”

“But what does...?” Xixu trailed off, his brow furrowing in spite of the arrival of his long-awaited tea.

What does that signify?

The proprietor’s wife smiled ruefully. “Strange, isn’t it?” she said. “Perhaps this is what they mean when they say people change. The courtesans who left said they ‘didn’t want to do that kind of work anymore.’ I thought they’d lost their minds.”

The vehemence in her final words took Xixu aback, and he looked up at her. He’d never thought of the proprietor’s wife as anything other than a good-natured woman.

Noticing the surprise in his gaze, she gave him a playful shrug of her shoulders. “You came from the capital like my husband, didn’t you? Then it might be a difficult notion to adapt to, but the courtesans of Irede take pride in their work. We don’t have legitimate ties to myth like the holy courtesans of Pale Moon, of course, but we’re all people of Irede. One of the first things we’re told is that if we will only sell our nights grudgingly, we should take our trade to another town. For it is in the act of keeping Irede *Irede* that we maintain our gift of gratitude to the god who caused this town to come into being.

The proprietor’s wife gave Xixu an embarrassed smile after she finished. Her countenance was meticulously adorned with makeup, and what it had gained in years had not taken from her any of her former beauty and conviction. In her, Xixu saw the lifeblood of the people of Irede.

For a thousand years, Irede’s people had not forgotten their gratitude, and the town’s god had accepted the sacred offerings devoted to her and maintained the peace, all to suppress the essence of the snake that slumbered far, far below. Such was the truth of the town that bore the name of Irede, and that truth remained evident—the town that had inherited the ancient myth still had not lost its heart. And yet, the girl who was their god had been forced out of her rightful place, and the town’s residents had begun to abandon it. This reality only reaffirmed to Xixu that the turbulence Irede was experiencing

would not be possible to deal with by ordinary means.

After some thought, Xixu asked his final question. “Have you met the new shadeslayer? The one who came after me?”

“I don’t believe so,” the proprietor’s wife replied. “Though I have heard of him.”

“I’ve seen him.”

The reply came from the proprietor, returned from the back of the teahouse.

Xixu looked up at the man, who was even more unsociable than himself. “What did you think of him?”

“You gathering public opinion about the newcomer?”

“More or less,” Xixu replied. Then, despite his lack of skill with them, he did his best to mix in a joke. “It’s rather difficult doing so in a way he won’t find out.”

The proprietor worked his mouth around, as though hesitant to say whatever he was thinking. Xixu considered momentarily if it was because he found the idea of being an anonymous informant disagreeable, but that notion was proven incorrect when he nodded slightly and looked straight at Xixu.

“I don’t mean to speak ill of the good sir, but he’s out of place in Irede,” the proprietor said. “I’m not sure how to describe the feeling I get from him... It’s just that he’s so oddly cheerful. It’s...eerie.”

“‘Eerie’?” Xixu repeated.

He’d been unable to stop the word from slipping out; he felt as though the proprietor’s description had hit the mark. “Eerie” was exactly what Xixu himself thought of the man at the center of this case.

Finishing his conversation with the proprietor and his wife, Xixu paid for his tea and exited the teahouse. He decided to put a hold on his investigation for now and to return to his regular patrolling; Xixu knew he could not be described as familiar with Irede even as flattery, and any more inquiry was likely to make its way to Nerei’s ears. In any case, he felt it was probably best for him to seek out the changes happening to the town with his own eyes.

And so, Xixu began making his rounds. He kept an attentive eye on his surroundings as he went, but despite the closing of so many businesses, the crowds of people walking the midday streets were as sizable as always.

Perhaps the changes in Irede have most affected those who belong to the night.

"If I could just find a member of the Midiridos Troupe..." Xixu muttered to himself.

He wanted to follow Sari's advice, but by some stroke of fate, today of all days, the musicians and performers that were a permanent fixture on Irede's street corners were nowhere to be seen. The realization filled him with an uncanny feeling. It was as though the specter of change was drawing steadily, inevitably closer. Irede, now empty of music, began to resemble a sinking ship in his eyes—one whose demise was so certain that even the rats had fled. Even so, Xixu knew it was not as if the Midiridos had actually abandoned the town; as representatives of one of Irede's three sacred offerings, they took too much pride in the music they dedicated to the god.

"What am I doing?" Xixu muttered, beginning to regret never having asked where the musicians stayed when they weren't out performing in the streets. "My own ignorance pains me. There's a lot I'll need to ask Sari later."

Until now, Xixu had gone to Sari and Thoma whenever he'd had questions he needed answered. Now that he could rely on neither sibling, however, Xixu was keenly feeling the sheer depth of his own ignorance when it came to matters of Irede. If he did nothing to amend it, he'd find himself lost again whenever the next incident rolled around. The next time he saw Sari, he would have to make sure to ask her all manner of questions. Though of course, that depended on whether he would be able to ensure her safe return to Irede.

Xixu glanced at the hilt of his military sword. When he saw only one decorative cord affixed to it, ending in a piece of black quartz, his feelings grew momentarily mixed. His thoughts threatened to go in a direction entirely unrelated to matters at hand—but that was the precise moment he caught sight of the problematic shadeslayer himself, just up the street. Dressed in a kimono, Nerei was slowly coming in Xixu's direction, a friendly smile on his face

as he made conversation with passersby.

Xixu wavered over whether to avoid their chance meeting by simply walking past, but they were already at a distance where doing so would seem unnatural. Deciding for the moment to offer a greeting when their paths crossed, he stayed as close to the edge of the street as he could. When Nerei noticed him, Xixu nodded politely. But his hopes that their interaction would end there were dashed when the other man visibly brightened up and headed in his direction.

“Hey there!” Nerei said. “Thank you for accompanying me yesterday.”

After several moments, Xixu replied, “It was my pleasure.”

“Where are you headed today?”

Xixu had the sudden sense that replying incorrectly would not end well for him. He considered telling Nerei that he was on patrol, or perhaps about to take his midday meal, but in the end, went with neither option.

“I’ve just reached a stopping point in my patrol, so I’m returning to my room,” Xixu said. He made to move away from the other man, but was startled when Nerei casually strode over and began walking alongside him.

“Isn’t Irede lovely in the daytime?” Nerei asked. “It really livens the spirit.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Xixu replied neutrally.

“Which isn’t to say it’s bad at night, but Irede’s atmosphere is a little unsanitary, wouldn’t you say? Best if it were cleaned up a little.”

While Nerei’s words didn’t sound like outright mockery of Irede to Xixu so much as insensitive remarks, he found them oddly irritating, given the circumstances. He decided to probe Nerei for information, all while taking care not to leave the bounds of small talk.

“You said something similar yesterday. Do you have a dislike for courtesan houses?”

“No, nothing of the sort,” Nerei replied. “I can’t say I like the ones in this town though.”

“Then why come to Irede? You could have refused.”

While Xixu had essentially had no say in the matter, that was not the case for other shadeslayers. *They* had not been sent here on orders from the king. So why had Nerei come to a famous town of pleasure if he so disliked it?

Nerei smiled at the blunt inquiry. “The truth is...I’m searching for somebody.”

“You are?” Xixu raised an eyebrow. He hadn’t expected that answer.

Nerei nodded. “It’s an embarrassing story, but I’m hoping to find my younger sister who left home a long time ago and never returned. It appears she’s somewhere here in Irede.”

“And you believe she became a courtesan?”

“Yes,” Nerei replied, scratching his head bashfully.

Xixu looked at the other man closely, trying to get a hint of the emotions that lay underneath his smiling expression, but ultimately came away with nothing. Seemingly oblivious, Nerei squinted up at the closed windows of the courtesan houses lined along the street.

“It’s not as though my sister’s a child, so you’d think it would be fine to let her be. But she never so much as drops by to visit. Eventually, I’d just had enough.”

“So you came to bring her back?” Xixu asked.

“Something like that.”

Could Nerei’s sister have anything to do with the matter at hand? Xixu wondered.

He sorted through Nerei’s story in his head. He hadn’t expected something like this of the other shadeslayer—in fact, he’d been under the impression that Nerei didn’t even *have* any relatives. That was impossible, of course, but for some reason, the recent series of changes had given Xixu the vague impression that Nerei wasn’t an ordinary person.

Eventually, he told the other man, “If you give me a description of her appearance, I’ll keep an eye out for her.”

“Oh, no, that’s okay,” Nerei assured him. “I’m not in a hurry or anything. I couldn’t tell you what she looks like these days anyway. She’s probably even changed her name.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. I do hope that she hasn’t been tricked by some dastard of a man.”

At some point during their conversation, the pair had left Irede’s main streets and walked down the narrow lane leading to Xixu’s dormitory. As he contemplated what he would do if Nerei genuinely followed him all the way to his room, the man tapped him lightly on the shoulder. Xixu stopped walking, expectant, and the other shadeslayer drew in close, his fox-like eyes narrowed.

“Incidentally, and I beg your pardon...” Nerei said, “but what have you done with her?”

The question was gentle, but thrust like a blade. Xixu’s breath stopped momentarily. The surprise, however, didn’t feel as if it had made its way to his face—Xixu supposed he had his naturally indifferent expression to thank for that fact.

In truth, this whole time he’d been wondering whether it had been the correct decision to have Sari leave Irede. While he’d thought it was best for her to take refuge elsewhere, he had also had misgivings about whether it would be possible to solve the ongoing mystery without her. However, in that moment, Xixu was glad from the bottom of his heart that he’d sent Sari away. If he’d left her in his dormitory room, she could have been taken away while he was gone. In the capital, she would have the protection of the king and the Werrilocia family. The hidden threat would not be able to reach so far, so soon. Or at least, that was what Xixu hoped.

Settling his inner thoughts, Xixu returned the enigmatic shadeslayer’s gaze. “‘Her’? Do you mean the maiden?”

“I do,” Nerei said. “Apparently, she’s been missing since this morning. I thought perhaps you might have taken her somewhere, you see.”

“Thoma asked me something similar, but I’m afraid I couldn’t guess as to where she might be,” Xixu replied. His voice barely shifted from its usual brusqueness; at times like these, his reputation for being unsociable was convenient.

Nerei gave him a patient smile, though it felt like there was an uglier emotion

being kept in check behind it. “Truly? But I can sense her presence on you. It’s quite strong.”

You can sense that? Xixu wanted to ask, but that would only reveal his hand. Instead, he held his tongue, mulling over the realization that had just come to him—perhaps Nerei could be something more than just a shadeslayer who could see the inhuman. It was possible, Xixu supposed, that the other man wielded an additional ability, similar to how maidens had their diverse array of supernatural powers. Though that was only conjecture, of course.

Xixu deliberately curled his lips into a frown. “‘Her presence’? What do you mean by that?”

“So you’re unaware of it, are you?” Nerei asked. “Her presence hangs around your body like a lingering aroma, like she’s ingrained into your skin. Where have you hidden her?”

Nerei’s words made Xixu recall the bracelet tucked into his breast pocket. That had to be the cause of what the man was referring to, but Xixu could hardly take it out and show it to him. The term “presence” had reminded him of another conversation, though, and he drew upon it when crafting his reply.

“Perhaps it’s because Sari used me as a test subject for one of her techniques the other day? She used me as the medium to create a boundary. According to her, her presence has soaked into me because we work together quite often.”

Nerei examined him for several moments before finally saying, “I see. Now that’s something you don’t hear every day.”

Though Xixu couldn’t tell if Nerei had truly accepted the excuse or not, it appeared that he wasn’t planning on continuing his questioning for the time being. The pair silently turned a corner, and the three-story wooden building that served as the militia dormitory came into view. Nerei looked up, studying its walls.

“And here I was thinking you of all people would know where she was,” he said. “Ah, what a shame.”

“What about you? I got the impression that the two of you were quite friendly yester...day...”

The moment the counter remark left his mouth, Xixu was struck by a mild degree of self-loathing. His words must have sounded like nothing more than him being snide out of jealousy—yet correcting himself would only pile shame on top of shame. He had the urge to send several sharp kicks into the nearby wall, but endured it and stayed silent.

Nerei grinned affably. “Sure, we’re close, but the moment I take my eyes off her she pulls the carpet out from under me. It’s a real bother, but that’s courtesans for you. You should be cautious too.”

“‘Cautious’?” Xixu repeated.

“Yes.” Nerei’s voice dropped a pitch deeper. “If you’re considering becoming her guest, don’t.”

Xixu was unable to tell for sure whether Nerei’s words were a show of intimidation, or mere small talk. He’d actually received a similar remark once, back when he’d been in the royal capital. A noble’s son had made the comment to him during their first meeting. Xixu had offhandedly acknowledged the man’s words, not thinking much of it, but for some reason that had kicked up a fuss that ended in a duel. To make matters worse, even though he’d won, a woman he’d been barely acquainted with had followed him around everywhere for a decent while afterward. The king had been in hysterics. Ever since, Xixu kept the inexplicable event tucked away in his memories, enshrined as an important lesson: if a person provokes you out of nowhere, it’s a bad idea to reply without understanding why.

Leveraging the experience of his past mistake, Xixu decided to ask what Nerei’s intent was directly. “Is there some kind of problem that would come with me becoming her guest?”

“Well, ‘problem’ is too strong a term for it,” Nerei said. “But it *would* result in suffering a number of uncomfortable experiences, no? Everybody has their own part to play. Failing to recognize that and overstepping one’s bounds will only shift the burden onto those around them.”

“In short, you mean to say that it isn’t suitable for a shadeslayer to become her guest?”

Nerei’s warning had been undeniably rude, so Xixu had replied similarly

without reservation, reminding the other shadeslayer of their shared status. The moment he did so, Nerei's smile turned artificial.

"I think perhaps you may have misunderstood me," Nerei said. "Let me put it this way: if one had to make the distinction, they'd describe you as a person of the capital, not Irede, right? As such, it would not benefit you or Sari if you were to involve yourself with Irede more than necessary. After all, when those who live their lives by different standards attempt to maintain a relationship beyond simple business, they're destined to face significant difficulties."

"Is that so?" Xixu said noncommittally.

What was this man's objective? Did he wish to make Sari his? To change Irede? Or was he truly only searching for his younger sister?

Ascertaining what Nerei wanted could lead to the discovery of possible means to deal with him, but Xixu felt that the answer was still out of his reach. He discreetly examined the man's expression, trying to glean some type of insight into his motives, but found nothing. Whether or not Nerei noticed his intentions, the other man's smile remained fake.

Perhaps I should press him a little further.

Offering an apology to Sari in his thoughts, Xixu decided to rise to Nerei's provocation. "She has stated her intent to choose me, though."

If Sari truly is Nerei's objective, he won't be able to remain silent after hearing that.

However, the moment Xixu had this thought, sheer reflex almost made him draw his sword. Then, after a delay, a visceral shudder ran down his spine. Speechless, he looked down at his own body. He could have sworn he'd felt a blade pierce through his stomach. But no—the hallucination had been the result of the wordless, honed killing intent that had burst from Nerei.

Without taking his eyes off of the man, Xixu focused his attention on his own hand, hovering by the hilt of his sword. Although the sudden change in Nerei had taken him by surprise, if the other shadeslayer drew his blade, this entire matter could be settled quickly—a far better alternative to wandering about in the dark, searching for each other's true intentions.

Xixu tensed the toes of his feet. The coarse sand underfoot rasped, the sound prickling at his ears. He steadied his breathing, waiting for the moment to come...and yet Nerei made no move to draw his sword. He just stared at Xixu, his slender eyes creasing as he smiled.

“Now, that is enviable indeed,” he said. “I wouldn’t spread the word around, though, if I were you. Who knows what envy might drive some people to do?”

“If somebody takes issue with me, I intend on accepting their challenge,” Xixu replied.

The implication was clear: *If you’re going to come for me, do it now.*

Nerei, however, simply laughed and said, “How gallant!” His killing intent had already vanished as though it had never existed, and all that was left in the air of the narrow lane was the mild warmth of the afternoon.

Xixu felt a trickle of disappointment that his challenge had gone unanswered, which mortified him enough that he immediately felt the urge to drive his foot into the nearby wall. Now that Nerei had ignored the bait, Xixu’s words sounded like pure arrogant boasting—like he was one of those braggarts who swaggered around tossing out statements that made it clear they were overly conscious of the opinions of others. Why was it that everything he did had such unintended, disastrous results? An image of Xixu’s liege entered his mind; the king was bent over, suffering from great fits of laughter. Xixu cursed him with every fiber of his being.

The pair of shadeslayers came to the front gate of the dormitory, and Xixu had the sudden realization that he didn’t know where Nerei resided. Just as he was considering the unexpected possibility that they shared the same lodgings, the man smiled and waved.

“I’ll see you around, then,” Nerei said.

“R-Right...”

Nerei turned and left so casually that it made Xixu question whether their entire conversation had meant anything to him at all. Xixu watched him go, waiting for the man to disappear before turning and slamming his foot into the side of the dormitory gate.

“*Damn* it! What *was* that?!”

It felt like all he’d managed to gather was a cloud of hazy, ill emotions. There was no doubt that Nerei was exceedingly close to guilty, but as long as he wandered among the shades of gray, Xixu had no means of recourse. Hopefully Nerei showed his true colors soon, because Xixu would be glad to cut him down—not that it would prove a simple task, given his opponent was another shadeslayer. He regretted not being present for Nerei’s assessment; he’d missed his chance to see the other man’s level of skill.

“For the time being, I need to find a member of the Midiridos,” Xixu muttered to himself. “And...to look into his younger sister.”

If I can’t make any progress by speaking with Nerei himself, I’ll just have to pursue other leads, Xixu decided. Any reply from the capital would not come until the day after tomorrow at the earliest, so in the meantime, he had to at least avoid making the situation worse.

Xixu returned to his room and saw Sari’s yukata, folded up and placed in the lidless clothes tray in the corner. He didn’t know how to feel about the sight. The events of the previous night—which still didn’t feel quite real—resurfaced in his thoughts.

“Me, her sacred offering...” Xixu mumbled.

Perhaps if he’d given in to Sari’s wishes last night, this matter could have been resolved with ease. After all, Irede was her town. From the very beginning, she’d been the able to provide an answer to any problem that arose. Even so, Xixu thought it was far too early for Sari to choose her guest. She had said herself that she wasn’t able to make a decision yet, as there was still so much left for her to learn.

Xixu did not think it was acceptable to force Sari into a decision just because they had encountered a crisis. As somebody who had seen more years in this world than her, he wanted to find another way—one that wouldn’t urge her forward before she was ready. However, if that path could not be found, he would need to be prepared to call on her aid.

Xixu frowned, unable to discern how he felt about the matter. He had the feeling that dedicating more thought to it would be pathetic of him, but at the

same time, he knew that if he tried to put his sentiments into words, they'd come out wrong. In any case, what he *could* perceive easily was his liege's visage, twisted with hysterical laughter as he laughed at Xixu's plight. This, of course, irritated him to no end.

"A jolt to the heart, huh...?" Xixu murmured.

The spell that bound a shade to a shadeslayer was intense in its own right; the mere thought of how much it would hurt when a god united with her sacred offering was intimidating. Yet, Xixu knew that, if that were all there was to it, he could accept. What mattered wasn't the pain, but something else. Something far more important.

Xixu approached the clothes tray, retrieved the yukata within, and stored it away into his closet. The faint, sweet scent that drifted from the clothing reminded him of a certain girl, whose smile he could not gaze upon for too long, for fear of being swept away.

3. Substitution

It was customary for coaches headed to the royal capital to spend the night on the road, most often camped out in a clearing alongside the highway. The service Xixu had selected for Sari, however, had an accommodation contract with a small lodge, so her journey would be completed without her having to sleep outdoors—an experience that would otherwise have been a first in her life.

Alone within her cramped room, Sari stared out through her window and up at the moon. It was just past full, and the cloudless night sky allowed it to cast its sharp, pale luminescence upon the world. She was still dressed in men's clothing—Sari figured that even if the garments only obscured her gender from a cursory glance, it would certainly prove harder for pursuers to track her in them than if she dressed as a courtesan, in her kimono.

Sari pulled her bracelet out from her loose-fitting sleeve. "I wonder if Xixu's okay..." she mumbled to herself.

Of Sari's two bracelets, one had been her mother's, left behind when she'd abandoned the family, and the other was Sari's own, which she'd worn ever since she was a child. It was the latter she'd given to Xixu, and which had been the key to her escaping Pale Moon. As long as Xixu kept it in his possession, it should be able to tell her if he'd reached a time of need. Alas, that was the limit of Sari's perception; she could not otherwise ascertain whether the young shadeslayer was safe and whole.

Unease whirled in Sari's stomach, refusing to settle. "I wish I knew what any of this meant."

She was scared. She had left Xixu behind, alone in the midst of an eerie set of circumstances with no clearly discernible cause. But, for now, all Sari could do was have faith in him. If she had stayed in Irede and fallen completely under Nerei's influence, she'd have become Xixu's most formidable opponent in returning the town to normal. Not to mention, if she lost her senses, it wouldn't only be Irede that was at risk of being destroyed, but the entire country.

Whenever Sari was around Nerei, she found herself listening to whatever he said against her will. Each time, it felt like she *had* to seek Nerei's favor, as though she were a child he was keeping under control with gentle affirmation and a pat on the head.

Even after experiencing it directly, Sari had no clue as to the sort of power it was that allowed Nerei to do such a thing. Since even Thoma had been affected, however, she came to the conclusion that perhaps mental tenacity was not a significant factor in resisting it. Actually, now that she thought of it, even though all of Pale Moon's maidservants had fallen under Nerei's influence, there were some guests who had not. Where did that difference originate from?

Sari returned to her room's humble bed, laid down, and hugged her knees. "I wonder why Xixu was okay," she muttered.

At first, Sari had thought that Nerei's power worked via proximity, and hadn't affected Xixu because he'd hardly ever come into contact with the man. Now, though, she realized that couldn't be true—there had been a guest of Pale Moon who fawned on the new shadeslayer during their very first meeting. In contrast, there had been a tourist who visited Pale Moon nearly every day as of late, and he hadn't shown any signs of being influenced, even despite multiple conversations with Nerei.

After contemplating what the difference could be for a while, Sari concluded: "Could it be that...people of Irede are easier to influence?"

She was the maiden of Irede. Thoma was the next successor to House Radi, who shared in the maiden's bloodline. Lastly, there were the courtesans and long-time patrons of Pale Moon, the ancient house of myth. Everybody around her who had been affected by Nerei's influence were people close to Irede's very nature. All of these people understood the town's ethos and were proud of it, and lived their lives by its principles. But if that was exactly what made them easier to influence...

"Then going to the Midiridos for aid might be..." Sari paled and shot up.

She had thought that the director would be safe from Nerei's influence because she hardly ever made public appearances, but if the conclusion she'd

just drawn was true, then the woman would be one of the first on the list to fall under his power. Unwittingly, she could have sent Xixu into danger.

No longer able to bear the idea of escaping to the capital alone, Sari hopped off her bed and ran toward the door of her room. But, just before she could reach it, it opened from the other side and revealed a seedy-looking young man holding a crude dagger in his hand.

The man examined Sari—who had her hair down—and smirked. “So, you *are* a woman,” he said. “Knew it wasn’t just my imagination.”

Sari eyed him warily. “Do you have business with me?”

Despite her question, she already had a fairly good idea of what he was after: her, or her possessions. It was also clear that this wasn’t the young man’s first time committing this particular crime, judging by the ease with which he’d opened a door which she was certain she’d locked.

Sari reached into her clothes and pulled out the small knife that she’d been keeping tucked into her chest binding. With the moon as full as it was, it would be better for her to drive the man off with a conventional method, instead of her power—if she was careless with the latter, it was highly likely she’d strike the man dead. Of course, she wouldn’t hesitate to do just that as a last resort.

Holding the knife in front of her with both hands, Sari said firmly, “Please leave. I have nothing worth stealing in my possession, and neither do I have the time to waste getting into a disagreement here.”

“There’s no need to be so cold,” the young man said, his voice thick with feigned affability. “Why don’t you put the weapon down? You’ll hurt yourself.”

“If anyone gets hurt, it’s going to be *you*. Know your place.”

Sari’s breath stilled, her blue eyes taking on a light that resembled that of the moon. Amidst the newly fallen silence, an inhuman presence slowly came to the fore. Her deep red lips drew into a faint smile.

Even an ignorant man could not have missed the change in her. The criminal’s smile stiffened. “What are you?” he demanded. “Some kind of monster?!”

All of a sudden, a voice interrupted from beyond the doorway. “A lowlife such

as yourself *dares* to brand our princess a monster?”

The would-be robber didn’t even have the time to whirl around before he was crumpling to the floor, unconscious. The young man who had kicked him turned his icy gaze toward Sari.

“Why are you dressed like...*that*?” he asked.

“Vas?” Sari replied, taken aback. She lowered her knife. “Why are you here?”

Her cousin scowled. “The Werrilocia estate was abruptly delivered a set of instructions today from the king’s maiden, which recommended that someone come out here to meet you. As irritating as that was, the veracity of her foresight is beyond doubt, so I set out immediately.”

“Sorry for the inconvenience...”

“Though I am ignorant of what has happened, I would appreciate it if you refrained from thoughtless conduct that invites the king to impose upon us so.”

Sari pretended to hang her head slightly and peeped at Vas’s expression. In the unlikely event that he had been influenced by Nerei as well, she didn’t know what she would do. Vas’s bearing toward her appeared no different from his usual sharpness—but then, Thoma and Isha had acted entirely normal as well, all while their thoughts had continued to shift out of place, little by little. It left even Sari, who’d witnessed the changes firsthand, unable to discern whether her cousin was truly himself or not by his appearance alone.

As the silence stretched out, Vas examined her dubiously. A slender rapier hung from his hip. “Is something amiss?” he asked. “Or are you devising an excuse to tell me? I would much rather you explained the circumstances truthfully, if that pleases you.”

“Before that,” Sari said, “can I ask you a question?”

She had to confirm whether he was on their side before anything else. As if he perhaps sensed Sari’s wariness, the furrow in Vas’s brow deepened. He shoved the unconscious man out of the room with his foot, closed the door, and turned back to her.

“What do you wish to ask?”

“What do you think about the courtesans and courtesan houses of Irede?”

From what Sari had observed, this was the topic where those under Nerei’s influence showed the greatest difference to their past selves. She could only assume that the critical eye they turned toward Irede’s courtesan houses was a reflection of the opinions of the person they’d come to adore. Recalling how she herself had acted a mere day before, Sari clenched her teeth, holding back an urge to grind them together.

Vas gave her an uneasy look. “While I cannot fathom the aim behind your inquiry,” he answered, “I would say that they are but one of Irede’s idiosyncrasies. Is there some manner of trouble currently?”

“It’s less ‘trouble’ and more...” Sari trailed off. “Do you think that courtesan houses themselves are bad? Or that they should go out of business?”

“I beg your pardon? Of course not. Irede would lose its meaning.”

With a happy cry, Sari sprang forward and embraced her cousin. “Vas!”

Vas froze in place, his body stiffening. After several seconds had passed, he said in a disbelieving voice, “What in goodness’s name are you doing? Have you lost your mind?”

“I’m just relieved that you’re sane,” Sari explained.

“I would advise you to examine your own sanity before doubting that of others,” Vas muttered, peeling her off of him.

For the first time, Sari found herself grateful to be on the receiving end of Vas’s cutting remarks. With an emphatic nod, she said happily, “So it *is* safe in the capital.”

“An *explanation*, please.”

Sari could almost see the anger seeping from Vas in dark clouds. Soon enough, lightning would follow, and she would be on the receiving end of another of his harsh scoldings. Hurriedly, she began to explain about the changes that had happened to Irede ever since the arrival of its newest shadeslayer.

“...And that’s everything,” she finished.

“This man you speak of,” Vas said. “Who is he, to be able to do such a thing? Is he even a man?”

“I... I don’t know.”

What *was* clear, at least, was that if everything that was happening was truly Nerei’s doing, then he could not be an ordinary human.

Sari turned back to the small, cloth-covered table to the side of the bed. Atop it sat three notebooks and three sealed letters. Vas appeared to take note of her gaze, and he walked over to the table. He picked up the letter that had been addressed to the Werrilocia family—the sender was Xixu.

“May I open this?” Vas asked. His tone made it clear that he was not seeking her permission; merely asking for confirmation.

Sari nodded, and he promptly broke the letter’s seal. Inside was a single sheet of paper, the contents of which did not appear to be particularly lengthy. Vas read through it once, then returned it into its envelope.

“What he said was much the same as what you told me,” Vas told Sari. “He’s asked that the Werrilocias safeguard you during this time of crisis, and warned us to be wary of anybody from Irede.”

“Right...”

“In any case, I suggest that you return to the estate. I cannot abide by the idea of allowing you to spend the night in a place such as this.”

“Ah, um, about that. I was actually planning on returning to Ire—” Sari made a strangled noise, cringing as Vas’s cold stare turned piercing.

Upon witnessing her reaction, her cousin heaved a deep sigh—deep enough that it seemed forced. “And what will you do there?” he asked. “From what you told me, it sounded as though your return would only worsen the situation.”

“B-But,” Sari stammered, “if it really *is* easier for people of Irede to be affected, then the Midiridos might...”

“To which your answer is to throw yourself into the fray also? I advise you to compose yourself and consider the matter a little more.”

Sari found herself unable to reply—Vas was right, but that didn’t mean she

could just stand by and not do anything. A chill began to suffuse her thoughts. Just as she was about to open her mouth in an attempt to force the issue, Vas held the letter back out toward her.

"I shall go to Irede," he said. "You should continue to the capital."

It took Sari several moments to process his words. "What? *You*?"

"Is there an issue?"

"Um, no..." Sari murmured, eyes wide.

It was just, she hadn't thought Vas would go so far for her sake. As a general rule, the Werrilocia family did not interfere in matters of Irede. That line had been drawn to protect both their domain and hers, and she had assumed that Vas would fall back on that fact in order to keep himself from being involved in the current situation.

A displeased expression came over Vas's features. "Your surprise is somewhat troubling to me," he said. "Should anything happen to Pale Moon or Irede, the family's work in the capital would become meaningless. Not to mention what a great inconvenience it would be if a member of the royal family died in Irede."

"B-But won't you become affected?"

"Who can say? However, there is no significant difference between myself and the prince, in that we are both people of the capital who respect Irede. Or am I wrong?"

To tell the truth, Sari thought Vas had a point. Given how he hardly ever visited Irede, he was actually *more* removed from the town than Xixu.

After a moment's hesitation, Sari took the proffered letter. "Can I count on you, then?"

"If the family head so commands me," Vas replied.

"I do."

Vas nodded once and said no more.

Sari's cousin had apparently come to retrieve her in the Werrilocia family

carriage, which was drawn by a pair of horses. As Sari watched, he unhitched one of them for his own use with help from the coachman, then fitted it with a saddle and stirrups.

Sari barely knew a thing about horsemanship herself, but it seemed Vas was familiar with the family's horses on an individual basis. Indicating the dapple-gray mount he'd selected for himself, he said, "This one should get me to Irede by dawn at the latest."

Sari nodded, then watched as Vas filled the carriage's vacancy with another horse that happened to be tied to a tree nearby. She found herself rather impressed by her cousin's deft movements.

"Whose horse is that?" she asked.

"Your would-be robber's, I imagine," Vas said as he checked his personal accouterments. The nonchalance in his voice was surely a testament to his superb moral character. "Taking it should serve as adequate reparation."

Sari studied her cousin's back, her gaze openly anxious. "What are you going to do once you get to Irede?"

"First, I shall investigate Pale Moon. After all, beyond you, it is the family's first priority."

"But right now, Pale Moon is—"

"Don't worry. I intend on practicing due caution. In any case, there were some amongst your guests who were not influenced, correct?"

"Yes, but..."

While none of Pale Moon's courtesans would recognize Vas, there was every chance he would run into Thoma. That wouldn't be Vas's only obstacle either—if none of the women of Pale Moon chose him, he wouldn't be able to hang around the premises as a guest. Usually, Sari would have been able to put in a good word for him, but that was impossible in the current circumstances.

"Well, you *are* attractive," Sari said slowly, staring unreservedly at her cousin's face. "Someone should probably pick you."

Vas glared at her. "What manner of discourtesy are you spouting now?"

“I, um, I was just...” Desperate to change the topic, Sari clutched at the first excuse that came to mind, half-hearted as it was. “I was just thinking that if you were a girl, you could’ve gotten in as a maidservant!”

Vas’s expression immediately became glacial. Sari could practically see the irritation flickering in his eyes. She cringed reflexively, expecting another scolding, but the sight of her recoiling from him seemed to return Vas to his senses.

Sighing heavily, he said, “You told me something similar in the past.”

“Huh? I did?” Sari, drawing a complete blank, pointed at her own face.

Vas narrowed his left eye at her. “You don’t remember? It was when we were children.”

“‘When we were children’? No, I don’t.” Sari was curious now, so she pressed further. “Can you be more specific?”

The expression on Vas’s face made it clear he considered explaining it an unnecessary hassle, but as he checked his stirrups, he said, “It wasn’t anything significant. During the period you were confined to your room in the estate, I was passing through the courtyard and you called my name. Then...you told me, ‘You should have been a girl.’”

“Huh? Wait... Oh!”

All of a sudden, Sari remembered. The continuation of the dream she’d had not long ago was dredged from the depths of her memory. Back then, when she’d seen her cousin in the courtyard, Sari had been beside herself with the desire to talk to him about something—*anything*. In her gloomy, unchanging life, crossing paths with him had been a unique opportunity for her.

She’d desperately searched for a topic to broach with him...only to realize that there was not a single thing in common between her, the girl who had been raised to become Irede’s maiden and the proprietress of Pale Moon, and him, the boy who had been educated in the formal affairs of the Werrilocia family. Faced with Vas’s growing exasperation at her aimless floundering, Sari had burst out, “You should have been a girl.”

The aftermath had been disastrous. Vas had immediately lost his temper and

berated her ignorance, ending his criticism with the parting remark: “You can’t even do anything on your own anyway!” The fact that Sari had clearly remembered his final words despite forgetting everything about the catalyst behind them was an attestation to how convenient the memory of a child could be.

Sari flushed red in shame at her past self and bowed. “I’m terribly sorry. You have my deepest apologies for my thoughtless remarks.”

“It was a child’s nonsense,” Vas said dismissively. “Hardly something that requires an apology.”

Even still, that did not change the truth that the would-be head of the family’s words had wounded his young self’s pride. Thinking back, Sari could clearly pinpoint that moment as the catalyst for Vas’s demeanor growing even more cold and distant toward her. Thinking of her past self’s insensitivity made Sari want to crawl into a hole, especially now that she was head of the family. Though it was far too late for an apology, she knew she had to express one regardless.

“I’m sorry,” she said, bowing deeply again. “Truly. I was just so desperate to talk to you. Though I was only a child, it was nevertheless thoughtless of me to say that.”

When Sari raised her head, she saw that Vas was staring at her as though he were looking at a rare curiosity. Their gazes met, just as they had back when they’d been children. As the seconds ticked by, Sari began to feel awkward, but before she could cast her eyes back downward Vas suddenly smiled.

It was a gentle smile, one that lacked any thorns. Sari froze in shock—she had never seen a look like that on Vas’s face before.

Before she managed to recover, her cousin nimbly swung himself up and onto his horse’s saddle. “That’s not like you,” he said, a hint of laughter audible in his tone. “I’m not certain how to feel when you’re not snapping at me.”

After a moment, Sari replied,“It’s not beyond me to admit when I’m wrong.”

“Then please make sure you take refuge in the estate. I shall handle matters from here on out.”

Vas grasped the reins with practiced ease and wheeled his mount toward the highway. He looked as though he would depart at any moment.

“Vas!” Sari cried hurriedly.

“Yes? Have you remembered information that may be of use?”

She hadn’t, actually, and nothing immediate was coming to mind. It was just that the sight of her cousin on the verge of melting into the darkness had made Sari suddenly uneasy. For some reason, she felt as though she couldn’t let him go. And yet, foresight was not one of her gifts. Allowing herself to be swayed by such a vague premonition was proof that she was becoming faint of heart.

Even so, she still felt the need to say something. Fumbling for the right words, Sari finally called out after her cousin, “Um, be careful of Thoma if you meet him, okay?”

“And miss the opportunity to give him a good beating?” Vas asked. “I’m always looking for an excuse to do that, you know.”

Sari’s only reply was silence. She vaguely recalled Xixu saying something similar, which made her wonder what her kindhearted brother did to those around him on a daily basis, if this was their reaction.

Sari took a breath to compose herself and rally her flagging spirits—and then was distracted by a flash of moonlight reflecting from Vas’s stirrups. Memory stirring within her, she looked up at her cousin. “Come to think of it,” Sari began, “Nerei said something strange to me, once.”

“Strange? How so?”

“If I’m not misremembering...he said he saw a ‘great, big, golden animal’ in the forest by the lake’s edge.”

Nerei had told Sari of it during their first meeting. Though it had appeared to be a hazy memory for him, recalling his words now nagged at Sari for a reason she couldn’t fathom. She felt as though she might have seen something similar, and not too long ago, at that. When had it been, again? Her gaze wandered aimlessly as she thought. Then, it snapped onto her cousin in the center of her field of vision, and the pieces all fell into place.

“That’s it!” Sari exclaimed. “I remember now!”

“Please refrain from being so loud.”

Sari took a moment to reign herself in. “Do you remember? During the incident at the soirée back at the capital. It was in one of the cages underground, right? A huge golden wolf.”

Sari was certain she’d seen it. When her senses had expanded as a result of her divinity, she had known the contents of all the cages around her, and one of them had contained a giant wolf that had stared straight at her.

Then, as Sari went over the memory, she noticed an inconsistency. “Hmm? But...when did it get there?”

She could have sworn that the golden wolf hadn’t been there when she’d first examined the cages. If she *had* seen such a conspicuous animal, it would have left a stronger impression upon her memories. That she only recalled it vaguely was because she hadn’t “seen” it, but “grasped” that it had been behind her.

Sari held a hand to her forehead, disconcerted. “You saw it, didn’t you?” she asked her cousin, her hope for his confirmation leaking into her tone. “You were sane at the time, right?”

Both Xixu and Fyra had been present as well, but they had been intoxicated by the scent of a certain flower, and so lacked any memories of the incident. However, Sari recalled that Vas had arrived later, and he had retained his senses.

“I was sane, yes,” Vas agreed. “But...”—he shook his head—“there was no such animal. Either you mistook something else for it, or you yourself weren’t in your right mind.”

Sari let out a quiet groan at having her sanity doubted. She was confident that the flower hadn’t gotten to her, but insisting as much wouldn’t do a thing to reconcile her and Vas’s differing accounts. Perhaps it would be prudent to ask Eid or Resenté, who had also been present at the time, but their whereabouts were unknown to Sari. Unable to make any headway into the mystery, she lapsed into silence.

Vas smiled; it was a rueful one, the emotion in it a degree warmer than his

usual frigidity. “Well, if you say that was the case, then I shall take you at your word. I will bear it in mind.”

Several moments passed before Sari said, “Be careful.”

She felt like nothing had been resolved at all—but then again, things were just beginning to unfold. She saw Vas off as he took up his reins and vanished into the darkness, then returned to the Werrilocia carriage.

Sari’s unease didn’t fade. It stretched out before her, a pit so deep she could not see the bottom. She felt as though she was on the brink of falling in. She wasn’t sure that Vas’s presence would solve any of Irede’s problems, at least not while they remained unaware of the source of the changes occurring within the town. But, all the same, Sari tried to tell herself that they were indeed moving forward. Even if it was only one slow step at a time.

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“There are no shades...” Xixu murmured, deep in thought.

It was the morning after he’d sent Sari away, and he was out on patrol. He had made his rounds the previous evening too, but hadn’t managed to find any leads. Strangely, he hadn’t found any shades, either.

By nature, shades grew in strength and numbers as the moon waxed. In Irede, however, that natural order was reversed, as the maiden’s strength increased at a rate that overshadowed theirs and kept them in check. But with Sari absent, she’d informed Xixu that it was possible shades would begin to manifest outside of their usual timeframe.

So the maiden had said, but contrary to both their expectations, Xixu had yet to see a single shade. It was also evident that he was not simply missing them on his patrols; the number of shade sightings reported by Irede’s townsfolk had been generally lacking. It was normal procedure for someone who had witnessed the telltale red eyes of a shade to report its appearance and location to a member of the town’s militia. That militia member would then pass the information along to any of the shadeslayers who were currently available. Xixu had considered the possibility that there had been sightings reported, but that they had simply been assigned to other shadeslayers—he’d even stopped by the militia headquarters to check and see. Ultimately, he’d discovered that no reports had come in to begin with.

“It’s difficult to call this just a streak of good luck,” Xixu muttered.

He supposed he was fortunate in that he could now fully occupy himself with the matter of Nerei, and yet, something about the sudden cessation of shade manifestations felt off to him, especially since the cause was unclear. Xixu recalled the last shade that he’d seen: Teté’s copy.

“‘Born weak,’ was it...?”

That particular description had seemed to bother Sari quite strongly. Xixu pondered the matter, trying to follow her line of thinking. The lack of shades in Irede. The courtesan houses closing their doors. The suspicious shadeslayer...

As Xixu listed all the irregularities he’d encountered, he found himself unconsciously ruminating over the teahouse proprietor’s words: *“He’s so oddly*

cheerful. It's...eerie." And yet, all that Nerei had revealed of his character at present was that he was easygoing person. The rest of him was engulfed in mystery. With nothing conclusive on the man, Xixu had no grounds to denounce him.

Given that, perhaps the only lead I have left to pursue lies with the Midiridos...

Looking up, Xixu saw that there was a sparse scattering of clouds across Irede's early morning sky. There was a strange bleakness in the air which made Xixu frown; though the town's businesses were closed at this hour and foot traffic was infrequent, the cause for the odd atmosphere felt as if it came from somewhere else. An ill premonition ghosted down Xixu's spine, causing him to imagine a future where the people of Irede slowly disappeared from the town's streets.

Xixu shrugged the vision off. "This is getting me nowhere."

The young shadeslayer knew there was no time for him to drag his feet, and so quickened his pace, intent on finding somebody who could tell him the whereabouts of the Midiridos Troupe. But then, he caught sight of a familiar figure ahead on the path ahead.

The figure—which belonged to a shadeslayer whose large build was unique in Irede—seemed to notice Xixu too, because he silently beckoned him over. Xixu headed in the other shadeslayer's direction, grimacing as he recalled the events of the day before. Soon, he drew up at the other man's side, and the two of them set off on a walk down the empty path in the direction of the Irede's outskirts.

After a short while, they reached the similarly empty storehouse district, and Ironblade finally spoke. "The maiden has been missing since yesterday," the large shadeslayer said in a grave tone.

Xixu remained silent. He had expected this, but that did not ease the tension he was currently feeling. Only Ironblade knew that he had been with Sari before her disappearance. Xixu was unsure whether he should attempt to deceive the man somehow, or tell him the truth. First of all, though, he needed to determine whether Ironblade had fallen under Nerei's influence or not.

When Xixu did not respond, Ironblade continued, "Well, I did give you my

word, so I've stayed quiet about the matter. But may I ask what happened?"

"She..." Xixu trailed off, unsure of where to begin. Eventually, he decided to start by sounding out Ironblade's thoughts on the person at the center of this mystery. After apologizing for changing the subject, he asked, "What do you think about the new shadeslayer?"

"Nerei?" Ironblade asked. "Hard to say. He's average as a shadeslayer, in terms of skill."

"And in terms of his personality? Or perhaps I should say nature."

"He's odd. Doesn't fit in here at all." Ironblade paused, a hint of what seemed to be sentimentality tinting his words. "Then again, his predecessor, Eid, fit in here *too well.* Maybe that's why they called for someone who's his complete inverse."

Prompted by Ironblade's words, Xixu compared what he knew of Eid and Nerei for the first time. The teahouse proprietor had said that Nerei seemed out of place in Irede, but Xixu hadn't heard anyone say that Eid seemed too perfect of a match for the town. Yet, now that Ironblade had pointed it out, Xixu thought that the description was accurate. When he thought of the way Eid had attempted to harm Irede, how he hated the town and cursed its existence, Xixu couldn't help but think of the man as a personification of the town itself. Eid's nature seemed stained deeply in the darkness of Irede's night, and infused with the languidness of its atmosphere.

If Sari was the moon, then Eid was the shadow cast by it. To an observer, the pair would have seemed well-matched. The thought was not pleasant to Xixu.

"What does that have to do with the maiden?" Ironblade asked, his voice returning Xixu's thoughts to the matter at hand.

"Well..."

Judging from the present situation, it seemed safe to assume that Ironblade hadn't yet fallen under Nerei's influence. In which case, Xixu could possibly ask him about the whereabouts of the Midiridos.

The young shadeslayer scanned the area before speaking, glancing at the vacant storehouse on his left and the canal on his right. "The truth is, the

maiden has been experiencing some trouble at the hands of the new shadeslayer, so I've temporarily evacuated her from Pale Moon."

"He's troubling her? This is the first I'm hearing of the matter."

"I believe the term for it is...'mental suggestion,' or something akin to it," Xixu explained, choosing his words carefully. "According to Sari, she was subjected to it while they were at Pale Moon together, and she gradually became subservient to him. She was able to escape, but until we have a means of resolving the situation, she can't return. I've been attempting to discover whether Nerei is explicitly behind the phenomenon or is simply another person who got dragged into the matter, and been seeking out how it is being done as well. Unfortunately, those answers remain unclear."

"To think all that happened while I had no idea..." Ironblade sighed deeply; despite Xixu's reticence, he seemed to have grasped all the critical details. "What about Thoma? I can't imagine he just stood by while all this was happening."

"Thoma has fallen under the suggestion as well," Xixu explained. "So has all of Pale Moon, for that matter."

"That's troubling. Where is the maiden right now? What's her opinion on the matter?"

"I sent her to the capital. She doesn't have a solution either. We could simply eliminate Nerei, but..."

"The capital, huh?" came a new voice from the shadows of a storehouse. "I thought so."

Xixu drew his sword and turned before he even recognized who was speaking. Ironblade looked at him, surprise evident on his face.

Thoma stepped into the light, studying the pair of shadeslayers with a relaxed smile. He held his own sword in his hand, unsheathed. "That's no good, Xixu," he said. "You can't just send Irede's maiden away without asking first."

"We'd all be worse off if I hadn't," Xixu replied.

"You think? But everybody gets influenced by their surroundings. That's just

how people are. Did you ever consider that Sari might have lied to you? What if the one you spoke to wasn't the real her?"

"It was, and Sari wouldn't tell me a lie like that. I only had to see her to know."

"Well, that's a damn shame," Thoma said casually. He overtly readied his blade, directing its honed tip straight at Xixu. His stance, relaxed as it was, still radiated his intent to fight.

Xixu tensed reflexively. He knew it would likely be impossible for this to end without either of them harming the other, but he couldn't just leave Thoma be. There would be nothing more troublesome than leaving him free to act on the enemy's side, and he now knew where Sari had gone into hiding. That was Xixu's fault, of course—his own lack of caution had been the culprit—but that only strengthened his resolve to apprehend Thoma, here and now. Fortunately, with Ironblade present, it would be two against one. As formidable as Thoma was, with the cooperation of his fellow shadeslayer, Xixu was sure they could manage him.

Xixu looked to the large man at his side, ready to discuss their plan of action—and was struck speechless. Ironblade, who had shown no signs of anything being amiss during the conversation they'd just had, was now looking down at him with somber eyes. A sigh leaked from the senior shadeslayer.

"It is regrettable that we'll have another shadeslayer vacancy again, so soon," Ironblade said.

"You're—!" Reflexively, Xixu leaped back, creating distance between himself and the large man.

Ironblade drew his blade—a thick katana—and moved to stand by Thoma's side. On the outside, the pair looked no different than their usual selves, but the eyes they fixed on Xixu carried within them a vague, unfamiliar distortion.

"I don't want Sari to cry," Thoma said, giving a small shrug. "So I'll bury your body where nobody will find it."

A part of Xixu wanted to ask if the man was joking, but the rest of him knew that Thoma—at least, the *current* Thoma—was deadly serious.

Xixu glanced briefly at the canal right behind him. He had to find a way to withdraw; nothing good would come of engaging in a direct fight against Ironblade and Thoma together. Death wouldn't just be possible—it would be *probable*. And yet, Xixu couldn't be certain he'd even get an opening to flee.

Sari's worried expression flashed across Xixu's mind. If he died here, it would hurt her. If he wished to avoid that outcome, he'd need to be ready to pay the price. Even if that price was losing an arm, or worse. The best case scenario would be that he would resolve this situation without that happening, of course, but Xixu was not an optimistic enough person that it blinded him to the realities of a combat situation.

Quelling his inner unrest, Xixu adjusted his stance, holding his military sword at the ready.

The first to move was Ironblade. The senior shadeslayer moved forward swiftly and without a sound.

Xixu brought his sword up, diverting the power of Ironblade's heavy overhead slash along his weapon's blade and off to the side. He stepped forward to drive his elbow into the burly shadeslayer's open flank, but a sudden flash of clarity caused him to stoop low.

A thick blade sliced through the air above Xixu's head. The rush of air that trailed in its wake tousled his hair, but Xixu paid that no mind. Without a moment's delay, he used the back of his blade to knock away the tip of the second sword that had been thrust at him.

When Thoma saw that Xixu had managed to defend what should have been opening, he smiled—though it didn't reach his eyes. "It'll only hurt more if you resist."

"Sorry, but I don't have the inclination to politely let myself be killed."

"Sari wavers whenever you're around, you know that?"

Xixu didn't reply; Ironblade's sword was already swinging in his direction. Contesting it directly was going to be impossible—the weapon was cutting through the air with far too much force. Xixu jumped to the right to avoid its path.

Thoma, however, had read Xixu's movements. He stepped in with perfect timing and swung his blade upward at Xixu's right leg. The young shadeslayer caught the weapon against his own, and the sound of clashing steel rang through the morning air.

Xixu made to pull his military sword back, but Thoma did not allow him to break the exchange. The man locked their blades together and pushed with increasing force, causing the hilt of Xixu's to creak harshly.

Xixu knew he couldn't afford to stop moving—he was fighting against two opponents, and staying still would only result in his death. That didn't change the fact that if he was careless in pulling his sword back, Thoma would cut right through him.

Xixu shifted his weight, readying himself to kick Thoma's leg aside, but then he caught sight of Ironblade raising his sword above his head in his peripheral vision. Alarm shot through Xixu's body. In a few heartbeats, he was going to die.

But the blow never came. Ironblade whirled around, using his thick blade to block the thrust that had been aimed at his back. The sound of clashing steel rang throughout the surrounding area once more, but the pitch of it was new.

There was a brief lull, and then the tired voice of a young man reached Xixu's ears. "Good grief, what a mess. And right on the heels of yesterday's too. I would appreciate it if you could be a touch more prudent in your movements."

Thoma laughed and withdrew his sword. "What, you're here as well?"

The familiar young man standing opposite Thoma, holding a slender rapier, was Sari's cousin from the royal capital. The riding attire he wore clearly allowed for ease of movement—one glance was enough to mark its wearer as a member of the upper class. His handsome, androgynous features resembled Sari's far more than Thoma's.

Xixu, regaining his stance, wasn't sure whether to recognize this surprise new arrival as friend or foe. Vas appeared to quickly take notice of his hesitation and shot him a cynical look.

"You may rest assured," Sari's cousin said drily. "I came here at her request."

Thoma hummed in surprise. "Are you sure you don't want to just let Xixu die?

You hated the idea of him getting close to Sari, didn't you? This could be your chance to be rid of him."

Vas's tone immediately became acrid. "And *that* is exactly why I detest you so much." Sari's cousin narrowed his left eye at Xixu and jerked his chin in Thoma's direction, even as he adopted a stance with his rapier and directed it at Ironblade. "I'll leave that fool to you. Injure him if you like; I don't mind. It should serve to cool his head, if anything. If you end up killing him, I'll handle matters with House Radi."

"You talk big for a little brat," Thoma said, sounding amused.

"I'll not hear that from somebody who has allowed himself to be used as another's puppet," Vas returned.

It seemed the verbal sparring between the cousins would only become more intense if left be. It allowed Xixu enough time to regain a modicum of calm, however, and to glance around at their surroundings. After confirming that the canal was to their immediate left, he looked back at the man directly in front of him.

"Thoma. It's about time I put a stop to this behavior. You'll make Saridi sad."

Thoma smiled and raised an eyebrow. Of everyone present, he seemed the most at ease, and there was not the slightest hint of aggression in his gentle expression. "By all means. You're welcome to try."

Although Thoma was the next head of a family of craftsmen, he had once intended on becoming a shadeslayer for his sister's sake. Xixu had seen his swordsmanship on several occasions, and he knew it far surpassed that of an average shadeslayer.

Still vigilant of Thoma's movements, Xixu glanced at his own military sword, checking it for damage. He'd heard it creak harshly earlier, but it looked no worse for wear. The sight of its honed blade made him suddenly recall the time it had been bestowed to him.

"I've heard good things about you."

When the king had first summoned Xixu and granted him the rights inherent to those of the royal line, he had offered him an extravagant decorative blade

adorned in precious gems. Xixu had firmly refused it, however—he'd told the king that no matter the circumstances of his birth, he was the king's loyal retainer, and he had no intention of living a peaceful life in the royal court. Upon hearing that, the king had casually offered Xixu the military sword that he still wore to this day, saying, *"Then choose your own path. One that you can accept."*

Xixu sighed at the old memory. "Easier said than done..."

Choosing an acceptable path was not as simple as chasing victory and avoiding defeat. It was a test of one's ability to look ahead and select the best, or second best, decision at each turn—a task far more difficult than straightforward win or loss. Yet perhaps possessing that ability was what it took to truly be a retainer who shared blood with the king.

As Xixu held his military sword at the ready, Thoma smiled. "What's wrong? Afraid to disgrace the royal name by losing in a place like this?"

"No," Xixu replied. "The thought didn't even cross my mind."

All matters considered, it was not absolutely critical that Xixu defeat Thoma here. But that did not mean he intended on losing.

Xixu kept Thoma, from the tip of his sword to his shoulders, within his field of vision, taking care not to overly focus on any one point. Patiently, he waited for the man to move.

Thoma was silent, still smiling. He flicked his gaze upward at the sky, for one brief moment, then launched forward.

There was the rough sound of feet scraping against coarse sand, and Thoma swung his sword, the blade cutting straight toward Xixu's shoulder in a fierce slash.

An ordinary person would have been cut down, unable to react. Xixu, however, was different. Standing with one leg slightly bent in front and the other extended behind, he turned Thoma's blow aside with his own blade. He wasn't able to divert the blade's momentum aside completely, however, and the impact numbed his arms.

Paying the discomfort no mind, Xixu whipped the point of his blade upward at

Thoma's shoulder. But all it met with was air—the man had taken a half step to the right.

Thoma shifted, leaning into a horizontal cut directed at Xixu's torso. There was more power than speed behind the blow, and Xixu, not wanting to block it, leaped back, coming to a stop at the canal's edge. There was no longer any ground behind him he could retreat to.

Thoma laughed loudly. "Going to take a dive in the canal again? Be my guest."

"I'll have to pass," Xixu replied. "I've had quite enough of that."

Xixu wasn't sure he could defeat Thoma in a serious fight. That was problem enough on its own, but Xixu also had to make sure he held back so as not to kill the other man. It was a limitation Thoma didn't share.

Xixu measured the distance between himself and his opponent with his eyes. Behind Thoma's shoulder, he could see Vas evading Ironblade's sword.

Coming to a decision, Xixu held his military sword up in a thrusting stance, so that the blade was parallel to the right side of his face. He did not smile.

"Come."

Thoma gave him an ambiguous smile. The man glanced down—and then their blades were already clashing, the clear sound of metal against metal ringing through the air. The thrust Xixu had aimed at Thoma's shoulder had been shifted aside, only managing to cut through the other man's clothes. Thoma's blade had done much the same to Xixu's uniform, its tip scoring a large gash across its chest.

Xixu, however, did not pause after this trading of blows. He dropped his left hand to his scabbard and brought it up and into a horizontal swing at Thoma's torso, pulling his military sword back with his right hand at the same time.

His plan had been to use his sword thrust as a decoy and knock Thoma into the canal with his scabbard, but Thoma must have anticipated it, for the other man swiftly pulled his sword back.

Thoma shot Xixu a glance and gave him an unfathomable smile. And then, all of a sudden, Thoma's expression froze.

“Thoma?”

Even as Xixu spoke, he moved; he could not fail to take advantage of such a perfect opening. He slammed his scabbard into Thoma’s left flank, almost unbalancing him, then shoved him into the canal with an unrestrained kick.

There was a violent splash as Thoma hit the surface of the water. Before he’d sunk beneath the surface, Xixu had gotten a glimpse of his face—Thoma had been staring at him incredulously. The expression had reminded Xixu of Thoma’s old self.

Xixu eyed the water warily. While it would be a welcome development if Thoma had returned to his senses, he could not let his guard down so easily.

Xixu returned his scabbard to his hip and caught his breath. “Cool your head in there for a while.”

Xixu went to turn in Vas’s direction, then paused, looking down at the gash in the chest of his uniform. The silver bracelet that he’d tucked in there was peeking out.

“He must have seen it...” Xixu muttered to himself.

Seeing his sister’s bracelet must have had an effect on Thoma, if only briefly. Feeling conflicted, Xixu spared another look at the still-rippling waters of the canal before turning toward the pair who were still fighting.

Vas was deftly using his rapier to parry Ironblade’s onslaught of blows. Though there was no weight behind the movements of his rapier, the young man’s technique was free of risk.

Watching him, Xixu recalled that Sari’s cousin was three years younger than himself. He was the same age Xixu had been when he’d graduated the military academy, and yet Vas’s swordsmanship was at a level where it would have proved an equal match to Xixu’s at the time. Xixu was quietly impressed—it was quite an accomplishment, especially since the young man was a civilian.

However, this was no time to be a spectator. He needed to back Vas up so that they could withdraw before Thoma climbed out of the canal.

But in the end, Xixu didn’t get the chance. Xixu and Vas watched, startled, as

Ironblade's large frame shuddered violently and lurched forward, going down to his knees as his legs collapsed beneath him.

"Both of you, this way please," called out a sharp, almost familiar feminine voice. "Quickly."

Xixu turned and saw the Midiridos director, her mouth concealed behind a black veil, peering out from the shadows of a storehouse. A tall man stood next to her with a flute in his hand.

Xixu hesitated, recalling everything he'd been through in the past two to three days. Were they allies, or not?

Vas, however, said, "Let's go," and ran over immediately. Xixu joined him after a brief moment, having decided that he couldn't let Sari's cousin go off with them alone. The group of four set off at a run with the Midiridos director taking the lead.

Although Xixu had thought he had a rough grasp of Irede's streets, gained from his frequent patrols, he soon lost track of where they were as the director led them through a series of narrow, winding alleys and paths. If this was a deception, it could very well prove fatal.

Just as Xixu was beginning to have misgivings, the two Midiridos members stopped at a small house, worn with age. It was surrounded by a low plaster wall, bore no nameplate, and it was entirely unremarkable. Dust had piled atop the stone paving leading to the entryway, and a dying tree was visible in the tiny garden.

The man who was with the director opened the latticework sliding door and showed them inside.

A tatami-mat room was visible from the entryway. The interior of the building was musty, slightly grimy, and almost entirely lacking in possessions—to all appearances, it was a vacant house.

Xixu began to remove his shoes in the entryway,, but the director merely said, "Keep them on," and indicated for him to follow. Disconcerted, he stepped further inside.

The director led him and Vas into the tatami-mat room, then said, "We'll be

taking you underground now. Please be careful; the air is slightly unpleasant currently."

The tall man knelt down and worked his hand under the corner of one of the tatami mats, pulling it up to reveal a set of stairs leading underground. Seeing the candles that flickered at sparse intervals along the naked dirt walls reminded Xixu of the incident involving the shaman who had become the snake's proxy.

"Please watch your step," the director cautioned, taking the lead and beginning to descend the stairs.

Vas, his left eye narrowed, watched her as she went. When he noticed Xixu looking at him, he asked a silent question with his gaze: *What shall we do?* Xixu, recalling his conversation with Ironblade, could not help but consider the possibility that they were walking into another trap. The pair of men stood there, watching each other in an unmoving silence.

The man holding the tatami mat gave them a slight, respectful inclination of his head. "I understand your caution. We ourselves have been taking refuge from the changes occurring in Irede by hiding underground. However, we would like you to consider our invitation to join us, in and of itself, as proof of our sanity."

The man's tone betrayed no falsehood, and Xixu himself had noticed that the Midiridos had been absent from town as of late. But neither of those were guarantees that they were telling the truth, and deception was easy to come by.

Xixu looked down at the gash Thoma had made in his uniform. His hesitation only lasted several seconds. "All right," he said to Vas. "Let's go."

Even if this was another trap, he would just have to crush each one as they came. Otherwise, he'd never discover a means to resolve the situation unfolding in Irede. Resolved, Xixu descended down the dimly lit staircase, with Vas following after.

The Midiridos man took the rear. He pulled the tatami mat back in place as he descended, leaving the meager light of the candles as their only source of illumination. With the dimness came a slightly claustrophobic feeling, which closed in around Xixu. He made the conscious effort to refocus his thoughts,

annoyed at himself for allowing a little darkness to make him faint of heart. However, he soon realized that the feeling of oppression did not come from a lack of lighting.

The director was waiting at the bottom of the staircase, which led onto a stone-paved passageway. Xixu took a step toward her, intending on standing by her side—but instinctively froze in his tracks. He sensed Vas almost collide into his back.

“What? Is something wrong?” Vas asked, sounding perplexed.

“No, it’s just...” Xixu trailed off.

It seemed that, despite being Sari’s relative, the young man could not see ordinary shades. For here and there throughout the gloomy passageway ahead, Xixu could see accumulations of black shadow—unformed shades.

Those shadows, which caused human minds to go astray, had to be the source of the oppressive sensation Xixu was feeling. However, they showed no signs of moving—if anything, they appeared vague and flimsy, as though a strong wind would be enough to send them scattering into nothingness. Xixu felt bewildered. Why were they here? Did it relate to why no shades had been appearing in town recently?

The Midiridos director must have read the confusion on his face. “They began accumulating underground when the changes started happening in Irede,” she said, gesturing toward the black shadows. “I believe the power proliferating aboveground is suppressing them. However, it is fair to say that is also what is allowing us to remain safe from the power ascending from below.”

“‘The power proliferating aboveground’?” Xixu repeated.

“Yes. You have noticed it too by now, have you not?”

The director, a musician of Irede and attendant of the god, sighed. In the gesture, Xixu saw both profound fatigue and irrepressible indignation. The woman began walking past the cowering shadows, headed for a door at the end of the passageway.

“Whatever is changing Irede is erasing the nature of the town’s night,” the director explained. “That is why it is suppressing the power of the snake, as well

as the shades, and preventing the latter from forming. However, it is usual practice for us to spend our days underground in order to refine our arts, which we offer to the god. It has made it difficult for the encroachment to affect us."

"So, by remaining underground..." Xixu muttered, trailing off. "I had no idea such a countermeasure existed."

"To be clear, simply being down here is not enough. The inherent significance of our music is that it softens the malice of the snake. Even compared to the sacred offering of wine, we are more intimately connected to the earth."

The director came to a stop before a pair of stone double doors. She turned and smiled ruefully; the expression betrayed a hint of discomfort.

"Beyond this point is Midiridos territory. I must beg your pardon for our novices. You may find their practice grating."

The director pushed both doors open, revealing a continuation of the stone passageway where they currently stood. The length before them, however, differed from that which they'd just traveled. Wooden doors lined both walls, and from behind each one filtered the sounds of flutes and stringed instruments.

The sounds intermingled in the passageway and echoed against the stone, creating a harmony that was, in a word, stunning. Though the space was devoid of people, the waves of music suffused the air, conjuring an atmosphere worthy of being described as a foreign land.

Standing amidst Irede's underground sacred offering for the very first time, Xixu was struck speechless. He heard a long exhalation from behind him; it seemed the young Werrilocia representative was feeling the same way.

The Midiridos director turned and smiled at the pair. "Please, this way."

The woman indicated further down the stone passageway. Xixu frowned when he saw that the not-shades were interspersed throughout this area too.

"Do they not have an effect on people?" he asked.

"They do, somewhat, on the inexperienced," the director replied. "But to begin with, it is drummed into us to give our undivided attention to our art, no

matter the circumstances. So it actually makes for good training."

"That's..." Xixu trailed off.

Perhaps "bold" was the only way to describe it. Xixu, who had until this point only been familiar with the offering of warmth—a role that had almost been foisted upon him—and the offering of fine drink—brewed by the easygoing, cheerful Thoma—found himself surprised. It appeared that the musicians who provided the offering of music imposed standards upon themselves that were far stricter than he'd imagined.

The group began making their way forward once again, the Midiridos members taking the front and back of their procession.

The director kept her eyes forward as she said, "Custom dictates that names are unnecessary for those of the Midiridos, but the circumstances, being what they are, appear to necessitate them. I am called Tensé, and the man behind us..."

"I am called Tozu."

"He is my successor. Please treat him kindly."

So, it seemed Tozu would be the next director. Xixu and Vas turned to look at the tall man, and he gave them a light bow, his face expressionless. He had an odd, distracted air about him, almost like he was in a world of his own.

Xixu's gaze alighted on the slender flute in Tozu's hand. "Is that what you used to put Ironblade to sleep earlier?"

"Yes. You have a good eye."

Xixu had realized that the flute was actually not a flute—it was a blowgun. He had not expected the Midiridos to possess such skills. Impressed, he turned back once more to face forward. Ahead of him, Tensé opened a wooden door.

"We'll use this room," she said.

The door opened into a small entryway, beyond which was a tatami-mat room eight mats in size. It likely served as a practice room; aside from the stack of floor cushions in the corner, it was empty. As Xixu and Vas removed their shoes and stepped up onto the slightly elevated floor, the director arranged the

cushions. The pair of Midiridos members sat across from the pair of young men.

Tensé, the director, was the first to speak. “It is fortunate that you both have retained your senses. We have confirmed that three of the shadeslayers have already been influenced. To our great regret, we alone are not enough to handle this task.”

“Three?” Xixu asked. “So everybody apart from myself?”

“No, three including Nerei. The last shadeslayer’s whereabouts are unknown, but he is not one to remain in a fixed location for long to begin with. I would guess that he has burrowed himself away somewhere.”

“I... I see.”

A sudden, vague image of a mouse floated through Xixu’s mind. He cast it away—it was no time to entertain such frivolous thoughts.

“May we consider all of the Midiridos to be sane?” Vas asked.

“All those who are moving around freely are our usual selves, yes,” Tensé said. “To our shame, several of our members were influenced before we noticed what was happening, so we have restrained them down here. It is nothing that should trouble either of you.”

Xixu found himself impressed with Tensé. She hadn’t hesitated at all to inform them of her actions. Compared to himself, who had been floundering around, lost and continually one step behind the situation, she had been markedly more decisive. Perhaps he should have made contact with the Midiridos sooner. He leaned forward, sensing a possible first step toward a solution.

“Can the restrained individuals be returned to their prior selves?” he asked. “I’d like to see them, if possible.”

“You are welcome to meet with them, but at present, we have no means of curing them,” Tensé replied.

“Everie hypothesized that people of Irede are easier to influence,” Vas noted.

Xixu was almost surprised to hear Vas mention Sari’s name, but remembered that he had come here at her request. It made sense that they had discussed the mystery with each other.

Tensé nodded. “I believe that is true. It appears that most of the people who make up Irede’s public face have been brought under control.”

“Is it definite that the new shadeslayer is the cause?” Vas asked.

Xixu and the two Midiridos members exchanged looks. After several seconds of indecisive silence, Tensé shook her head slightly.

“We cannot be certain,” she said. “However, it *is* clear that this all began with him.”

The changes in Irede had begun to occur when Nerei had arrived and become one of the town’s shadeslayers. The knowledge made Xixu grow vexed with himself; he had been the one who had picked Nerei up in the forest. Even though he couldn’t have known what was to come, he still felt the weight of responsibility heavy on his shoulders.

Vas, who was sitting beside Xixu, had a hand on his chin as though he were pondering something. Xixu paid him no mind—he asked the two Midiridos members, “If Nerei is killed, will the situation resolve?”

“I cannot say,” Tensé replied. “He may be nothing more than a tool.”

That was a misgiving Xixu himself also harbored. It was difficult to say whether Nerei truly was the source of everything. And if he was, then why would he have gone missing around the lake for days on end?

“Should I visit the lake?” Xixu mumbled quietly to himself.

If something there was the cause of the changes happening around Nerei, then perhaps it would be best to investigate the location at least once. As Xixu considered the idea, Vas stared at him uncertainly.

Tensé noticed the young man’s odd expression before Xixu did. “Have you realized something?” she asked him.

“No...” Vas began. “It was Everie who did. She informed me that Nerei had told her he saw a large golden animal at the lake’s edge.”

“A large golden animal?” Xixu repeated.

Of what kind? he wondered.

Xixu almost pictured a gigantic golden eel swimming in the lake, and he found himself disheartened at his own lack of imagination. In the first place, the lake and the forest around its edge were locations of an entirely different type, despite their close proximity to one another. An eel would not be roaming amongst the trees. Xixu's head sagged, and he pressed a hand to his temple.

Vas gave him a dubious look, though there was also something probing in his gaze. "Do you know of any animals by that description in Irede?"

"No," Xixu said.

"I'm afraid not," Tensé added.

Tozu shook his head.

Taking in their denials, the furrow in Vas's brow deepened. He said no more.

Tozu broke the brief lull that had settled over the discussion by turning to Tensé. "Director," he prompted.

Tensé nodded and turned to the two young men. "Now, in regards to how we can return Irede to normal, we *are* in possession of a certain countermeasure..."

"You are?!" Xixu exclaimed.

"To be more precise, it is more of a rite. The tale of it has been passed down amidst the Midiridos over the generations, although it was originally meant to be used for different circumstances than to cure Irede of what is befalling it currently."

"So you have knowledge of it?"

"Yes. It is a rite which the maiden and the Midiridos made use of to prevent the snake's essence from gnawing away at human hearts whenever the maiden was required to be away from Irede for extended periods of time."

Xixu had not heard of this so-called "rite" before. It sounded like a promising solution, even if the accumulation of not-shades underground *was* likely sufficient enough proof that the snake was not the source of the changes currently happening in Irede.

Perhaps reading the hope in his expression, Tensé smiled. "The method to

carry out this rite was also passed down, of course. But since it is composed of both music and dance, it would be more accurate to say that it was the music we inherited."

"So the person performing the dance would be...?"

"As I'm sure you've already guessed, it would be the maiden."

Xixu recalled the conversation he'd had with Sari about dancing. It seemed like an age ago when he'd sat down at Pale Moon for an evening meal, and she had told him that she knew several different dances. He didn't know if the one required for the rite was among them, but there was more than enough cause to have hope that it was.

Xixu looked to his side, only to see that Vas was frowning.

"I see," the young noble said, exhaling lightly. "If that is the case, then even if Everie does not know of the dance, it should be recorded somewhere. Either in Pale Moon, or the family estate."

"I don't think it would be in Pale Moon," Xixu said. "Saridi took her important notebooks with her when she made her escape."

"Then the method would be in one of those three notebooks, or in the storehouse," Vas agreed.

If that proved to be true, then all there was left to do was inform Sari herself. But in contrast to Xixu, who had begun estimating the number of days the task would take, the tension had not drained from the expressions of the two Midiridos members. At first, he thought it was because they were unaware of Sari's location, but then Tensé looked at him and Vas in turn.

"Suppose the rite succeeds," she said. "We will still have another concern to deal with. When we dispel the pressure that has accumulated aboveground, the shade essence currently being suppressed below will rapidly spill forth. Even though we are in the full moon period, it is likely that the backlash will result in many shades manifesting. If we do not have enough shadeslayers on hand, it could result in terrible tragedy."

Xixu considered Tensé's words. "So if we handle this poorly, it could result in the end of the town."

Irede had already begun to wane when its residents started to decline. A rampage of shades could very well prove to be the finishing blow. And, although it was possible that the other shadeslayers would have regained their senses by then, there was no guarantee that would be the case.

Xixu began to seriously calculate whether he alone would be able to handle the task, assuming he had Sari and Vas to assist him. Yet, even with their help, he'd had no idea what kind of effect the maiden's dance would have on Nerei himself.

As Xixu silently brooded over the issue, Tensé said gravely, "If we find our lack of manpower to be truly dire, I have the authority to lift Eid's exile. His lack of reverence for Irede should make him difficult to influence, and he is quite capabl—"

"That won't be necessary," Xixu said flatly.

"I shall contribute where I can," Vas burst out, at nearly the same time. "There is no need to borrow that man's assistance."

Tensé's eyes widened at their reactions. Evidently that expression was rare for the Midiridos director, because Tozu, who had until now resembled a stone statue, burst into laughter. When Tensé glared at him, however, he clamped his mouth shut.

Xixu, feeling slightly awkward, stood up. "Regardless, our first move should be to contact Saridi. We should arrange to meet her away from Irede and only bring her back at the last possible moment, as she may become one of Nerei's puppets if we are careless with her return."

"Hopefully, we will be able to endure for that long," Vas said ominously.

Suddenly, the entire tatami-mat room shook violently.

"Wha—?!" Xixu exclaimed, his words dying in his throat as the tremor continued.

Vas half rose to his feet, but did not move further. After roughly thirty seconds passed, the tremors stopped completely.

Xixu made to run out of the room to investigate what had happened, but

Tensé stopped him. “Please wait,” she said. “We already know the cause.”

“The ‘cause’?” Xixu asked. “It’s not an attack of some kind?”

“No,” Tensé said, smiling apologetically. “It is the snake’s essence. It has been notably worse since yesterday.”

Realizing why that was the case, Xixu sighed. Sari, who normally kept the snake’s essence in check, had left Irede yesterday. The essence must have begun to roil as a result. Which meant that, even if it was currently being suppressed underground by a mysterious power, they had to be quick, or the situation would deteriorate even further.

Xixu strode briskly toward the entryway. “I’ll go retrieve Saridi,” he said. “We’ll be back in two days, so please have everything ready by then.”

The journey would have taken significantly longer if he’d decided to go by coach, but Xixu knew that if he went alone and made haste, he’d be able to make it to the capital in half the time. It helped that he’d grown familiar with the highway by now.

Vas, however, seemed to have a different concern on his mind. “You’re going yourself?” he asked, narrowing his left eye at Xixu.

“I told her not to believe anyone else that came for her,” Xixu said.

“That’s quite the confidence you have,” Vas said. Though his words were sharp, his tone was perfectly calm. “Are you so certain that you cannot be influenced?”

Xixu, unable to tell whether Sari’s cousin was being critical of him or asking a genuine question, decided to answer seriously. “Truthfully, no. Telling her that was a risk, admittedly, but fortunately I’m currently fine. I should go to retrieve her while I’m still in possession of my senses.”

Vas studied him for several moments. “Very well. Then I shall use the time to investigate the cause further. Ah, and you should watch out for Fyra. I imagine you would suffer a rather dreadful experience if she got a hold of you.”

“I still don’t know what that means...” Xixu muttered, his mind darting back to a time when Sari had given him the same warning.

Why are all of Sari's relatives such unfathomable individuals? he wondered. He felt the urge to press the issue so he could get an explanation regarding Fyra, but restrained himself. He had the feeling that he'd be happier not knowing.

In the end, Xixu simply said, "I'll keep that in mind," and began putting on his shoes.

"Should the worst come to pass and Irede falls to ruin," Tensé said from behind him, "please take the maiden with you and escape elsewhere."

Xixu turned, surprised, and saw from the expressions on the two Midiridos members' faces that they were entirely serious.

Vas nodded solemnly. "She is correct. The Werrilocia princess cannot be allowed to come to ruin along with the town."

It was clear from Vas's words that he valued the head of the Werrilocia family more than Irede itself. Unaware as he was of Sari's true nature as a god, there was no reason the young noble would feel differently.

The two Midiridos members' request for him to prioritize Sari, however, carried an entirely different meaning. They—who represented one of the god's sacred offerings—were implying that they valued Sari's personal safety above the town itself. That meant they were willing to cast aside Irede, the town that in itself was god's offering, for the maiden, even if the result was allowing the snake's essence to go free.

To Xixu, that decision seemed contradictory to the original reason why the god had been summoned in the first place. Still, he agreed that they could not hand Sari over to the enemy.

Accepting the resolutions of Vas and the Midiridos both, Xixu replied, "Understood. I'll prioritize Saridi above all else."

That course of action also aligned with his order from his liege to safeguard her. He would not fail her—not even if the cost of protecting her was levied upon himself.

With the broad strokes of his own future now clear to him, Xixu checked his military sword and left the underground room.

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From her seat on a white rattan wicker chair deep inside the glass-walled conservatory, Sari loosed a sigh. Time seemed to pass by slowly in the space around her, which was filled to the brim with verdure—large leaves drooped from the surrounding greenery, and the sweet fragrance of flowers mixed with the almost muggy air. The sound of trickling water was audible from a small fountain.

The original plan had been for Sari to take refuge at the home of Xixu's mother, since neither of them had known whether staying with the Werrilocias would be safe when Sari had left Irede. That was why of the three letters Xixu had provided her, one had been addressed to his mother, while the other two had been addressed to the king and the Werrilocias in turn. In the end, however, Sari had ended up returning directly to the Werrilocia estate. It had only made sense, as Vas had met her on the way with the family's carriage. But still...

"I should've gone to Xixu's mother..." Sari mumbled to herself.

"Did you say something, Everie?"

"No, nothing."

The reason Sari was currently sitting in the wicker chair in nothing but her underclothes was currently kneeling at her feet, filing her toenails. Of course, Sari wanted to ask why her cousin, Fyra, had requested such a thing of her, but she held her tongue. She knew that doing so would only drag the process out longer. It would be faster to just play along, at least for the time being.

Focusing on her task, Fyra looked, as though she were enjoying herself from the bottom of her heart."So, where were we?" she asked.

"I've told you all of it, more or less," Sari replied.

"And what a mysterious story it was."

Fyra sounded as though she were discussing the affairs of a stranger. But that was understandable, as she was viewing the circumstances from the perspective of a member of the Werrilocias. Although the family's efforts in the royal capital were for the sake of Pale Moon and the family's head, they were

not involved in the matters of Pale Moon itself. To Sari, the mere fact that Fyra was still herself was more than enough.

Dressed in a pure-white corset which Fyra had stuffed her into, Sari reclined against the wide back of her chair. There was nothing for her to do now but await the response to the letter she'd sent to the king.

"Everything that's happening is just so strange," she said. "I mean— Oh! Right!"

"Don't move," Fyra chided.

"Fyra, can I meet with Resenté?"

"I'd like to know why, first."

"Back during the soirée, I saw a strange animal in that underground chamber. I think it might be related to what's happening now, but when I asked Vas about it, he said he hadn't seen it."

"My, what an incompetent little brother I have," Fyra said, not tearing her attention away from Sari's nails for a moment. Her reply couldn't have sounded more perfunctory. "If you claimed to have seen it, Everie, then he should have just said the same."

Sari had to wonder what the point would even be in telling a lie like that, but she knew that what she considered to be common sense held no sway over her female cousin, to whom aloofness was a way of life.

Giving up on the hope of holding a decent discussion, Sari pressed, "So, can I meet Resenté?"

"I can hardly take you along to a brothel," Fyra said.

"I'm the proprietress of a courtesan house."

"So you are. But in *this* city, you are a daughter of nobility."

As though to reinforce the warning, Fyra teasingly trailed her fingers along the pads of Sari's toes. Sari gripped the armrests of her chair and stifled her breath, trying to endure the sensation without making a sound.

Fyra looked up at her and smiled meaningfully. "That aside, Everie, there's

something else I need to tell you."

Sari took a moment to catch her breath. "What is it?"

"It seems that several of the businesses that closed in Irede are reestablishing themselves in the capital of a neighboring country."

"Huh?" Sari stared at her cousin blankly. This was news to her. In fact, she hadn't even known that businesses *were* closing down in Irede.

"It's just a little something I caught in my information net," Fyra explained. "Apparently, businesses in Irede have been closing their doors since a short while ago. Whether they're old or new doesn't seem to matter. It's as though their owners suddenly woke up from a trance one day and decided to leave. Or perhaps the opposite; perhaps they were suddenly possessed. Regardless, several of those businesses are currently readying to open up next door."

"Is this related to the current incident?" Sari began to turn pale. Was Nerei's mysterious brainwashing truly capable of so much?

Fyra shook the file at her. "It's difficult to say. After all, rumor has it that Tesed Zaras was involved in inviting the businesses over."

Sari cocked her head to the side. "Who?"

She felt as though she'd heard that name before, but the memory just wasn't coming to her. As though to chastise her, Fyra stroked her calf from bottom to top. Sari squeaked reflexively at the sudden touch, then was immediately disappointed with herself for reacting to the surprise attack.

I was holding on so well, too... Sari silently bemoaned, wondering how much longer Fyra's pampering would continue. *I want to put some clothes on, already.*

Fyra, looking like she was having the time of her life, resumed filing Sari's nails. "Tesed Zaras is the elderly gentleman who was involved in the soirée case," she said. "The teahouse proprietor who led His Highness downstairs, remember?"

"Oh... Oh!"

"Tesed was also the one who directed his son-in-law, the flower market

proprietor, to distribute those white flowers throughout the city. I'm told a man matching Tesed's description was sighted in the neighboring country leading the effort to invite Irede's former businesses over."

"But that's..." Did that mean Tesed was the mastermind behind Nerei? Sari buried her head in her bare arms, utterly lost. "That makes even less sense... *What* is happening?"

"All you have to do is eliminate the problems laid before you, no? First of all, I'd like to meet this new shadeslayer I've heard so much about."

"Huh? Why?"

"I'm curious how he managed to get my princess to hang off of his every word. Do you think it would be more effective if I asked him in a more *physical* manner?"

"Um... I don't think that would be a good idea."

Although it was not a new development for Fyra to be so impulsive, Sari couldn't read from her cousin's expression whether she was genuinely interested in Nerei, or mad at him. She shivered, feeling a sudden chill that was not entirely the fault of her state of undress.

"My, Everie. Are you cold?"

"Can I put some clothes on...?"

"But you're so beautiful when you give into being spoiled like this... What a shame."

"I can't catch a cold at a time like this."

If she was laid up in bed sick when Xixu came to get her, she would never live it down. Sari stood from her chair and put on the black robe that had been placed beside it. The robe was as smooth as velvet and long enough that it trailed across the ground behind her. For the time being, it would serve to conceal her half-nakedness.

As Sari slipped into a pair of black high-heeled shoes, Fyra remained kneeling. She looked up at her reverentially—almost in a daze—as though she were a faithful hound awaiting its mistress's orders.

“So, what shall we do, Everie?”

“I’m going to check whether any similar incidents have happened in the past. You should continue gathering information. And please put me in touch with Resenté.”

“I’ll take you to her tonight.”

Smiling happily, Fyra took up the train of Sari’s robe, keeping it from touching the ground.

The three notebooks Sari had taken with her from Pale Moon mainly detailed maiden arts and techniques. However, the Werrilocia storehouse, located in the estate’s garden, contained records concerning many other matters.

Sari, who had changed into a black dress, was alone in the storehouse as she searched through its wicker baskets. Though it was still afternoon, the interior was dark. She flipped through the pages of timeworn notebooks, relying on the light of a small lamp to guide her.

Although the storehouse reopening—and thus cleaning—had taken place only recently, the characteristic scent in the air of its interior had already paralyzed Sari’s sense of smell. She had been working single-mindedly for the last two hours, forsaking lunch. A certain page caught her eye, and her hand stopped on it.

“I...wonder if I can use this?” Sari mumbled to herself.

On the page was a record of a type of maiden dance. She had never seen it before, but several of the motions were fundamental ones, and two in particular were the identical to moves she used in her kagura dance. The rest closely resembled the hand gestures required for complex maiden techniques. Although, given that the record noted that this maiden dance had once been used to prevent the snake’s spreading essence from corroding peoples’ minds, perhaps it was more accurate to call it a spell dance.

Sari read through the record thrice, then placed the notebook back into its wicker basket with its pages still open. She took one step back and began to flow through the motions of the dance to get a feel for it.

Then, she heard a thumping sound from the other side of the storehouse door.

“Huh?”

The sound had seemed quite heavy, and too dull to be a simple knock at the door. Sari picked up her lamp. She was wary, but she wanted to find out the cause of the sound.

“Don’t tell me I was locked in from the outside...”

That would just be a plain old inconvenience. Sari approached the door and placed her right hand on it. Doing her best to avoid making a sound, she slid it slightly to the side, creating a crack. Fresh air filtered into the storehouse interior along with sunlight tinged with the red of twilight. Before she opened the door further, Sari peeked outside. The sight she saw struck her speechless.

Several long heartbeats passed before she found her voice again. “Why...?”

The storehouse entrance faced out onto the rear garden, where white stone paved a path back to the manor. It was on that same white stone paving where Fyra lay collapsed, face down and motionless.

Sari had no idea what had happened, but she returned to her senses and immediately made to dash over to her cousin. However, she only managed to take a single step out of the storehouse when something seized her ankle from the side. Startled, she looked down and realized that one more person was collapsed on the ground; he slumped against the door, in what had been her blind spot.

“What?” Sari stared at him. “Eid...?”

It had been he who had seized her ankle, but since his head was sagging lifelessly, she couldn’t tell whether or not he was currently conscious. She began to lean over in an attempt to peer at his face. But then, a hand gently patted her shoulder from behind.

“Hey there. I came to get you,” said a familiar voice.

There was no chance to scream. Pure panic seized her, dragging her thoughts down into its throes.

Everything went black.

4. Sincerity

Apparently, there were several paths that joined Midiridos territory to the surface. Xixu, who had been led by Tozu along one of these paths, now found himself emerging from a storehouse in the southwestern quarter of Irede. To his surprise, the sun was on the verge of setting; it appeared he'd spent more time underground than he'd thought. He gazed sullenly at the red-tinged sky. Vas, who had been following behind him, checked his watch.

"It'll be the dead of night before you reach the capital, at the earliest. And when it comes to securing a horse..."

"This way," Tozu said, setting off at a walk. As Xixu and Vas followed him down an empty back alley, he pointed a hand in the direction of the center of town. "We will prepare a stage where the main streets intersect. It should be the most effective location for our purposes."

"Won't those who have been influenced attempt to stop you if you perform in such a public area?" Xixu asked.

"We'll be taking measures to clear the location beforehand. May we count on your support for that also?"

"Of course."

Such a plan would likely result in a difficult battle, but it was one that could not be avoided.

His mind drifting to Thoma, Xixu felt the pangs of a slight headache. The man must have climbed out of the canal by now, though Xixu wished he would have just stayed under the water until everything was over, as his sister had once done. But, given that Thoma was an ordinary human, it was likely matters would not proceed so conveniently.

Then again, it was possible Sari would be able to undo the brainwashing that had been done to her brother. Thoma had frozen for an instant upon seeing her silver bracelet, so there was a chance he could be returned to his senses once again in a similar fashion.

But just as Xixu was beginning to ponder that possibility, a brief golden light flashed across the edge of his vision. He looked up at the sky curiously, wondering if he'd just glimpsed lightning, of all things, but saw nothing to which he could attribute the golden gleam he'd seen.

Tozu looked back at him. "What was that?"

"I'm not sure..." Xixu replied.

It had happened so fast that he hadn't been able to place it.

Xixu glanced at Vas—it seemed that while he and Tozu had been exchanging looks, the young noble had turned his gaze elsewhere. He was staring northeast intently, his face growing more and more pale.

Just as Xixu was about to ask what the younger man had thought of the golden light, it flashed again, briefly illuminating the scarlet sky in the direction Vas was looking. Its source was hidden from view by several buildings, but it appeared to be emitting from the ground.

"It couldn't be..." Vas murmured. "Pale Moon?"

Without warning, the young noble broke into a run in the direction where the light had come from. Xixu and Tozu stared on in stunned silence for a moment, but quickly set off after him once they'd realized his intent.

If something had happened to Pale Moon, the worst case scenario would result in them having to make the decision to keep Sari away from Irede.

And so, the three men ran through the sparsely populated outskirts of the town, headed for Pale Moon. Vas only slowed his pace once the copse of trees surrounding the courtesan house came into distant view. But then, as they stood amongst the shadows of the fence, they saw Pale Moon's gate. What had happened to it rendered them all speechless—the sight before them was too baffling for words.

Tozu, who was standing behind the two other men, mumbled, "The gate...shrunk..."

"I think 'buried' might be a better word," Xixu muttered.

Ordinarily, Pale Moon's gate possessed a small lintel. Yet currently, that was

nowhere to be seen—the gate consisted solely of two posts, one on the left and one on the right, which had sunk halfway into the ground. In addition, the thick, rounded wood columns had lost their usual deep brown color and were now pitch black, as though they had been charred by flame.

If Sari saw this, all the blood would drain from her face, Xixu thought. He could almost hear her crying out, “No one told me we were rebuilding!”

The two gateposts protruding from the ground were now only about as tall as a child; Xixu frowned at them, overcome with the strange feeling that he’d seen them before. The memory struck him just as Vas made to step forward, and Xixu immediately grabbed the young noble’s shoulder to stop him.

“Wait. Aren’t those boundary pillars?”

Xixu had seen several white stone pillars buried in Pale Moon’s grounds before, and knew that they formed a boundary. For whatever reason, the two gate pillars reminded him of them. And if his conjecture was accurate, then that would mean Pale Moon had already become the territory of another.

Vas seemed to realize this too, because his breath caught in his throat for a moment. “The situation...appears rather dire.”

Xixu nodded. “It would be best if we checked inside, but it will be dangerous.”

It was obvious that Pale Moon was currently the lion’s den. However, if they remained ignorant of what was happening, their plans would suffer for it. Vas sighed and drew his rapier, then stopped Xixu with a hand as he made to go in with him.

“You should stay here,” Vas said. “If I begin acting strangely, leave for the capital.”

“But—”

“If anything happens to you, Everie will scold me.”

Vas cautiously stepped toward the gate. As Vas’s figure moved farther and farther away, Xixu and Tozu kept careful eyes on his retreating figure. Left behind, Xixu found himself still struggling to tell whether what the young noble had said had been serious, or just a convenient excuse.

Eventually, Vas reached the gate and peered past it at what lay beyond. He froze, as though in utter disbelief at what he'd seen. The trembling words he spoke still managed to reach Xixu's ears.

"Why...are you here?"

Before the words had even had the chance to fade, Xixu was sprinting for the gate, abandoning his place by the bamboo fence. With his hand on his military sword, he came to a stop next to Vas.

Pale Moon's white paving stones drew a gentle curve between the gate and the manor. Usually, at this time of dusk, the hanging lantern at the entryway, dyed with a half-moon symbol, would be lit to signal that the courtesan house had opened for business. The entryway itself would typically be open, a maidservant out in front, and the young proprietress would be standing inside, waiting to greet Pale Moon's guests.

Yet currently, the lantern was dark, hanging somberly in the meager sunlight of dusk. Neither were there any maidservants in sight. In exchange, a kimono-clad man lay collapsed face down before the entryway, while another man sat within, atop the step that lay beyond the one where a guest would remove their shoes. A silver-haired girl rested her head upon the latter man's lap, her languid expression almost suggesting that she was in the midst of a dream.

The girl wore a black dress reminiscent of mourning attire. Her pale legs spilled out from the hem, standing out as strikingly captivating against the polished floor. Her eyes were hollow beneath her drooping eyelids, and her silver hair, which was down, was being slowly stroked by the man's hand.



The girl should have been in the royal capital, yet Nerei had gotten his hands on her anyway. The pair were talking.

“So?” Nerei asked her. The sound of his voice seemed to soak into all that it touched. “Why are you still obsessed with this town? Why haven’t you come back?”

“The snake’s essence has permeated the earth,” the girl replied in a slow voice. “I must suppress it...”

“Why is it necessary for you to do that?”

“Saridi.”

It was Xixu who had called the girl’s name. Here in Irede, that was something Vas could not do. So, as the young noble had stood there silently, Xixu had acted instead. Still, the bizarre scene before him threatened to scatter his thoughts into confusion. Xixu only just managed to pull himself together.

Sari had looked up at the sound of her name; she was staring at him with dull eyes. There was no hint of her own will visible within them.

Nerei followed her gaze, then seemed to finally catch sight of the two men standing at the gate. He smiled at them, the gesture creasing his eyes into thin lines. “My, my. Whatever are you doing over there?” he asked. “Is that young man with you your friend?”

“What are you?” Xixu asked warily. “What are you hoping to achieve?”

He did not ask if Sari had even made it to the capital—the answer was obvious. After all, the man lying collapsed upon the stone paving was Eid, and as far as Xixu knew, the man had resided in the capital ever since his exile from Irede. If he was here, then it followed that something had happened there.

Although, when Xixu had encountered Thoma earlier, the man hadn’t yet known that Sari was in the capital... If she and Eid had been brought here after that, then the timeframe alone meant that whatever had happened couldn’t be the work of a human.

The clearest indicator that the circumstances had shaken off any pretense of being mundane, however, was sitting behind Nerei.

Xixu, feeling tense, adopted a stance that would allow him to draw his sword at any moment.

“You ask what I am, but is there any meaning in you knowing?” Nerei asked. The smile on his lips was the only aspect of his demeanor that hinted at affability.

“Irede is suffering,” Xixu said. “We can’t overlook that.”

“You could solve a little thing like that by just walking away and finding somewhere else to live. Anywhere you wish.”

Not waiting for Xixu to respond, Vas demanded, “Hand her over.”

The young noble’s direct thrust was a notable difference to Xixu’s caution; it appeared that his anger had already risen to the surface. A sharpness hung in the air about him, as though he were about to rush forward and run Nerei through at any moment.

Xixu reached out, holding the young noble back with his left hand. There was a matter he needed to confirm before things devolved.

“Wait,” Xixu told Vas firmly. “I need to ask you something.”

“Now, of all times?”

“Can you see anything behind him?” Xixu pointed to behind where Nerei was seated in the entryway, where the stairs to the second floor and hallway to the flower room were visible.

Vas stared at the spot Xixu had indicated, his left eye narrowed. “What do you mean by ‘anything’?” he returned dubiously. “I see the inside of the manor. What of it?”

“So, you can’t see it after all.” Xixu groaned in spite of himself. This was proving to be far more of a headache than he’d expected.

Vas frowned, the expression deepening with each passing moment. “What? Is there a problem?”

“There’s...”

Xixu trailed off, unsure of what to say. He knew Vas could not see shades, but

this was not a shade. Regardless, he also knew he had no choice but to attempt to explain. Turning to face the young man next to him, Xixu pointed once more in the direction of the “being” sitting behind Nerei and described what he saw.

“There’s a huge golden wolf sitting behind them. It’s likely the one she told you about.”

Vas gave no reply; he appeared to have been struck speechless. As the young noble’s expression twisted into a sour grimace, Xixu looked back at the wolf.

The golden wolf sat in Pale Moon’s spacious entryway as though it owned it. Its massive body, roughly two sizes larger than a horse, was covered in long, gleaming golden fur, which seemed to enlarge its strange presence yet further. As its eyes were closed and its head slumped, it was difficult to tell whether it was awake.

With everything that had been happening in Irede, Xixu had all but known for certain that some manner of mysterious power was involved. Still, he had certainly not expected an opponent such as this. Unconsciously, he drew his military sword.

Vas, who was standing at his side, sighed. The young noble looked weary. “To think it truly exists...” he muttered. “You’re not hallucinating by any chance, are you?”

“Do you know what it is?” Xixu asked.

“Don’t get your hopes up. All I know is that Everie told me she saw it in one of the underground cages during the soirée. I had thought that she was mistaken, since I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“If only she had been.” Xixu sighed.

Despite Vas’s lack of ability to see the wolf, just as he couldn’t see shades, it was clearly not one of the aforementioned. It appeared to be a far more troublesome opponent, in fact, given that it was capable of suppressing the shades underground and bringing Sari under its control.

Recognizing that Vas knew no more about the wolf, Xixu turned back to Nerei. “Who are you?” he asked again.

Nerei smiled, though it didn't reach his eyes, and stroked Sari's hair. She resembled nothing more than a broken doll. "All I came here to do was find my sister," he said. "I told you, didn't I?"

"You mean to say Saridi is your sister?" Xixu asked.

"Yes. Exactly."

Xixu, caught off guard by the answer, looked at Vas.

The young Werrilocia shook his head. "She only has one brother. There is no room for doubt."

"Then he must be deluded," Xixu said.

Had Nerei, desperate but unable to find his younger sister, convinced himself that the girl was Sari? If so, this situation would be a major hassle to untangle. But...something about Nerei's words nagged at Xixu.

He focused on the golden wolf. To his knowledge, the inhumanness of its being, coupled with Nerei's profession to be Sari's older brother, seemed to indicate only one answer. But Xixu hesitated to put it to words, for it was far too staggering. Even still, he knew he had to confirm his suspicion. He tightened his grip on his military sword and looked not at Nerei, but at the golden wolf.

"Are you...a god of old?"

Once, the goddess of the moon had been summoned to this continent. If this being was her older brother, the god of the sun, then everything lined up.

The wolf's eyelids eased open. Its eyes were crimson, similar to a shade's, but far deeper in color. They peered out at Xixu, then suddenly narrowed into a smile.

There was clear affirmation in the wolf's gaze. Xixu almost closed his eyes and leaned his head back pleadingly at the sky.

Vas stared at him incredulously. "What manner of nonsense are you...?"

"It may sound like nonsense," Xixu replied, tone weary, "but it's the truth, apparently."

In the age of myth, one of the gods of old had answered the summons of a

king, and had slayed the snake that had tried to devour the sun. However, her name and her faith had faded from the world along with the nation she had saved, leaving nothing behind but the fable from which Irede drew its origins, and the town which still prospered to this day.

Yet Xixu knew that this fable was simply a truth that had been forgotten. The god's bloodline had been left to linger in the world, and the women who were a part of it and that had remained in Irede were, like their ancestor, not human. Xixu understood this, and he had accepted it.

He *had* accepted it, but given the circumstances, he dearly wished to ask why the role of the one who was to handle inexplicable mysteries had fallen to him. He certainly hadn't ever expected to get stuck with the task of dealing with another god besides Sari.

The golden wolf once again closed its eyes. Nerei, still sitting before it, laughed. "You are very perceptive indeed," he said. "Or perhaps my sister told you something? You *are* her guest, after all."

"What?" Vas turned to Xixu. "Guest? You?"

"That's... Leave it for later. That's not what we need to discuss right now."

Xixu had only told Nerei he was Sari's guest to poke the man for information; this was no time to suffer from Vas's glare over a simple lie.

Hoping to prevent the topic from straying any further, Xixu shook his head decisively. "Sari didn't tell me anything," he said. "I simply guessed."

"I see," Nerei said. "You'll have to excuse me then; I had taken you to be duller than that."

"Enough about me. Saridi herself isn't your sister."

Even if she possessed the same blood as the god herself, that was no justification to treat Sari as her substitute. Sari's current self was not the same person as the god who was her ancestor.

Despite Xixu's declaration, however, Nerei merely continued to smile faintly. His voice lowered in pitch and blurred, as though the same words were being spoken twice and were overlapping. "What we sustain is existence. Not of the

individual, but of a way of being.”

“A way of being?” Xixu repeated.

“Perhaps one could call it a ‘nature.’ It does not weaken with blood, and though our souls change, our natures do not.”

“That’s...”

Xixu lapsed into silence. He felt as though he was on the cusp of understanding, but the knowledge still seemed frustratingly far out of his reach. Regardless, it was clear that the god’s perspective on this matter was vastly different to that of a human.

Vas kept his gaze forward as he whispered, “Would you care to tell me what all that meant?”

“In short...” Xixu muttered, “victory is likely impossible for us.”

“We haven’t even made an attempt yet,” Vas retorted.

“Understanding the circumstances and choosing to act on them are two different matters.”

Sari’s divine self alone would be beyond their ability to handle. With Nerei and the wolf also present, they didn’t stand a chance.

Xixu decided to attempt to negotiate. Paying close attention to Nerei’s every move, he said, “And yet despite that, your sister is here because she wants to be. I’d ask you to not interfere with that.”

“She has fulfilled her role and been paid her price. There is no longer any reason for her to be used by man.”

“She isn’t being used. She wants to live among mankind of her own volition.”

“Truly?”

As he spoke, Nerei lifted the head of the girl in his lap by the chin. She looked up at him with dull blue eyes. Xixu could not help but frown; no sign of Sari’s vivid, energetic self existed in her expression. She truly looked like a different being.

“Why are you still here?” Nerei asked her, repeating his question from earlier.

“Those of your blood may have chosen to stay, but you are of a fundamentally different existence. They cannot understand you, nor can they accept you. As long as you remain, you face naught but eternal solitude. You have noticed this, have you not? What are you doing? Why will you not return?”

Several moments passed before Sari spoke. “I am suppressing the snake’s essence.”

“Then if I destroy it, will you return with me?”

Xixu stopped breathing, and he heard Vas do the same. Certainly, the snake’s essence vanishing would be an unthinkable blessing, but that did not mean they could simply allow Sari to be taken away. And yet, as they stared at her in mute shock, she remained wordless.

“Do you think I cannot?” Nerei added. “I can. I simply have to dig deep into the earth and sear it from existence.”

“The snake’s essence has soaked far below,” Sari replied, voice listless. “Far enough that it has reached the roots of the world that support this land.”

“And what of it? That only means I have to dig those roots up.”

“But then, mankind will...” Sari trailed off and cast her gaze downward, as though exhausted.

Nerei removed his hand, and her head fell back into his lap. She sighed in profound weariness, but under it there appeared to be some remnant of her original self, not yet lost. It was possible, perhaps, that the existence of that remnant was a mere figment of imagination, conjured by the hope in the eyes of those that beheld her, but the fact remained that she had not directly agreed with her brother’s words. In which case, there was only one option to break this deadlock.

Xixu steeled his resolve, then stretched a hand toward Sari. “Saridi. Come here.”

The girl glanced at Xixu, affected by his words. They’d contained an unspoken plea: *Act, and let this impasse come to an end.* But even so, she remained where she was, leaning against Nerei. It was as if she had no strength to move beyond the slight shifting of her eyes.

Xixu felt Vas's gaze upon him, brimming with tension, but he did not take his eyes off of the young maiden. He called out once more, his voice firm. "Saridi, come here. It's okay."

The girl before him was a god, just like her brother. If they were to overturn this situation, they would need her strength. Even accounting for her immature state, they would still have better than even odds against Nerei with her on their side. More importantly, she needed to break free of her brother's control on her own. Otherwise, the significance of her resistance would be diminished.

In that moment, Xixu realized that he had not seen Sari's divine self once since Nerei had come to Irede.

The girl who was a god looked at him once more. There was no will in her eyes, but what was in them seemed to be suffering from a terrible uneasiness, as though it had no place to go.

Nerei tapped her on the shoulder. He was not looking at her eyes. "If they are what is keeping you here, then remove them yourself," he said. "Then you will truly know whether they had any meaning."

Sari appeared surprised at the direction, but after a short while, nodded. Sluggishly, she rose from Nerei's lap. Her pale, bare feet stepped down onto the hard-packed clay, and she stood up unsteadily.

As they watched her slowly begin to walk toward the gate, Vas muttered in a low voice, "What should we do? She doesn't look in her right mind."

"We'll get her out of Pale Moon's grounds first," Xixu said. "The rest will come later."

When Sari had last escaped Pale Moon, it had returned her to her normal self. Therefore, that was the obvious first method to try. Xixu waited as Sari approached, her gait unsteady.

Before the young girl reached him, however, she paused, stopping halfway between Pale Moon's entryway and gate. Bending only at the neck, she stared down at the back of Eid's collapsed body, which was now next to her. Whatever emotions surfaced on her face in that moment were hidden from view by her silver hair—her form was all that was visible. By the time she looked up and

turned back to Xixu and Vas, she was as expressionless as a doll.

Sari raised her right hand and pointed a finger at them.

“Not good,” Vas whispered in a stiff voice. “I suggest we get back.”

“No, wait...” Xixu murmured.

There was still no will in Sari’s eyes, but Xixu was not entirely convinced that she was completely under Nerei’s control. Instead, he felt as if something else had her in its grasp—unease. The same unease that she’d felt when she’d first begun to have misgivings about Nerei, and the same unease she’d felt when she’d escaped into the night and fled to Xixu’s side.

Knowing that, Xixu could not step back from where he stood. If he did, his actions would only become another source of fuel for her misgivings. So instead, he continued to hold out his hand.

“Saridi.”

If a sworn vow was what a woman of Pale Moon gave to her guest, then what did that guest give her in return?

Xixu knew nothing of the practices or etiquette of courtesans, of their homes or of their work. Neither did he know the customs of Irede. And so he found himself thinking that, if there was anything he could offer Sari in return, it would be his sincerity. Ever so carefully, he put those thoughts into words.

“You are you. I know that. And it’s okay for you to stay that way. There’s no need for you to be uneasy.”

Sari’s blue eyes widened slightly. To Xixu, they resembled those of a lost child.

“I know,” he said, nodding. “I won’t run away.”

Strangely, Xixu found he did not feel tense as they faced each other. He supposed that it was because he understood deep down, that even though the Sari before him appeared to have lost her senses, she was still unmistakably herself. It was different from when he had first learned of her true nature. Now, he knew bits and pieces about who she really was.

He knew, and none of the knowledge bothered him. Because the girl who had lived among people and the god who was her true nature were both *her*.

Sari stared at Xixu's outstretched hand, expressionless. Suddenly, her gaze dropped, her long silver eyelashes flickering. She lowered her hand. And then, a single word escaped her small, trembling lips, barely louder than a whisper.

"Xixu..."

Nerei stood up and drew his sword. Vas noticed and ran forward, his own rapier in hand.

Sari herself was still motionless. Xixu dashed toward her to take her hand.

Nerei beat both men to the young girl, but though he reached out to grab her, he jumped far to the side just before he made contact. Eid, who had been lying unmoving on the stone paving, had risen to one knee and slashed at Nerei's legs with his blade in one swift movement.

"Go..." Eid grunted.

He put his other hand on Sari's back and pushed. As she staggered forward, Xixu scooped her up and slung her over his shoulder. Then, he grabbed Eid's arm.

"Let's go!" Xixu shouted.

Nerei moved to take a swipe at Eid with his blade, but was checked by a well-placed thrust from Vas.

That was when the golden wolf in the entryway slowly began to rise. Xixu, catching sight of it, backed off toward the gate, dragging Eid along. Unfortunately, it appeared that the man was injured—his movements were far from smooth.

At this rate, the golden wolf would catch them.

Just as Xixu was about to call out to Vas, Tozu appeared from behind him and smoothly hoisted Eid up over his own shoulders. In the same movement, he brought his small flute to his lips and blew a dart at Nerei, who was locked in combat with Vas. The drug it was coated in must have been fast-acting, because the man immediately staggered. Vas kicked him in the pit of the stomach, then turned on his heel.

"Run!"

The group ran from Pale Moon without looking back, with Tozu leading the way.

Eventually, they reached a vacant house, and Xixu was able to confirm that the golden wolf had not pursued them. He sat down before the entryway, utterly exhausted.

5. Maiden Dance

Now that Xixu had confirmed that they had successfully lost both the golden wolf and Nerei, he finally lowered Sari off of his shoulder.

Tozu opened the sliding door to the vacant house and showed them inside. The construction of the interior resembled the house from earlier, and Vas, still wearing his shoes, stepped into the front tatami-mat room and began looking about. Eid, who Tozu had already put down, sat upon the hard-packed clay of the entryway.

Tozu looked over everybody gathered before shaking his head slightly. “We may be able to buy a little time, but against an opponent such as that...”

“It’s not a matter of if he finds us, but when,” Xixu agreed.

Tozu must have seen the wolf also. That meant he was aware that their opponent was a god—a being that was antithetical to entities like shades. The two men shared a look and sighed.

“To think it was a god behind this...” Xixu muttered. Then, he noticed that the girl before him hadn’t moved. She was simply standing there, unmoving as she mutely stared into space.

Xixu studied her. “Saridi? Are you okay?”

After several seconds, Sari finally turned her blue eyes to him. She nodded, expressionless. “Yes...I’m fine.”

Xixu had a strong feeling that the other three men present were indirectly listening in—no doubt they were concerned about her condition. If Sari failed to return to her senses after they’d brought her all this way, then their predicament would not improve.

However, Sari seemed to sense their misgivings. She ducked her head like a bird in the act of drinking water. “I’m fine. Truly.”

“Then go inside and rest,” Xixu said. “You’ll injure your feet.”

Sari looked down, apparently realizing for the first time that she was

barefoot. Lethargically, she stepped into the entryway. Vas took her hand and led her into the tatami mat room.

Xixu looked to his side, where an unmoving Eid remained. “How bad are your injuries?” he asked, concerned.

“They’re not significant,” Eid replied after a moment. “Just a little pain in my ribs.”

“What happened in the capital?” Xixu asked. At the same time, he held his hand out, helping Eid up, and the two men entered the tatami-mat room together.

Tozu stepped over to them. He was carrying bandages and a bottle of herbal medicine which he must have retrieved from somewhere on the premises. “I’ll treat your injuries,” he told Eid. “Please undress.”

“Don’t touch me,” the ex-shadeslayer snapped. “I’m fine.”

Eid went to push Tozu’s outstretched hand away, but without speaking a word, the Midiridos heir evaded the attempt and slapped the other man on the back. Eid crumpled in silent agony, and Tozu took advantage of his momentary weakness to deftly begin stripping him of the upper half of his kimono and smear his skin with herbal paste.

From the look of things, Eid would be in no state to give his account until his treatment was over. Giving up for now, Xixu looked over to the corner of the room, where Sari was sitting and hugging her knees. She noticed his gaze and gave him a feeble, strained smile.

“He came to the estate,” she said.

“He?” Xixu asked. “The wolf?”

“The man too. Beyond that, I am unaware of what happened. It looked as though Fyra and the man being treated over there were attacked in the Werrilocia estate grounds.”

“I’m in this sorry state because Resenté sent me there in her stead, but I have no idea what’s going on,” Eid said bitterly, causing guilt to flash across Sari’s expression as she glanced at him.

Vas, who had been observing the withered tree outside through the window, interjected, “In Resenté Disram’s stead? Were you going to discuss whether you had seen the golden wolf during the soirée incident?”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose, given everything that has happened, there’s no point in asking that question anymore.”

Eid clicked his tongue softly. Xixu knew he must have seen the wolf too; it was visible to all those who could see shades.

As Tozu began wrapping bandages over the medicine smeared onto Eid’s skin, Sari added, “He ended up entangled in this situation when he tried to help me get away, and was brought here with me to Irede. Fyra was unconscious, so I believe she’s still back at the estate.”

“Such a useless sister I have,” Vas said.

“She was simply outmatched by her opponent,” Sari replied, sounding utterly mournful. It appeared her divine nature had surfaced, but her demeanor was subdued, and her usual haughtiness nowhere to be seen. She looked over the four men in the room. “I’m sorry,” she murmured quietly.

“There is no reason you should be apologizing,” Vas said. “More importantly, regarding the countermeasure we’ll be taking...”

Sari, still hugging her knees, listened as Vas explained their plan of driving away their enemy’s essence by using the music of the Midiridos and the maiden’s dance. After he finished, she put a slender hand to her brow for support.

“I read about that dance in the storehouse,” she said.

“Can you perform it?” Vas asked.

“I believe so. But given who we’re up against, that won’t be enough. He has possessed Nerei, so we must do something about him also, or his essence will simply return.”

“Possessed?” Vas said, filling the silence created by the other three in the room. “You mean to say that man is human?”

Observing the two's conversation, Xixu noted that the change in Sari did not appear to have perturbed her cousin. Was it because Vas had confronted her divine self before, in the capital...?

"It is likely that he was human, once," Sari said, her delicate eyebrows knitting into a frown. "He must have drawn his possessor's eye at some point due to his position as a shadeslayer. But with what he has now become...he can no longer return to his previous self. His ego has been painted over."

"There's no way we can help him?" Xixu asked.

"No." Sari shook her head. The inhuman girl's eyes were cast in despondent shadow, as if she was lamenting the fragility of man. It evoked an emotion in Xixu that he found impossible to describe.

Vas's sharp voice, however, managed to drag the mood in the room back from the somberness that had threatened to overwhelm it. "Then if we kill that man and you perform the maiden's dance, the matter will be settled?" he asked.

"Yes," Sari replied. "But killing him will prove difficult. It is possible for me, but I am a poor match for him. It's likely that I'll once again fall under his control if I get near."

"Is it not something you can avoid?"

Sari hesitated. "Not as I am now."

She glanced at Xixu, a pained expression on her face. A bitter taste filled his mouth; he knew what she was referring to.

In short, since Sari had not received her sacred offering, her existence was incomplete, preventing her from holding her own against her brother-god. But though Xixu began to have an unpleasant premonition about where this was going, she did not raise the issue.

Sari looked around to the other four people present, examining them one by one. "All else aside..." she said, "this is a rather amusing assortment of faces."

"It did not turn out this way by choice," Vas said. "There is a distinct lack of sane individuals around."

“That’s unavoidable. Strong emotional attachment to Irede or myself translates into piety—piety which *he* has seized control of. Only people such as yourselves, who do not possess that piety, are safe.”

These words seemed directed at all present, barring Tozu. Xixu, Eid, and Vas each reacted with inscrutable expressions, but Sari showed no signs of minding.

“Just like how the maidens of Pale Moon are born through the medium of human flesh and blood and are anchored here via the contract of being Irede’s mistress,” she continued, “he has anchored himself to Nerei. If we are just able to eliminate Nerei, then I will be able to act.”

“I see,” Vas mused.

“However, Nerei himself is no longer human. Even if your swordsmanship surpasses his, it is difficult to judge whether you would be able to slay him.”

“Are you implying that we will need some special power of our own?”

“To speak plainly, yes.”

And yet Sari, Irede’s maiden and the prime choice to fill the role of “one with special power,” could not act. Before Xixu could truly begin to consider the dilemma, Sari beckoned to Vas.

“As such, you will do it,” she said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I shall lend you my power. We share blood, so I’m sure it will work out. There’s no time for us to suddenly produce a man to be my offering.”

“What exactly do you mean when you say you’ll lend me your power...?”

“Oh, enough already. Come here.”

Vas, though visibly reluctant, stepped over and knelt in front of her, answering the head of his family’s haphazard beckoning. Sari sighed listlessly, reached a pale hand toward her cousin’s chest, and...pushed it in.

Just like when she bound shades to others, her willowy palm sank into the young man’s breast. Then, swiftly, she pulled it out, and Vas immediately folded over in voiceless anguish. The blood visibly drained from his face at a rapid rate,

and sweat poured from his brow. As the other three men watched him in mute shock, groans began leaking from Vas's throat, almost as though he were retching.

"You'll soon grow accustomed to it," Sari said simply, and returned to hugging her knees. She shut her eyes and waited.

Ten-odd seconds proved to be enough for Vas to reign his heaving breath into a semblance of order. He looked up the girl who was the head of his family. Astonishment and reverence were in his eyes, as if receiving her power had catalyzed some kind of understanding in him.

"Who are you...?" Vas asked softly.

"The Werrilocias aren't informed of the true nature of Irede's maidens for two reasons. The first is to prevent arrogance. That we are related by blood carries no particular significance. You are all naught but humans, and outside of specific circumstances such as these, that blood means nothing. If anything, you should pay your consideration to your status as the descendants of your ancestor king. Which is the second reason—as those who have inherited the name of Werrilocia, you must never forget the pride and reverence that are company to it."

All of a sudden, Sari smiled. Seeing the expression from the side, Xixu could detect a weariness in it. From a different perspective, the blood she'd spoken of defined her as a solitary existence, an outlier. Though she had a brother and family, she was utterly, inherently different. And since her grandmother had passed and her mother had cut her ties with her divinity, Sari was truly alone, an immutable fact that she was forced to accept.

The moment he noticed her sorrow, Xixu found himself speaking. "It's okay," he said.

He only realized his mistake when everybody immediately turned their attention to him. Given the flow of the conversation, his words could only have sounded like he was answering in Vas's place. The young Werrilocia himself had turned around and was looking up at Xixu incredulously, though he did not say anything. Then again, perhaps the situation would have been slightly less embarrassing if he *had*.

Xixu wanted to drive his foot into a wall, but it appeared that Sari had understood the meaning behind his words, because she smiled at him. He convinced himself that as long he'd gotten himself across to her, that was enough, and turned his face away from the gazes of the others.

Outside the window, the sun was rapidly setting. In more usual circumstances, the time for Pale Moon's lantern to be lit would soon be upon them.

As though to reanimate the stagnating mood, Vas stood up. "I have a rough grasp on what you gave me," he said. "Including the aspects that seem impossible to put into words."

"It will dissipate after a day," Sari said. "Your senses will return to normal then too."

"It's better that way. This is beyond my station."

Sari nodded slightly, then looked to Tozu. "May I count on you for the accompaniment to my dance?"

"Tensé, I, and several of our skilled performers stand ready to serve."

"I'd like to rehearse at least once, but that will likely draw our opponent's notice. How long will the preparations take?"

"Four hours should prove sufficient."

"Perfect," Sari murmured. "The moon will be out."

The young girl looked down at her bare feet, dirtied with sand and grit. The paleness of her skin, which stood out starkly from the creeping gloom of twilight, seemed warped in some way. It was as though her body was dual natured, possessing a fragility that threatened to break at any moment, but also something else that he could not place—something ominous and unfathomable. She flickered like a flame trap for killing insects, and Xixu felt restless—almost unsettled—to see it.

Sari, perhaps noticing his gaze upon her, turned to him and reached her arms out like a child. "Help me up," she said.

Without a hint of reluctance, Xixu stepped over and did as she requested,

supporting her by the hand and waist. Sari leaned into his chest and loosed a quiet sigh.

“I’d like you to help Vas, if you can,” she said. “I might have lent him my power, but he’s still human.”

“Okay.”

“But think of yourself first. If you find yourself at a disadvantage, pull back.”

Sari grasped Xixu’s clothes. There was a faint trembling in her tightly clenched fingers, telling him that despite her words, she did not want him to go.

After a slight moment of hesitation, Xixu gently patted her back. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I know my role.”

Sari stared at him rebukingly. “You’re the type who’ll take on a fight with bad odds even if he *knows* he’s the one who’s worse off. Just like you did earlier. Idiot.”

Xixu had no response. Internally, however, he knew he would conduct himself differently now that Sari was back in their possession. At least, he thought he would.

“Will you be okay alone?” Xixu asked.

“I’ll have the Midiridos and Eid with me,” Sari replied. “We’ll be underground until the very last moment, four hours from now.”

“I thought I told you to keep me out of matters like this,” Eid interrupted.

Perhaps he would have spoken further, but Tozu slapped him on the back once again, sending him into yet another paroxysm of agony. “With your injuries, it would be more dangerous if you stayed aboveground,” the future director of the Midiridos said plainly.

Sari must have found humor in their exchange, because she stifled a rush of laughter. The slightest touch of color returned to her bloodless cheeks.

Patting Xixu on the shoulder, Sari stepped away from his embrace. At some point, a steely determination had settled in her blue eyes. Using both hands, she brushed back her disheveled silver hair.

“All right,” she said. “Let’s accept his challenge. I’ll show him that one brother is more than enough for me.”

Then, as though to reinforce her words, she clenched her small hands tight.

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Normally, after the sun set in Irede, the town came alive with florid crimson and amber lights, shining from the lanterns hanging from the eaves of stores, and the night sky was painted with the sounds of the music that trickled forth from throughout the town's streets. Now, however, moonlight was the only illumination that chased off the darkness, and all that suffused the air was silence.

There was something unusual about Irede tonight, and Vas and Xixu, as far removed as they were from the heart of the town, were not unaware of that fact. Still, there attention was on the path they tread, which led to Pale Moon. It was not the bamboo fence-lined path typically used by the courtesan house's guests, but an out-of-the-way detour they'd chosen in order to avoid the possibility of an ambush. Although it was unknown to most, Pale Moon had a back gate. After a brief discussion, Xixu and Vas had decided to enter the property from there in an attempt to catch Nerei unawares.

Xixu glanced at Vas, who was walking at his side. Though the young noble had been lent the power of a god, he had undergone no outward change. Still, from time to time, he would knit his brows and frown as though he were confirming something only he could see. Coupled with his frequent habit of narrowing only his left eye, it made it appear as though he was suffering from a terrible headache.

Although Xixu had no qualms with remaining in silence, he decided to break the quiet that had fallen between them. "What does it feel like?" he asked the frowning young man.

"It's...difficult to express in words."

Vas waved his hand in front of his face, as if to brush away something invisible. The gesture was smooth, but also gave the impression that it met with resistance. Xixu thought that perhaps, currently, the young man was not strictly human.

Vas, his left eye narrowed, went on to explain, "It's as though all of my senses have expanded in depth, or perhaps been shifted out of place. Something like that."

Vas looked out over the moonlit path, but soon pressed a hand to his temple,

as though the act of looking in itself was painful. The stress of Sari's power had to be quite the burden on a human body.

Xixu sighed heavily. "That's difficult to imagine..."

"If I hadn't experienced it myself, I would fail to comprehend it too," Vas replied. "As it is, I believe I've come a little closer to understanding what our opponent meant when he spoke of 'existence.'"

"Ah, that. So what did he mean?"

Vas gave a faint shake of his head. "Keep in mind that while it may make for a more comprehensible explanation if I liken it to something else, that would also distance it from the true essence of the matter. With that being said, think of it as a matter of power and place."

"'Power and place?'" Xixu repeated.

"Yes. What is the power, and where is it located? *That* is the 'existence' he spoke of. In essence, the absence of the god of old is like a single stone missing from a pile. What matters is that whatever replaces it carries her power, not that it is the stone itself. As long as the power is the same, it is deemed the same as the stone."

"That...seems nonsensical."

"It is not a matter that can be measured by human standards. In the first place, it is even difficult for us to comprehend the concept that no matter how much human blood Irede's maidens add to their bloodline, they cannot become human."

"That's true..."

The women birthed by the god were also the god herself. Xixu had asked Sari about it once, out of curiosity, and she had told him that even though her father had unmistakably been human, her divine blood had not been diluted. Earlier, she had said that Irede's maidens were born through the medium of human flesh and blood, but evidently that was a different matter from that of being human.

Xixu held back a sigh; he felt slightly overwhelmed.

Half a step in front of him, Vas looked up at the moon in the sky. “I’d like you to consider what I’m about to say as me talking to myself,” he said.

“All right.”

“I’m talking to myself. Please don’t reply. I...wish to have Everie experience a normal marriage.”

Xixu remained silent as he walked, just as he had been told. The lack of illumination made the path they were on seem to be in a different town entirely. Vas, however, lived in the royal capital, and likely felt less uncomfortable with the scenery than Xixu did. The young Werrilocia looked down at the dark path, his expression placid.

“Of course, a normal marriage has always been impossible for the head of our family. Their only choices have been to either take a blood relative who was aware of their circumstances as a spouse for appearances, or give birth to an heir while remaining unmarried.” Vas paused. “But Everie knows about her mother.”

Vas’s tone took on an audible chill as he spoke of Sari’s mother. Evidently, it was true that the Werrilocias considered the topic detestable. Xixu was grateful that Sari was not around to hear, but then again, Vas would not be speaking to himself of such matters if she were.

The two young men continued their brisk pace toward Pale Moon.

“Everie never speaks of it, but it is impossible that she does not have her own opinions of her mother. After being confined to the estate all throughout her childhood, it would not be strange if she envied her mother’s way of life. And that isn’t all—there is additional pressure on her *because* of her mother. Given that, isn’t it my duty to provide Everie with at least as much warmth as she is due?”

Xixu hesitated to give a reply. How was one supposed to respond when asked a question by a person talking only to themselves? After a moment of thought, Xixu decided to reply as if he was talking to himself as well.

“So that is why you wish her to have a normal marriage?” he asked.

“Talking to yourself as well, I see. Yes, you’re correct. Until now, the heads of

our family have kept to the shadows, while publicly receiving their guests as maidens of Irede. I wish to reverse that. I will make it so that Everie's chosen partner is accepted as the head of the family's husband, while the maiden's guest is kept a secret. If nothing else, that should at least allow her to live a normal life with her husband in the capital. There will be no need for her to wait in her courtesan house for a partner that may never come. Don't you think that degree of normalcy should be a given for her?"

Xixu did not reply—it was clear that Vas had not been seeking one.

The still eighteen year old young man kicked a pebble at his feet, as though he were irritated with something. "Those are my thoughts," he continued. "Though, Thoma and such seem to have the wrong idea. It would be difficult for what I spoke of to come to pass if Everie's partner was well known amongst the aristocracy. If you were chosen, for example, then it would all come to nothing."

After a brief lull, Xixu said, "I didn't become royalty by choice."

"I do not care. Abandoning your status is the least you can do for Everie's sake."

"You'll have to take that up directly with His Majesty..."

Although Xixu had only been espousing his honest thoughts, Vas shot a look at him as though he could not believe what he was hearing. The pair lapsed back into silence.

Shadows crept underfoot as they walked. They had come far enough that Pale Moon's manor would soon come into view. There wasn't much time left before the promised four hours were up. As Xixu checked his military sword and steeled himself for what was to come, he thought about what he had just been told.

Vas, in his own way, wished for Sari's happiness. But Xixu had the feeling that his plans for Sari's future were slightly different from what Sari herself wanted. If given the choice, Xixu thought that Sari would choose to await a guest as the proprietress of Pale Moon rather than live a quiet married life in her estate in the capital. She would choose to live in this town of the night, and she would take pride in that choice. It was difficult to imagine she would accept another

way of life, even if it was presented to her.

However, Xixu also felt that it would be wrong of him to point that out to Vas. Besides, if he expressed it poorly, it could come off as him attempting to lead the matter toward a more favorable position for himself. He pressed a hand to the chest of his uniform, where there was still a gash.

In the end, the two men reached Pale Moon in silence. The rusted, iron grill back gate was half buried in vines. The last time Xixu had passed through here, Sari had opened it with the key, but she had not brought it with her when she had escaped Pale Moon. As such, Xixu and Vas wordlessly climbed over the gate, just as they'd discussed earlier.

Normally, this manner of intrusion would have been noticed by Sari's boundary, but according to her, their opponent had not yet extended his control to Pale Moon's rear. Even so, it was only a matter of time before they were discovered, so it was best to make haste.

Xixu stepped inside the manor from the garden with his shoes still on, feeling guilty for it even as he did so. Then, keeping his footsteps silent, he headed through the hallways toward the entryway. The further he proceeded, however, the more he sensed an unpleasant pressure that made him frown. *Something* that was not a presence, but could also not be expressed in words, was emanating from the direction he was headed—something so heavy and powerful that it felt as if it would take its control over Pale Moon for granted.

It was only natural that, with a god as their opponent, their current mission would prove to be more difficult than any run-of-the-mill ordeal. Even so, feeling that difference with his own body had Xixu breaking out into a cold sweat. He focused on keeping his movements from faltering, memories of the first time he'd witnessed Sari's transformation drifting to the forefront of his mind despite himself. Immediately behind him, Vas drew his rapier.

They were only here to deal with Nerei; luck willing, they would be able to avoid the golden wolf. Nevertheless, there was no guarantee that matters would go exactly as planned, which was why it was Xixu's role to clear the way. It was problematic that the opponent he would have to deal with was a being beyond human comprehension, but he figured that he should at least be able to

buy Vas some time, somehow.

There was nobody else walking the hallways of Pale Moon. It was worrying that none of the courtesans were anywhere to be seen, but Xixu found that far more preferable to being spotted and the situation devolving into uproar.

Xixu turned the final corner before the entryway. Ahead, part of a large, golden body was visible. At this distance, it was likely best to assume he had been noticed already. No longer caring about muffling the sound of his footsteps, Xixu quickened his pace.

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The sound of stringed instruments reverberated through the underground space, overlapping to fill the air with surging notes and strains. Sari, hugging her knees and leaning back against the wall of one of the Midiridos's tatami-mat practice rooms, listened to the performance.

Tensé's biwa and Tozu's flute, though restrained in their volume as this was merely practice, still possessed enough vigor that the waves of their music completely enveloped all who heard it. As the music that was the very essence of Irede flowed over her, Sari felt her thoughts slowly becoming more lucid. She placed a hand to her head, which was unsteady due to fatigue. When she looked to the side, she saw Eid, sitting against the wall a little further away. From what she could tell from his profile, he appeared to be in an ill mood.

"Are you okay?" Sari asked.

After a moment, Eid replied, "It has nothing to do with you."

"It does. It's my fault you were hurt."

Sari knew that, from Eid's point of view, this entire affair was something he'd been dragged into completely against his will. All he had done was happen to be at the Werrilocia estate. Still, she wasn't sure how she should apologize.

As she wavered over what she should say, Eid said, "I just misjudged when to get out." He sounded disgusted, and he kept his eyes looking forward. "Don't bother with me. Keep your mind on what you have to do."

If Eid had simply handed her over when Nerei had come to the estate, he

likely wouldn't have suffered as serious an injury as the one he'd incurred. Yet, he had refused to back down when Nerei had attempted to take her away, and as a result, he had been dragged to Irede too. Sari could not tell what the true intent behind his actions was, but she could not help but feel grateful—though the feeling was rather mixed.

Eid had probably saved her—the girl he hated—due to the habits he'd developed during his time as a shadeslayer, as well as a subconscious pity for the person he'd known since they were children. Sari herself knew that, even now, after their separation, she would still not hesitate to lend him her hand if he were in trouble. For good or worse, that was the significance of the time they had shared together. Yet, in truth, Sari also wished that she could free him of that weight.

Realizing that she was giving herself over to incoherent thoughts, Sari pulled herself together and refocused her attention. Mentally, she went through the steps of her dance, matching them to the music. Hand movements, the position of her feet, and the methods with which she worked her power—she reviewed them all, one by one.

"All right..." Sari muttered to herself.

Right now, it was her role to successfully perform the maiden's dance and protect Irede from the compulsions of another god. If she could not achieve that, there was no meaning in her existence.

Sari raised her head and looked down at the silver bracelet she was holding in her right hand. She clutched it tightly, praying for the safety of the two who weren't present.

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Xixu ran down the remainder of the hallway.

The god—the massive golden wolf—was in the same position it had been occupying earlier, and Nerei was still seated at the entryway. Of the two, only the former seemed to react to Xixu, turning its head slightly to observe him. When he met its red eyes, he shuddered, goosebumps rippling all over his body. The wolf's overwhelming presence threatened to make him dizzy; he felt as though its gaze pierced through to his very core.

However, Xixu had expected himself to have such a reaction. His feet moved independently of his thoughts, carrying his body across the floor and toward the wolf's flank. Keeping his mind intentionally clear, Xixu swung his sword with ingrained habit. Its sharpened tip descended upon the wolf's back.

But just before his weapon's blade sank into its golden fur, the wolf spun its head fully toward Xixu and opened its jaws wide.

With a silent exclamation of surprise, Xixu immediately dived to the left. Though the maneuver sent him off balance, the physical abilities he'd so diligently honed managed to prevent him from tumbling across the floor.

Pushing himself back up, Xixu cut at the wolf's leg—the beast was still just sitting there, right in front of him. But, at that moment, a vision of himself being struck by lightning and set alight flashed across his mind. An emotion more primal than fear seized Xixu in its icy clutches, piercing down to his very soul. An immense pressure closed in on him from all sides, not so much demanding that he obey as considering his submission as the natural way of things.

Even still, Xixu did not stop moving. His blade bit into the wolf's golden fur, only to be kicked away by its hind leg.

Idly, Xixu noted that the sensation of slicing into the wolf was not so different than that of cutting through shades outside of Irede; it was as though his sword was moving through water. However, it didn't appear as though his cut had had any effect—though his sword has left a shallow gash in the wolf's flesh in its wake, the wound was soon concealed by the beast's rippling golden fur.

The massive wolf slowly rose, keeping its red eyes on Xixu as it turned to face him. Beside it, Nerei also stood.

"So you've returned."

Xixu did not reply to the double-layered voice. He merely took half a step forward. Then, while his opponents were focused on his movement, Vas dashed out from the shadows of the staircase.

Passing behind the wolf, Vas headed straight for Nerei. The possessed shadeslayer, his attention having been focused on Xixu, was slightly too slow to react. Vas used the opening to nimbly step into the man's reach, driving the tip

of his rapier into Nerei's right arm.

Nerei made no exclamation of pain. Instead, there was only the sound of his blood, splashing across the polished floor of the hallway.

Vas extracted his sword from Nerei's upper arm, using the recoil from the movement to twist his body and bring his free right hand thrusting forward. The heel of his palm was aimed directly at Nerei's heart.

Sari had explained that, just as she exercised her power by piercing a person's chest, it was Nerei's heart that served as the medium for his possession by the god. Therefore, all Vas had to do was strike that point with the power she'd lent him. To ensure that, he had first eliminated Nerei's right arm.

Xixu, keeping his eyes on the wolf, prayed that Vas would succeed. Nerei managed to twist aside at the last moment, however, and Vas's palm ended up piercing not his chest, but his shoulder.

The air cracked, and a flash of silver lit their surroundings. Though Vas had missed Nerei's heart, his strike must have still had quite the impact, for Nerei was violently thrown back into the entryway.

As Vas moved forward for a follow-up strike, the wolf turned toward him, but Xixu swung his sword at it to prevent it from pursuing. Within those few seconds, their disparate goals intersected.

Then, an intense burst of golden light seared everything from view.

Xixu was only unconscious for a handful of moments. When he came to, he found himself collapsed halfway up the staircase. He hurriedly lifted his head up, but groaned as he was immediately assaulted by an agonizing headache.

The pain felt as though he were burning alive, but quickly receded like the ebbing of the tide. Xixu was confused, but then he felt a faint warmth against his chest, and he recalled the object that he'd tucked away in there.

"It must have been Saridi..." he muttered, realizing that the young god's power had to have protected him, her bracelet acting as a medium.

Looking around, Xixu noticed that Vas had been blown away too, and was

currently picking himself up off the hard-packed clay of the entryway. Nerei, sword drawn, was walking toward him.

Alarm shot through Xixu. He immediately pulled the needle from the scabbard of his military sword and threw it at Nerei's back.

Though Xixu's position was not by any means conducive to throwing, the needle flew true to his aim and stabbed into Nerei's left shoulder—the same arm the man was holding his sword in. Nerei let out a slight grunt of pain, and the golden wolf turned its sharp gaze toward the staircase.

Xixu had prepared himself for this, but their position was far too disadvantageous. He stood up, relieved that his body was still capable of moving. If he had broken a limb or had been similarly disabled, the situation would be hopeless.

Yet, even though he was physically fine, the situation was still desperate. Sari's words from earlier came back to him: *"If you find yourself at a disadvantage, pull back."*

But Xixu didn't think they had reached that point yet.

Vas blew out a breath. "It seems we've been bested..." the young noble muttered.

Nevertheless, Vas readopted his stance, aiming his sword at Nerei. Xixu frowned when he saw the sheen of sweat on his brow.

When Vas struck at Nerei's heart with his power, he was also, from another perspective, releasing power that had been lent to him. In other words, it was not an act he could perform limitlessly. Sari had informed them that Vas would have, at maximum, three attempts. Since the first had just ended in failure, they only had two more with which to incapacitate Nerei.

"The least I can do is perform the role I was given..." Xixu muttered.

Slowly, he began descending the staircase, intent on drawing the wolf's attention. He came to a stop on the third step from the bottom.

The wolf had noticed him approaching, and was looking up at him with its red eyes. A single glance from it was enough to put immense pressure on Xixu's

mind. But, no, perhaps it was his very being that was being overwhelmed. Xixu's breathing threatened to quicken and run wild, but he quelled it with force of will alone.

Silence.

Just as Xixu began to wonder whether sound had vanished from the world entirely, the wolf opened its maw wide. But as he prepared himself for it to snap at him, a golden sphere of light formed in its mouth.

Xixu, realizing what it was, dashed back up the stairs. At the same time, the wolf released the sphere of light from its mouth, and it slammed into the bottom of the staircase. Hot wind scooped Xixu off of his feet.

"Ngh...!"

This time, Xixu was able to maneuver himself midair in a way that allowed him to land safely. Narrowly avoiding a collision with the wooden wall of the second floor, he kicked off of it and came to a stop on the landing.

Xixu looked down, expecting the staircase to be destroyed, but not a single part of Pale Moon showed any sign of damage. Since the attack had been unleashed by a god who could not be seen by ordinary humans, perhaps there had been more to its nature than violence.

Vas and Nerei were crossing blades in the entryway. From what Xixu could see, Nerei had a bit of an upper hand on the younger man. It didn't seem to originate because of any divine power; rather, it appeared Nerei was simply the better swordsman. Despite the wounds in his right arm and left shoulder, the man's movements were still better than Vas's.

Xixu spared a thought for what a waste it was; Nerei must have been a skilled shadeslayer, and yet now, they had no other choice but to kill him, due to his status as the god's anchor. Xixu looked back at the wolf at the bottom of the stairs. It stared back at him curiously, as though wondering why he had not lost the will to fight.

Half unconsciously, Xixu held a hand to his chest. He knew that the reason he was still alive was because his opponent was making light of him. He had only been able to withstand the wolf's offensive because it had considered him to be

nothing more than a trifling human.

However, if his opponent began to take him more seriously, reaping Xixu's life would be a simple task for it. It would be better if he managed to draw it away from their current location before that happened. After all, Sari had told him many times over not to be too reckless.

The problem was, Xixu held little hope that Vas would be able to defeat Nerei if he left the two of them behind. If possible, he wanted to deal with the wolf somehow and provide Vas with support.

Xixu searched his memory for the location of another staircase—and then the floor creaked behind him.

He turned, startled, and saw a courtesan in a pale crimson kimono further down the hallway. When he recognized her as Isha, Thoma's lover, he grew even more tense. Given the circumstances, it was hard to believe that she was herself. As if to confirm his fears, Isha simply stood there, a dazed expression on her face.

Just before Xixu was about to call out to her, the familiar voice of a woman spoke first. "I cannot...maintain this...for long..."

The voice had come from Isha's mouth, but it was not Isha's. Still, though it was muddled and weak, as if coming from somewhere far away, it was unmistakably the voice of the king's maiden. Xixu froze, caught entirely off guard.

She continued, "I'm afraid...that I cannot...be of any...direct assistance. This matter is...beyond my ability..."

"Right..."

"However...there is one thing...that I know...which may be of use..."

"And that is?" Xixu asked, not tearing his eyes away from the golden wolf. The beast had begun moving, and at that moment it placed its massive forelegs on the bottom step of the staircase, starting to ascend.

"Whether this is...the trump card that saves you...or the blade that corners you...I do not know. However...this name...will allow you to...summon forth a

being...of immense power...”

A being of immense power? Would they be an ally, or an enemy? There were already two gods in Irede; was it prudent to add a third power to the mix?

Xixu suppressed his momentary hesitation, as well as a shudder. The wolf was ascending the stairs before his eyes—he needed something that could change the situation. He nodded at Isha, the movement meant for the king’s distant maiden.

“All right,” he said. “Tell me.”

“The name is...Distira...”

“Distira?” The moment Xixu repeated the name, he realized that the bracelet tucked into the chest of his uniform felt hot.

No explosive or dramatic change manifested itself; all that happened was that Sari’s silver bracelet heated up, and the wolf lowered its head and growled. Its guarded stance was a stark difference to its previous lofty indifference.

Xixu, recognizing that the change in the wolf’s behavior was related to the name he’d just spoken, began rapidly thinking about how he could best use this opportunity. But just as he was considering calling out the name a second time, the wolf’s ears twitched and pricked up. It raised its head and strained its ears, seemingly searching the air around it.

A moment later, Xixu registered the significance of its behavior. “No! The maiden’s dance...!”

Four hours had passed. The maiden’s dance had begun in the central plaza of Irede.

The wolf must have sensed it. It began descending the staircase, ignoring Xixu as though he didn’t exist. Xixu saw Vas, still exchanging blades with Nerei in the entryway, look visibly startled. He leapt after the wolf.

Vas knew, just as Xixu did, that letting the wolf reach Sari again was out of the question. After what had occurred earlier, it would not let her out of its clutches again, and if it took her away, there would no longer be anything they could do to save her.

Xixu's impatience outweighed his fear and caution. He jumped from the middle of the staircase and swung his military sword in a downward cut at the wolf's golden back. An unpleasant sense of weightlessness enveloped him as he fell. Then, noiselessly, he severed the wolf's tail at its base.

The wolf made no sound. The severed golden tail disappeared the moment it fell to the floor, as though it had melted into it.

But Xixu did not have the wherewithal to pay mind to such details. The time it was taking for the wolf to turn around seemed to pass exceedingly slowly, and he abruptly came to the realization that he was not going to be able to get away.

In that brief span of time, Xixu vividly foresaw his own death. One of his liege's rare frowns crossed his mind...and so did Sari's tear-stained face.

Xixu felt guilty toward her, for what he'd done. "I'm sorry, Saridi," he murmured.

The moment the words left his mouth, a girl appeared, her back facing him.

She had long, silver hair and a delicate frame. The former was untied and down, the evenly cut ends of it swaying about her waist. Her pale, bare arms and legs were slender, and seemed more unhealthily fragile than graceful. In place of clothes, she was clad in sheer fabric that shone silver and coiled around her body. Casually, she raised her right arm.

Nothing manifested. It was only her bare hand that prevented the wolf's jaws from closing on Xixu.

Dumbfounded at the sight of the girl who had suddenly appeared before him, Xixu asked slowly, "Saridi...?"

"No."

The girl turned her head back toward him. Her visage possessed an almost translucent beauty. It was terribly familiar, but it was not Sari's. Xixu instinctively realized who the girl was.

"So, you're Distira," he said.

"So, *you* are the one who called for me," the girl returned.

Her voice resembled Sari's, but seemed somewhat younger, and it sounded slightly fissured. Upon closer inspection, her body was also faintly transparent. Xixu's suspicions were proven correct—she was not human. But even though, mentally, he had expected this and known it, the sight before his eyes sent an unstoppable chill running down his spine.

Distira seemed to notice something. Her eyes widened slightly, and she laughed, a high-pitched and pleasant sound. "I see," she said. "So that is how it is."

"What is?" Xixu asked.

"In that case..."

The girl exhaled. That action alone focused a suffocating amount of power into her raised right hand, and the wolf took a great leap backwards.



When Distira saw this, she turned fully and looked up at Xixu. For a moment, her blue eyes matched his, and then she passed straight through his body. Utter shock prevented him from even turning around. From behind him, he heard a delighted voice.

“Next time, I shall come for you. Await me in anticipation.”

The last words were mixed with laughter and whispered into his ear.

Xixu turned, startled, but she was already gone, leaving no trace of her presence except the lingering sensation of something having passed through his body. He almost stood there frozen in blank amazement, but quickly returned to his senses.

He did not have a single second to spare for hesitation.

Ignoring the wolf, Xixu ran for the entryway. He met Vas’s eyes over Nerei’s shoulder.

No words were necessary; the two came to an implicit understanding. Xixu dashed forward, letting his momentum carry him into a kick at the rear of Nerei’s right knee. As the man fell, he seized him by the hair and bent him backward with all of his strength.

Nerei, understanding what was about to happen to him, began to struggle out of Xixu’s grip—but Vas didn’t give him the time.

Vas struck the man’s chest with his right palm. The noiseless impact ran through Nerei’s heart, reaching even Xixu at his back; it felt like it possessed dozens of times the potency of the spell Sari usually applied to him, and he found himself unable to breathe.

Xixu watched Nerei crumple at his feet, and he himself began to fall to his knees. However, at that moment, Vas took a large step forward and forcefully shoved him aside.

Xixu did not spare the thought to wonder what Vas was doing; he had already realized. That was why, even as he slammed into the entryway door, he reached his hand out toward Sari’s cousin.

But his hand did not reach.

Vas, the cousin to a god by blood, fell victim to the wolf's jaws.

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It had been a long while since Sari had last worn her dancing raiment. It was comprised of white fabric weaved through with silver thread, and she wore it over a vermillion underrobe.

She had tied bells to her wrists and ankles with decorative cord, but wavered over what further additions she should make. Eventually, she'd settled for threading her silver bracelet over her right wrist. Her makeup had been her own work, but her hair had not—it had been combed by a woman of the Midiridos. Her long silver tresses had been left down, then bound into individual bundles by decorative cord, upon which hung more bells.

The girl who jangled every time she walked observed herself in a full length mirror, somewhat concerned. "This is everything...right?" she murmured.

The last time Sari had worn this raiment was when she had performed a maiden dance for one of Irede's festivals as a child. Her grandmother had still been in good health at the time, and she had seen to all of Sari's preparations. So, while Sari had diligently kept up with her dance practice ever since, it had been a long time since she had taken to a stage.

Sari exited the dressing room and headed for the spacious tatami-mat room where everyone was gathered. As they all looked upon her dancing raiment in admiration, Eid—still sitting against the back wall—glanced at her, and his expression softened. There was a nostalgia in his gaze that Sari could only suppose came from his memories of seeing her dance upon a stage once before. She smiled ruefully, feeling embarrassed.

Tensé stood to greet her. "Our preparations here are complete. The stage aboveground will soon be set."

"Okay."

Sari checked the clock in front of the dresser. The end of the four hours they had agreed upon waiting for with Xixu and Vas would soon be upon them. Everybody in the room began to move, spurred by her arrival.

"Let's go," Sari said.

The procession left the room, setting a brisk pace as they headed for the staircase that was closest to the town's center.

Irede's central plaza was located at the intersection of two main streets, and since the Midiridos made use of it frequently, a private residence in the vicinity served as their entry and exit to and from the underground. The young men of the Midiridos ascended the narrow staircase first, to prepare the stage. Sari followed after them, climbing the stone steps.

Night had already fallen upon the surface world. As Sari stepped up into the private residence, she tasted the fresh air. She had known that the Midiridos possessed many entrances and exits around town, but she hadn't known about their specific locations. As she examined the scenery outside the window, she finally understood where she was.

One of the men who had gone outside to scout the surroundings returned. "It appears safe," he said. "We can carry on."

After exiting the private residence and turning a corner, they found they were already at the plaza. A wooden stage had been erected deep within; currently, nobody stood atop it.

There was less pedestrian traffic around than usual for Irede after sunset, and here and there along the rows of businesses that lined the streets, lanterns were dark. Perhaps because of that, or perhaps not, the moonlight seemed unduly bright. Sari looked up at the night sky, focusing her concentration on her own power.

The square stage was a step higher than the ground, and was visible from across the flow of people. It had been made large to serve the purposes of music and dance, but was customarily surrounded by rope to prevent it being trampled upon by indiscriminate feet. The three men who had gone ahead nimbly removed the rope and placed cushions down for Tensé and Tozu. Men carrying flat *taiko* drums placed themselves by the stage.

The four lanterns at the stage's corners were lit. In a single moment, the atmosphere of the plaza was dyed in fantasy.

As onlookers began to stop and admire the sight, Tensé and Tozu walked briskly toward the stage, carrying a *biwa* and a flute. As Sari followed behind

them, she sensed something all of a sudden that made her examine the surrounding people.

The dim lighting made it difficult to tell for sure, but she felt as though she was being watched from somewhere. The feeling compounded her nervousness...and then something tapped her shoulder from behind, causing her to jump.

“W-Wah!”

“Hurry it up.”

“Eid? Don’t scare me like that.”

“Whatever, just hurry. Thoma’s here.”

“H-He is...?”

Sari began searching for her brother, but Eid nudged her toward the stage. She stared at him in astonishment as he turned his back to her and gripped the hilt of his sword, but quickly nodded and ran for it.

Right now, her first priority was to begin the maiden dance on time. If her brother was himself, then all the better, but if he wasn’t, then all she could do was rely on Eid. Sari ran over to the steps leading up to the stage, sending glances back at her injured childhood friend as she went. She removed her shoes, climbed up the steps, and turned to face forward, looking out over nighttime plaza.

She was met with the anticipating gazes of visitors who were wondering what was about to happen, and the surprised expressions of store owners standing under the eaves of their businesses.

And, among the throngs of people, there was a man walking to the stage alone, clad haphazardly in a *yukata*. Thoma met his sister’s eyes and smiled as though he were enjoying himself.

The smile was warped, and clearly not her brother’s.

“Eid!”

“We’re going to begin.”

Sari almost found herself leaping off the stage, but Tensé's well-projected voice brought her back to her senses.

The young dancing girl held her breath, and then a second later, the expression she'd been wearing before vanished from her face, replaced by a faint, beautiful smile—a display for the benefit of the audience.

Right now, Sari could not lose sight of what she had to do. This dance was their trump card, and nobody could take her place.

Tearing her eyes away from Eid and Thoma, Sari turned on her heel. The white hem and sleeves of her raiment fluttered as she moved to stand in the center of the stage. Then, without any preface, a *biwa* began to strum.

Since time immemorial, music and dance had been a means of swaying a person's being. The arts were passed through the flesh, into the mind, and ultimately touched a person's very soul.

Just as the man who was chosen as a maiden's sacred offering grew closer to the god through seeing her kagura dance, the maiden dance, created for the sake of Irede's people, would rid the improper encroachment of the golden wolf from their beings and return them to their rightful freedom.

This meant that, as long as Sari danced her maiden dance, Thoma was sure to return to his usual self. Holding onto this belief, she raised her right arm, stringed with bells, exposing her pale hand from the thin fabric of her sleeve. The attention of the onlookers focused upon it.

Looking up at her own raised palm, outstretched as though it were reaching for the moonlight, Sari closed her eyes. The sound of a flute joined the *biwa*. She inhaled a shallow breath.

Then, followed by the ringing of small bells, her bare feet began to move.

Thoma, who had weaved his way through scatterings of people wearing a smile that, at a glance, looked no different to his usual one, tilted his head to the side as he stood in front of Eid. Whether it was because he was wearing a *yukata*—a rare choice for him—or because a disquieting aura hung about his tempered body, he looked oddly unsavory.

The man looked Eid up and down, and the corner of his lips quirked up. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“I didn’t come because I wanted to,” Eid replied. “If you were sane, I wouldn’t even need to be here.”

Eid looked at the sword Thoma was holding. He could hear the sound of music coming from behind him, and people were beginning to form a crowd. He didn’t think Thoma would draw his weapon in a place like this, but it was difficult to predict what the man would do in his current state.

As Eid kept a close watch on Thoma’s movements, the other man looked up at his younger sister on stage and smiled. “If I were sane?” he repeated. “What a strange thing to say.”

“Do you really think you are right now?” Eid asked incredulously.

Thoma, still smiling, narrowed his eyes. “Oh, I didn’t mean that it was strange because of me. I was talking about you.”

“*What?*”

“In the end, you’ll always make your way back to Sari. No matter what everybody says, no matter what excuses you make, that will never change. As long as you hate this town, you will continue to be her prisoner. Open your eyes and realize it already. I know you wouldn’t want that, given the choice.”

Eid did not reply. He knew the blood was rushing to his head. He also knew that his mind was chilled through, calming him. His emotions and thoughts at odds within him, Eid gripped his sword.

Thoma looked at the action cynically. “How long will you continue to resort to brute strength? You haven’t grown up at all, have you?”

“Shut up.”

Unable to bear it any longer, Eid drew his sword. The surrounding people, however, spared neither him nor Thoma a single glance; their attention was captivated by the otherworldly performance occurring on stage. Even so, Eid knew he could not wield his sword here—he had drawn it as a threat.

And yet, Thoma simply smiled faintly. He raised his empty hands. “This is the

perfect chance for you to realize your own blind devotion. Once you do, you'll be able to live—and die—more freely."

"You have no right to tell me how to live."

Eid went to create distance between himself and Thoma, but an onlooker behind him prevented him from stepping back. Trapped in place, he kept his attention focused on gauging the distance between himself and Thoma—he had never been a match for the man.

The sounds of music and bells suffused the plaza. The god's dance was one of passionate strength, but to Eid's ears, there almost seemed to be melancholy buried somewhere within.

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The music of the *biwa* and flute drifting in from outside sounded familiar. The man who had buried himself under the covers of the futon, indulging himself in idle slumber, raised his head, awoken from his shallow sleep. The owner of the room, a courtesan, took notice of his movements, and she turned her gaze outside.

"Oh, it's Tensé's music. That's rare."

Though it was no match for Pale Moon, this particular courtesan house of Irede, located near the central plaza, also had a venerated history, and its name was quite well known. The old proprietress, once a beautiful courtesan, had calmly lit the lantern every day as usual even during the recent turmoil, increasing the courtesan house's popularity among its guests all the more.

The courtesan in the room, herself a veteran of the store, stood up, inhaling from a long smoking pipe as she listened to the music. Wearing nothing but a kimono that was somewhat askew, she poked her head out of the second floor window.

The courtesan had an immediate view of plaza, where a crowd had now gathered, and her inkling about who the musicians were was proven correct when she saw the two Midiridos members sitting on the stage. She listened to their music attentively; she hadn't had the chance to hear any of the Troupe playing recently, what with the changes that had been happening to the town.

The man, still lying belly down on the futon as always, rested his chin on his hands.

“Must be a maiden dance,” he mused.

“My,” the courtesan said. “That’s impressive, considering you haven’t even looked outside.”

“It’s the only reason they’d be playing at this late an hour. It looks like the maiden has finally made a move.” The man yawned loudly. The disheveled state of his hair was not entirely the fault of his nap.

The courtesan turned back to him and smiled. “Shouldn’t you be there too? You *are* a shadeslayer, more or less.”

“Not a diligent enough one to work when I’m not called on,” the man said, with no semblance of motivation in his tone. “Besides, with how things are right now, one wrong move and I’ll find myself being killed by someone I know.”

The courtesan shrugged and returned to looking outside. Then, her eyes caught sight of a certain individual. “Oh?” she said. “Isn’t that little Eid?”

“Huh?” the man replied. “He was exiled, wasn’t he? Isn’t it just someone who looks like him?”

“No, it’s him. He’s got an eyepatch.”

Hearing that, the man finally crawled out of the futon. He joined the courtesan by the window and looked down, whereupon he saw a familiar face.

“What in the world is he doing?”

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Although Eid had drawn his sword, there was no way he was going to be able to utilize it as he normally would with so many people around. However, given the injury to his ribs, it was a blessing in disguise that he would be able to avoid an ordinary fight.

Eid held his sword up with the hilt in front of his face, the blade vertical and facing Thoma. He supported the back of the blade with his left hand. The stance was not meant for combat, but as a warning. Once the maiden dance was over, Thoma would likely return to his normal self. Though Eid had a lot on his mind,

he knew there was no need to force an unnecessary fight here, and so he chose to forgo violence in favor of intimidation.

Thoma merely smiled gently. Although the man was empty handed, he casually approached Eid, as though he could not even see his sword. Then, just as Eid was about to turn his blade toward the man's outstretched right hand, Thoma abruptly disappeared from view. Before Eid even had the time to be startled, a swift, powerful kick slammed into his leg.

Eid reflexively gasped in pain, but stopped himself from crying out. The blow had thrummed through the bone of his leg all the way up to his ribs. When he saw Thoma with his fist raised, he dropped his sword, lowered his body, and tackled the man.

The two men tumbled across the ground. Naturally, the audience—though captivated by the performance on stage—noticed, and began to criticize them from the sidelines.

"What? Is that a fight?"

"Take it somewhere else. You'll put somebody in danger."

"Sorry," Thoma called back, despite being busy fending off Eid's arms, which were grappling at him. "We'll be done soon."

At the nonchalance in the man's tone, Eid realized that the blood was rushing to his head again. But, in contrast to his flaring emotions, his experience was warning him to get away from Thoma. Perhaps he could have managed the nimble maneuver if he hadn't been injured, but since he was, he settled for driving his fist into Thoma's gut and using the momentum from the blow to stand back up.

However, before he could fully rise, Thoma's hands grabbed onto his head and began twisting. The man's large hands did not lack in strength; much more, and Eid's neck was going to snap.

Ice ran down Eid's spine, accompanied by the premonition of his own death. He reflexively tried to move away, but doubted that he would make it in time.

He was going to end up as a pitiful corpse right here in the plaza. He was going to die in the birthplace he loathed so much, all for the sake of a girl he'd

once abandoned. For some reason, the thought pierced his chest with a burning nostalgia. Wondering why he was experiencing this emotion, of all things, in his dying moments, he simply closed his eyes.

He had no words to leave behind.

Thoma's fingers held onto his head like a vise. Eid could hear the man as he murmured ever so gently, "Forget about her. If you can't, then go somewhere far away. Don't do anything that'll have you dying in front of her."

Thoma's impossibly somber voice seemed as though it belonged to somebody else.

Eid looked up in surprise. "You're..."

Thoma was looking back at him with cold, emotionless eyes. It was impossible to tell whether he had returned to his old self or not. But Eid sensed instinctively that his expression, as sharp and frigid as a blade of ice, revealed a part of the man's true nature that even Sari did not know. It was a look wholly uncharacteristic of what the man known as Thoma Radi had ever shown to others.

Thoma's expression did not change as he cast Eid aside.

The ex-shadeslayer barely had the time to wonder where the man had gotten such strength before a follow-up kick was driven into his stomach, leaving him writhing in wordless agony.

Taking advantage of his incapacitation, Thoma bent and gracefully picked up Eid's discarded sword. Then, in a low voice, he whispered, "If you're going to die, do it somewhere else. One man dying for her is more than enough already."

Thoma walked away, headed for the stage. Eid stretched a hand out in an attempt to stop him, but his fingers reached nothing. The sound of receding footsteps and the feel of his face against the ground reminded him of a faint memory from his childhood.

His face had been bruised and battered, and a woman's—girl's?—hand had been held out toward him. Had it been his mother's, or Sari's?

Eid couldn't tell; his memories were muddied and indistinct.

The sound of music coming from the stage and the delighted voices of the crowd pressed heavily upon his dim consciousness, shrouding the world into a dim obscurity.

Sari's feet made hardly any sound as they moved across the wood of the stage. That was the first lesson that her grandmother had hammered into her when she'd started learning her maiden dances: "All sound should come from the Midiridos. You merely dance upon it."

The young Sari hadn't quite understood the meaning behind the words, but now, she felt as though she did.

A maiden dance was, so to speak, a method for the women who usually walked amongst people as Irede's maiden to expose a little of their true nature in the form of a dance. Her footwork, the placement of her hands—every minor detail was an expression of her power. That she refrained from making any sound was so that her power did not scatter, and also because sound was not originally one of the attributes of the god's true nature. It was for that reason that she loved human music so.

Sari's pale, bare feet slid silently across the boards of the stage. Her hands, stretched out elegantly down to the tips of her fingers, scooped up the air by her knees and returned it to the sky. In the night air, her long silver hair flickered, the red of a burning fire reflecting from its surface.

Sari smiled broadly; she felt like breaking out into song. The very essence of the town was moving, with her at its center. Elation welled forth from a primal place inside her, as though she had delicately poked her finger into a precious, precious goldfish bowl and stirred it around.

However, with gentle care, Sari kept her exhilaration confined to a single part of her cooled consciousness. If she allowed her true nature to go free, she knew she would become unable to even act the part of a human. And should that happen, she would drag Irede down along with her too. Though there was much Sari did not know, this alone she knew to be true. She *had* to keep her own power in check here.

Sari pulled back her white sleeve and raised her chin. The ripples created by the circles she drew with her feet echoed with power, telling her of Irede. From them, she sensed an inexplicable change that made her breath catch in her throat.

The number of inhuman presences had increased.

But that was impossible. The golden wolf's arrival in itself was an exception among exceptions.

Sari almost stopped in mute incredulity, wondering what had happened, but her body continued on its own. Led along by its movements, she returned to her senses. She inclined her neck to look down from the stage, and beyond the captivated audience, she saw Eid and Thoma grappling with each other on the ground.

Soon after, Thoma stood up slowly and turned back to the stage. Her brother's smile betrayed not a hint of shadow, and behind her own constructed smile, Sari shuddered. She wanted to leap off the stage at once and check on Eid. Beyond that, she could not think of a way to stop Thoma.

Her brother pushed his way through the audience, gradually growing closer to the stage. His confident figure overflowed with self-assurance and a certainty of his own strength. Ever since Sari was old enough to comprehend her surroundings, her brother had been the person who'd understood her most, and her protector. And yet, as he drew closer, no sign of any hesitation in his bearing, Sari began to feel tense.

If he caught her here, it would all have been for nothing. Without anybody to perform the maiden's dance, it would be difficult to return Irede to normal, even if they drove away the wolf.

Still watching Thoma, Sari hesitated over whether she should escape the stage and start her dance over somewhere else. Normally, it would have been out of the question for her to stop midway, but desperate circumstances called for desperate measures. As long as she and the Midiridos pair were safe, they still had a chance to reverse the situation.

Continuing with her dance, Sari turned to Tensé, the movement sending her raiment fluttering. She shook the bells on her wrists, and they gleamed beneath

the moonlight, dyeing the night their color. But, as Sari attempted to signal Tensé with her eyes, she suddenly recalled the two men who weren't present. She reflected upon them, and herself.

In truth, even though she had lent them her power, it was not possible for a human to oppose a god. But they had taken that burden upon themselves without a word of complaint; they had staked their own lives in order to protect the inexperienced Sari.

Despite that, was she to believe that the only thing she herself could do in this moment was run away? Depending on the circumstances, whether Sari completed the maiden dance or not could be the deciding factor over if they lived or died. Their two groups had, so to speak, placed their fates in each other's hands, to be weighed upon the scales of victory and defeat.

Was she truly considering being the first to give up, all alone? She closed her eyes and thought.

There was only one answer.

Sari spun, as though she were drawing a circle. Thoma had almost reached the stage. Looking down upon his handsome features, she smiled. Her shapely fingers invited the gazes of the audience upward. Following her arm, she threw out her chest and tilted her head back. She smiled fondly at the moon in the night sky.

It was a beautiful night, and Saridi knew well what she was. Her eyes, gemstones of ice, fixed upon Thoma. His eyes widened slightly.

Her will made clear the difference in their positions, as well as the distinction between their beings. Atop the stage, her true, divine nature gave her a clarity that dulled her surroundings.

Sari exhaled a long breath, diffusing her surging power into her dance. Each time the hem of her raiment, threaded with bells, billowed out, it scattered silver droplets that no person could see.

She knelt upon both knees, leaned the upper half of her body forward, and grasped at the air with both hands. Then, she raised her small face and looked at Thoma.

She no longer viewed the man standing in front of her as her brother. He was a member of House Radi who owed her his service. If she could not make him submit, then she was not fit to be a god. And he, who had not knelt before her, was not fit to live.

Sari lifted her upper body, flowing into the gesture. There was beauty in her smile, yet there was also a majesty so refined that it invoked a shudder from those watching. The audience, their gazes locked to the stage, stood in place, captivated and unaware. They watched the god without knowing what it was that they faced.

Her spreading power washed away the essence that had stagnated in Irede. The unceasing music of the Midiridos carried her power further still.

Not much time had passed, but the end of the dance approached.

The young mistress of Irede gracefully stood and stretched her right hand forward. Her proud gaze commanded subservience, and her bearing reinforced it as the natural way of things.

Thoma smiled ruefully and closed his eyes. Silently, he knelt and bowed his head toward her.

Within the feverish night air, the dignified sound of bells marked the end of the maiden’s dance.

6. Ties

The stagnant air was a representation of himself.

Recently, the rotting blood living deep within the dark depths of the earth had been being suppressed by the power that had spread aboveground, causing it to drift within the shallow soil. In usual circumstances, it would seep aboveground instead, taking the forms of people and wandering the town. But currently, it could not. Yet, in exchange, the essence that had settled underground was far thicker and possessed more power than usual too.

Lazily, he slithered.

The essence that had become closer to its original form raised his head out of the dirt. He had a premonition. No, perhaps it was more accurate to call it an omen.

He could sense multiple powers intersecting aboveground. He knew that the power that had been suppressing him was being washed away.

A sense of liberation overcame him, as though a heavy stone above his head had been removed, and spontaneously, he began to rise to the surface. When his head finally broke free of the earth, moonlight shone upon him, brilliant and dazzling. But he had already become thick, so he was able to remain in the light without dissipating.

He was on the verge of assuming a human form, as he always did, but then, he noticed a presence.

There was a woman standing a short distance away, clad in moonlight; she was the being who had once slayed him. She was the one who had buried him deep into the earth, reaping his essence that had seeped aboveground for a timeless age afterward.

When he realized that she was somewhat weaker, as well as close by, he experienced an emotion akin to exultation. Without any conscious effort, he pulled his essence that had begun to scatter together and shaped it into one form.

He wanted her. To devour her, to make her his possession.

He became a large, black snake—similar to his original form—and, giving into his everlasting hunger, slithered toward the woman soundlessly. He turned down an alleyway and raised his head to examine the crowd and the stage beyond it. The girl standing atop it, her complexion pale, did not seem to have noticed him yet.

He, who could not be seen by ordinary humans, laid back upon the ground and began slithering toward her, intent on not letting his prey escape.

However, the very next moment, a naked blade stabbed into the back of his head.

The sword pinning the snake's head to the ground was a shadeslayer's sword; ears of wheat had been tossed into the furnace at the time of its forging. As he writhed in sudden anguish, a fiery voice fell upon him.

"Don't get close to her. Return to where you belong."

As the words of warning were spoken, the blade impaling him was withdrawn. He bared his fangs, still feeling the remnants of pain, but the military sword at the edge of his vision flashed once more as it arced toward him.

There was not a shred of mercy in its blade.

The slash severed through air as well as the snake's neck, and his essence once more melted into the dark depths of the earth.

After Xixu confirmed that the black essence had dissipated, he took a breath and resumed walking toward the stage.

Sari, who stood atop the stage beyond the crowd, looked as though she were in a rapturous trance, but when she noticed him, her eyes shot wide open. Her expression immediately broke into a wide, relieved smile.

It was an expression Xixu knew well—one that belonged to her true self. However, likely because Sari was still on stage, it only lasted a moment, and was quickly replaced by something more superficial. Her lips curved anew, her expression as beautiful and pure as a flower shimmering with captured moonlight—it was a look that belonged unmistakably to a young courtesan.

Sari pulled her right leg back, and gave the audience an elegant bow.

Applause and cries of delight surged throughout the surrounding crowd, and Sari moved for the staircase at the side of the stage, supported by Tensé. Xixu, who had returned his military sword to its scabbard, met them there.

He looked up at Sari's face, concerned; it was drained of color. "Saridi, are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "I just used a little bit too much power. Thank you."

Sari stretched both hands out toward him, and Xixu took one and lifted her into his arms. Perhaps because she had exercised her divine authority, her body was as cold as ice. Even if someone unaware of her circumstances were to touch her, they would realize she was not human. Xixu carried her with great care, as though she were as fragile as spun glass.

Sari leaned into his chest and took a small breath. "His presence has disappeared from Irede..." she said. "It looks like you and Vas managed on your end too."

"Mmn."

"I think I'll sleep for a bit... Please...take care of the rest..."

No sooner had Sari said the words than her eyes closed. She curled up into herself—she had to be cold—and Xixu readjusted his hold on her to better convey her some of his own body heat.

Standing in the plaza, where the heat of the maiden's dance still lingered, Xixu looked up at the night sky. The moon was a brilliant, dazzling white, and there was not a single cloud to be seen.

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It was likely that there had been no other case thus far where the full account of damage was as difficult to calculate as this one.

After cleaning up the aftermath as best they could, the next morning, Xixu, Thoma, and Tensé gathered at Pale Moon. Seated around a table in the flower room, which was empty of guests and courtesans, the trio shared looks filled with varying degrees of exhaustion. Xixu, who had done a round of the town,

started them off.

“So, what is the status of the injured?”

“Strictly speaking, the only injured person we have is Eid,” Thoma said nonchalantly, holding a stack of documents. “He won’t be able to move for a while. He’s developed a fever too.”

Thoma himself was the cause for Eid’s bedridden state, but he showed no signs of remorse at all. Xixu bit his tongue, holding back what he wanted to say, and asked another question that had been bothering him.

“Sari’s developed a fever too, hasn’t she? Is she all right?”

“Well, that’s the usual for her,” Thoma said. “She’s resting alone right now because all of the other Pale Moon women are out of it too, but she’ll recover soon enough. If it bothers you, you can go sleep with her.”

“No. How is Vas?”

“Now him, I’m not quite sure about. He has no physical injuries, but I guess that isn’t the issue, is it?”

Xixu remained silent, recalling the events of yesterday. The wolf’s jaws had closed around Vas before his very eyes. But the next moment, it must have been affected by the maiden’s dance, because it had sprung up and run out of the open door. And yet, although Vas hadn’t had any external wounds on him, he had fallen unconscious.

Xixu, who had known that shades would manifest after the wolf was driven away, had only checked that Vas was still breathing before leaving him asleep in Pale Moon’s entryway before heading for the stage. However, it seemed that Vas had not woken up since. Sari had also examined her cousin before stumbling into bed herself, but she had simply said that his existence had been weakened and they could only wait for him to recover on his own. The same went for her, so in the end, it was just a question of which of them would wake up first.

Tensé sighed deeply. “It seems that those who were more profoundly controlled are suffering worse aftereffects. It must be quite severe, since even Ironblade has developed a fever.”

“It makes you wonder why this fellow here is so full of energy, doesn’t it?” Xixu said, gesturing toward Thoma with the hand he was using to hold a teacup.

Thoma, his complexion slightly drained of color, shrugged. “If *I’m* out of the picture, that’s that much more cleanup work that gets dumped on you, no?”

“You should prepare yourself to be hit by several people once this is over.”

“You mean like how you kicked me into the canal?”

“You remember that?” Xixu stared at Thoma blankly. The man hadn’t brought the topic up even once until now, so Xixu had assumed he had no memory of it.

Thoma smiled ruefully. “I do. Sari remembered when she was under control too, didn’t she? I’m not sure if that’ll apply to everyone, though. Still, it helped me wake up a bit. Being under that control was pretty rough. We’ll need to think of countermeasures for next time.”

“Next time?!”

“It’s better if we assume there will be one, right? Nerei might be out of commission, but the main culprit is still fine. All he needs to do is make another puppet, and then he can begin his meddling once again. In fact, after coming all this way, it’d be stranger if he *did* give up so easily.”

As Thoma sipped his tea, Xixu and Tensé shared horrified looks. They had gone through enough trouble this time; if their opponent learned from his mistakes and came back, it was difficult to say whether they’d be able to drive him off again. Xixu shook his head listlessly. He felt as though a dark shadow had suddenly been cast over the future.

Thoma gave him a look of amazement. “What’s all the head shaking about?”

“It’s nothing...” Xixu replied dejectedly. “I just experienced what absurdity feels like.”

“Don’t be so quick to feel down. Our side’s still got room for growth too. Sari’s still a kid and all.”

Did that mean that when she became an adult, she would become an even match for that wolf?

Xixu stood up, fearful of the direction the conversation was headed in. He had

no desire for Thoma to talk his ear off about being a sacred offering again. But, as he silently made to leave the room, Thoma raised his hand casually.

“Go check in on Sari, won’t you? If she’s awake, get her to drink some water.”

After a pause, Xixu replied, “Fine.”

“And sorry for the trouble I caused. You all saved me. Truly.”

“Come again?”

Xixu turned, startled, but Thoma already had his back to him and was sipping tea. He couldn’t see the man’s expression, only Tensé’s wry smile.

Perhaps even the usually easygoing Thoma had found this incident hard to bear. Everybody else that had fallen under the god’s control was laid up in bed, leaving only him to run around in an attempt to handle the aftermath—an unreasonable burden on its own. And although the maiden’s dance had been successful, her power did not reach beyond the town. Someone would have to do something about the businesses that had left Irede and moved elsewhere.

Slightly astounded with his twisted friend, Xixu left the flower room. He stopped briefly by the kitchen to draw a pitcher of water, then headed for the proprietress’s room.

Sari, who had been sleeping in the bedroom within, appeared to have been woken up by the sound of him opening the sliding screen. Her eyelids flickered open as she looked up at Xixu. He held the water pitcher up, showing it to her, then sat cross legged by her pillow.

“Can you drink?” Xixu asked. “If you can, you should.”

“Mm-hm...”

Sari was dressed in a *yukata*, and she held the chest of it closed as she sat up. Xixu had turned his back to her, as was only polite, and as she fixed her disheveled attire, he poured the water into a teacup. As the water rippled, the blue butterfly painted onto the bottom of the white porcelain appeared to flutter.

Sari caught her breath, then reached a pale hand out toward him. “Thank you,” she said. “May I?”

“Here.”

She took the teacup and drained it of water, seemingly satisfied. She likely still had a fever; sweat shone on her brow and her complexion was pallid.

Xixu frowned, concerned. “Are you all right? You should probably have kept sleeping.”

“Well, it’s not a cold,” Sari replied. “But I think I overreached and did a little too much, too soon.”

According to Sari, her human face and divine nature were gradually getting closer, but as a god, she was still immature. During this incident, she had pushed herself hard to make up for that gap in order to seize a narrow victory.

“I’m sorry I put you in danger,” Sari apologized. “Everyone else too. Things got really close.”

“We’re here to help you,” Xixu replied. “Don’t let it bother you.”

Xixu considered himself to be first on Sari’s list of helpers. He had come to Irede to assist her, so he could not allow himself to become a source of her sadness. In that regard, it was he who had overreached and failed to achieve his goal this time. He frowned slightly, remembering how narrowly he had avoided losing his life.

“I need to become stronger...” he muttered to himself.

“You’re only human Xixu,” Sari said. “Don’t be too reckless. I’ll become somebody able to protect everyone one day, so...”

Sari’s blue eyes abruptly unfocused, as though she were looking into the distance. Xixu was startled to see the faint, cold light within them. She was clear and dazzling, detached from everything—a faraway being. A sacred existence who, in exchange for three offerings, had been tied to the world of man.

As these impressions flashed across Xixu’s mind, he reflexively held his breath. But then Sari put the teacup aside, and he saw that she was already back to her usual self.

Perhaps because rising had been difficult on her, she placed both hands down to prop her slender frame up. Xixu, taking notice of this, moved the teacup

away and urged her to lie back down.

“If you can sleep more, you should,” he said. “Tell me if there’s anything you want, and I’ll bring it.”

“Anything I want?” Sari repeated.

“Whatever comes to mind.”

Xixu knew that, even if it was something difficult for him to obtain, Thoma would prepare it for him if he asked.

Sari looked up at him. “Hand,” she murmured.

“Hmm?”

“Hold my hand. Just until you have to go.”

As Sari lay back down, she held her hand out to Xixu. He stared at her for a moment, wide-eyed, but held back his sigh when he noticed the forlorn look in her blue eyes. Gently, he took her hand. The moment he touched her slender fingers, he frowned—they were as cold as ice.

“Saridi.”

“I get lonely when I’m cold. Just until I fall asleep...is fine...”

Sari exhaled lightly. She was already on the verge of drifting back into slumber. Perhaps it was because her hair was so disheveled, but with her eyes closed, she looked terribly mature. Forgetting himself, Xixu stared at her. Her shoulders, which rose and fell with the cadence of her breath, seemed so slight that it made him want to touch them to confirm they were really there.

Yet, when Xixu caught himself thinking this, his face twisted into a grimace. He felt like kicking himself; how could he think that of a girl who was younger than him?

In truth, he knew he had to ask Sari about the inhuman girl who had suddenly appeared before him. But for some reason or other, he had simply missed the chance. Sari was weak currently, so perhaps it was best that he wait until she recovered. For now, they should simply enjoy the fact that they had been lucky enough to narrowly hold onto their everyday lives. Chances were that they would once again have to foray into hardship soon enough.

Xixu adjusted his hold on Sari’s hand. He didn’t know what the future would bring. Nor did he know what choices he would make when it came.

Even still, he wrapped her faraway hand in his, hoping that, even if only by a little, it would warm her icy skin, and ease the god’s loneliness.

Fourth Tale

1. Night

It was commonly said that one could never know where life would take them. That the saying was so oft heard was a testament to the many individuals who found themselves living lives that their past selves had never imagined.

Xixu, who had been born and raised in the royal capital, was no exception. Neither upon enrolling into the military academy, nor graduating and entering the service of the king, had he ever expected to become a shadeslayer in the world's oldest pleasure town.

Irede, the town of myth. The town of fine drink, masterful performing arts, and holy courtesans. In the interests of being precise, however, Xixu was not currently in Irede, where the vestiges of bygone eras lingered, but instead inside a certain parlor within a certain estate in the royal capital.

Xixu had entered the parlor at the prearranged time, and was now drinking the tea that had been set out within. Vas Werrilocia sat diagonally across from him, looking somewhat impressed.

"I must admit," the young noble said, "I honestly hadn't expected you to possess the tact necessary to ask my advice beforehand."

"Those around me have been rather vocal about my tact, so..." Xixu trailed off.

The two men were within the Werrilocia estate, while the head of the household, Sari, remained in Irede. Xixu had in fact kept this visit a secret from her, as his goal in coming was related to her birthday the next day.

There came a knock at the parlor door, which then opened, allowing a male merchant to enter. "My deepest apologies for the wait," he said, bowing deeply all the while.

The merchant had, in fact, arrived precisely on time.

Xixu stood from his seat. "It's fine," he said. "Sorry for the sudden request. I

know it was unreasonable."

"Not at all. It is the least I could do; I am much obliged to the patronage of the good Werrilocias." The merchant bowed to Vas, who remained seated. "Please, call upon me whenever you wish."

The merchant then spread a cloth over the table before the two men, and began arranging the wares he had brought with him upon it. Each and every article was a unique gemstone or work of jewelry without peer.

Tomorrow evening at Pale Moon, a modest banquet was going to be held to celebrate Sari's birthday. Xixu, however, had spent the last several days occupied with his duties in the royal capital, and attending was going to prove difficult. Accordingly, he had thought that he should at least bring Sari a gift—yet he had been unable to decide upon one.

In the end, Xixu had turned to Vas, and stated, "I'd like to find a good accessory to give Sari. Would you be able to introduce me to a vendor?"

Normally, Xixu would have asked Sari's brother Thoma about such matters, but the man was currently in Irede as well. And, since Xixu had also been meaning to check in on the state of Vas's injuries—received during the trouble with the golden wolf—he'd found himself sending a letter to the Werrilocias.

"Are you healing up well?" Xixu asked.

"I'm entirely back to normal," Vas answered, "though there was numbness in my limbs for three months or so. If not for the power Everie lent to me, I would be a dead man. Currently, the worst I have to deal with is the occasional headache."

Despite Vas's composure, Xixu felt nothing but guilt—the young Werrilocia had been injured protecting him. Vas perhaps sensed this sentiment, for he made an exasperated expression.

"Is that *still* on your mind? I've had quite enough of your apologies already. Back then, I simply made the obvious choice; the probability of my survival was higher. If our positions had been reversed, you would have done the same."

"Yes, but..."

Xixu knew that Vas had more reason than that to be concerned for him. The young Werrilocia had said many times: “If anything happens to you, Everie will be beside herself.” And yet, judging by Sari’s continuously anxious and fretful state while Vas had been bedridden, the statement just as true for him as it was for Xixu.

The merchant finished arranging his merchandise, having been hard at work setting it up while the two young men talked. “My first recommendation would be this ring...” he began.

Starting with a ring fitted with a deep green gemstone, the merchant politely but thoroughly described each article he had laid out. Xixu, whose knowledge of jewelry was nonexistent, listened carefully, asking rudimentary questions whenever one occurred to him.

Vas stared at Xixu with a mixture of astonishment and respect in his eyes. “One never grows bored watching you,” he remarked. “What are *you* going to do, now that you know the proper storage method?”

“I’m simply checking,” Xixu replied. “I thought it would be an inconvenience if I gave her something difficult to maintain.”

The jeweler looked astounded by his words, but Xixu was of the opinion that giving Sari a gift that only proved to be a nuisance would be putting the cart before the horse. Ideally, he would find something of good quality, that was easy to maintain, which lasted a long time, and that could still be exchanged for a tidy sum when she didn’t need it anymore.

When Xixu said as much, Vas nodded gravely. “With a mentality like that, I am deeply impressed that you still managed to come to me for advice. It seems more likely to me that you would have selected a gift yourself, and after all your careful consideration, it would have still been the incorrect sort anyway.”

Xixu hesitated. “I’ve...done that several times before, yes.”

Each time he had previously given Sari gifts, his liege, his fellow officers, and Thoma had practically lambasted him for it. “Why in the world did you pick that?” had been a frequent refrain, along with, “You didn’t do anything wrong, I suppose, but also you couldn’t have gotten it more wrong!” and “You have zero understanding of how a woman’s heart works.”

Sari herself had always happily accepted his gifts, but that was more likely a product of her forbearance as a person rather than Xixu's taste.

He wanted to at least give her a decent gift on her birthday.

"Seventeen already..." Xixu mused. "Time passes so quickly."

"Why are you speaking like you're her relative?" Vas asked. "I'm sure you're aware that seventeen is the marriageable age for a daughter of nobility. Please do something about that."

"I don't think there's a need to force her into that mold."

"I'm talking to *you*."

As their conversation gradually digressed, the jeweler's expression became more and more helpless. Xixu certainly hadn't called him here to window shop, so he felt guilty for making the man anxious. He turned back to the arrangement of jewelry and gems—and then noticed a thin, unopened case in the man's bag.

"What's that case?" Xixu asked.

"Ah, this is something that just came in recently..." The man opened the cloth covered thin case as he spoke. Set within were two large, unprocessed pearls. Their brilliant white shine contained a shade of lustrous silver.

"It's quite rare for pearls to grow so large naturally," Vas said admiringly.

"I'll take them," Xixu said.

"Huh?" The jeweler's business smile froze.

"Please don't be so hasty," Vas said, sounding exasperated. "Caring for raw pearls is rather troublesome, you know."

"Well..." Xixu paused. "I *do* feel sorry about that. But I think these are the right gift."

One glance had been enough to tell him that the pearls matched Sari far more than any other gem. Xixu was convinced that they would enhance, rather than take away from, the pure white of her appearance. He picked up the case and studied the two pearls closely.

“I’ll take both. Unprocessed is fine.”

“A-As you wish.”

The jeweler named a price that was rather high, but Xixu arranged payment without any particular concern. Once the man had left after bowing and scraping in gratitude, Vas—who had watched the entire ordeal from beginning to end—spoke, once again sounding impressed.

“I had expected you to be more lost and hesitant over what to choose. Your decisiveness surprises me.”

“Did I make the wrong choice?” Xixu asked.

“No, I approve. Rather than a refined piece that cannot be changed, now Everie can do whatever she wishes with those. Furthermore, your concern regarding their care is needless; you can rest assured that she will take proper care of her jewelry, no matter how demanding any particular piece may be. For she is the Werrilocia princess.”

“Then...pardon my mistake.” Xixu tucked the case into his breast pocket. Now that he thought about it, it was indeed ridiculous to consider his unrefined self in the same terms as the adept Sari. “Thank you for agreeing to my sudden request. I’d like to express my gratitude more formally, but first, I must deliver these to Irede.”

“Deliver?” Vas repeated. “You’re going in person?”

“Of course. It is the least courtesy I can show, since I cannot attend.”

It was a not insignificant distance to Irede, but if Xixu forgoed sleep, then he could make it there before the celebratory banquet to deliver his gift and back to the capital without having to step away from his duties. His liege had already given him permission to that effect.

But although Xixu considered this to be a matter of course, Vas gave him a look of amazement, narrowing his left eye at him. “If it were anyone other than Everie,” he said, “they would never notice that care of yours, given how you don’t show it on the surface. Allow me to predict your future: if you ever marry a woman who was charmed only by your exterior, the relationship will collapse within a year.”

“Why are you suddenly prophesying my future, exactly...?”

“So that one day, you’ll hopefully stop neglecting our princess.”

“I’m not doing anything of the sort.”

“I suppose you really aren’t, from your point of view.” Vas gave a casual wave of his hand. “In any case, you must be busy. I need not your gratitude; spend that spare energy on Everie.”

Xixu, knowing that the young man was showing his consideration in his own way, thanked him and left the Werrilocia estate.

The reason that Xixu, a shadeslayer of Irede, had been able to be away from the town for several days was simple: they were within the period when shades did not manifest. From half moon to full, Sari’s power kept them completely in check.

As such, Xixu had worked as an officer for the first time in a decent while. Yet, unlike when he had last fulfilled the role, recently, the state of international affairs had begun to show signs of slight change.

For approximately the last sixty years, the continent—including Torlonia, the country Xixu served—had enjoyed a period of peace. After a past riddled with wars and skirmishes, the continent’s nations had struck a political and commercial balance.

However, that balance was, little by little, becoming unstable.

Intelligence reported that multiple countries were reinforcing the state of their militaries and increasing the frequency of their exercises. Some were making shows of force at national borders. In addition, an assassination cell of unknown origins had infiltrated the royal capital—this was the problem that Xixu had been charged with handling. He knew that, without the assistance of the foresight and farsight of the king’s maiden, he would have been constantly one step behind his quarry.

Said maiden had told Xixu that he had the time to make the trip to Irede, so he intended to presume upon her consideration. Though to be precise, since his absolute first priority was Sari—by the king’s command, even—it was possibly

more accurate to say that he owed his temporary leave to her.

As for Xixu himself, he wished to remain in Irede as much as possible; it was not certain when the golden wolf would once again appear. However, Sari had been quite decisive regarding the matter. *“I’ll make sure that next time, I’ll be his equal, or even his greater. So all of you should act freely.”* Nevertheless, while Xixu had no intention of taking advantage of her efforts, Irede was a famous pleasure town—a fact that made it an occasional victim to the sparks flying from the fires of international strife.

The other day, a spy had entered Irede on the trail of an influential figure of another country, who had been visiting the town. When the militia had discovered the spy occupying a vacant house, it had been quite the disturbance. Xixu was of the opinion that it was his role to work outside of Irede as its external vanguard, to prevent further such incidents from happening.

After leaving the royal capital in the night and spending the entirety of the day traveling the highway atop his horse, Xixu reached Irede as fast as generally was possible. He arrived in the evening, just at the time when businesses were beginning to light their lanterns, and headed straight for Pale Moon. As he made his way through the twilit main streets, the town’s residents occasionally called out to him.

“Are you going to celebrate Miss Pale Moon’s birthday, Mister Shadeslayer?”

“The maiden’s already seventeen, huh? Take good care of her, you hear?”

“I bet the princess’s formal kimono is a sight to see!”

Their words were filled with their affection for Sari. Though they knew not her true nature, they cherished her as the town’s very own princess, and they saw Xixu as somebody who was close to her.

The celebratory banquet being held at Pale Moon was modest, and only those close to Sari had been invited, but as far as the town’s residents were concerned, it was a noteworthy occasion. Xixu suspected the day itself was a happy one for them. The evening activity seemed busier and more full of life than usual.

After slipping through the hustle and bustle, making polite greetings as he

went, Xixu arrived at Pale Moon's manor.

The courtesan house exuded a tranquility that exceeded the usual, and an innumerable array of flowers had been arranged along the path from the gate to the entryway. Whether they were large petaled varieties in pots or colorful bouquets, each one bore the name of the business or individual who had been the sender. The gratitude they represented seemed directed at the pleasure town of Irede itself—but the side of it not meant for visitors.

There was a maidservant who Xixu was acquainted with standing by the hanging lantern, and her eyes flew open in shock upon seeing him.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I know I'm early, but may I see Saridi?"

"If you wish to see the proprietress, she is getting ready in her room."

The maidservant slid open the entryway door, which Xixu took as permission to enter. Though he knew where the secondary building that Sari lived in was, this was the first time he would be visiting it alone. He thanked the maidservant, removed his shoes, then made his way to the connecting passage between Pale Moon and its secondary building. The small building had two floors, and it was located behind the manor proper, deeper into the rear garden. After Xixu climbed the glossy wooden boarding of its staircase, he reached his destination and knocked on the door.

A girl's reply came from within. "Yes? Who is it?"

"It's me."

"Huh? Xixu?" The surprise in her Sari's voice was evident, but she was quick to recover. "Please, come in."

Xixu was caught off guard; he had expected her to come out to greet him. Still, it was he who was the visitor. He opened the unlocked door—and immediately understood why Sari hadn't come out herself. She was sitting in front of her dresser, wearing not her usual kimono, but a blue butterfly-pattern *furisode*—a style of formal kimono with long, hanging sleeves.

Lustrous silver hair, held in place by an ornate black boxwood hairpin.

Blue eyes, clear and deep, and smooth skin to which white porcelain paled in

comparison.

Beauty without a single flaw.

Sari's untouchable dignity, perhaps because of her beautifully elaborate attire—perfectly suited for the celebratory occasion—and makeup, seemed to have reached full bloom.

Of course, from Xixu's point of view, ever since their very first meeting, that she possessed that dignity had never been in question. As he stood there, captivated by her despite himself, Sari gave him a puzzled look.

"Xixu? What's wrong?"

"No, it's...nothing. Sorry."

Xixu was the one imposing upon her with his visit; it would be rude of him to simply stand there and stare at her. After apologizing, he entered the room and produced the small case containing the pearls.

"Thank you for your invitation, but I won't be able to attend the celebration. There's trouble in the capital that I need to see to."

"Oh, really? That's a shame."

"Here, a gift."

Sari craned her head over to examine the case Xixu had left on her shelf. He'd expected her to open it later as she was currently busy with preparing for the celebration, but hardly a moment passed before she reached her hand out toward it.

"May I open it?"

"Of course."

Xixu handed Sari the case, and she opened it with great care. Her clear blue eyes widened, reflecting the unprocessed pearls they were met with. Perhaps out of surprise, she said not a word—a fact that made Xixu feel uncomfortable. He thought that, even though Vas had approved of the gift, perhaps he should have chosen something safer.

"If you'd like," Xixu said, "I can have them set into something you can use

before giving them back to you. Like a kimono sash clip, or a hairpin."

"No, these are fine. Thank you, Xixu."

Inwardly, Xixu breathed a sigh of relief; Sari seemed happy. She had never shown disapproval of any of his gifts before, of course, but on a day such as this, he couldn't help but feel nervous.

Despite that, however, it appeared as though his choice had been a good one. Xixu gave Sari his well wishes and made to leave, but she called out for him to stop, and he turned back.

Sari held the lip brush in her hand out toward him. "While you're here, could you apply my rouge?"

"Me?" Xixu took the brush out of sheer reflex, whereupon he saw that rouge had already been applied to its tip.

Since Sari had been seated in front of her dresser, she must have been putting the final touches on her makeup. Even still, leaving that up to him was far too great of a responsibility for him to bear.

"You should do it yourself," Xixu said. "I might mis-apply it."

"It's fine." Sari smiled, closed her eyes, and raised her chin.

Xixu wondered if her confidence meant that she could easily fix whatever mistake he made. He pictured himself accidentally getting rouge onto her furisode and felt overwhelmed. Yet, he couldn't make her wait. Steeling himself, he removed the glove from his left hand and held it out, supporting her delicate jaw.

Carefully, deliberately, as though what he touched was of more importance than anything, he traced the brush's tip over the rouge that she had already applied to her lips.

The length of her silver eyelashes and softness of her closed eyelids threatened to distract Xixu from his task. He pressed his mouth together tightly.

Sari's lips, so reminiscent of flower petals, gradually began to take on yet more color. Xixu almost felt as though he were touching upon a secret no person could touch, and forced himself to suppress the restlessness welling up

from within him. He almost breathed a small sigh, but he swallowed it down lest it fall upon the girl beneath him.



“There, done...” Xixu said. “I think.”

“Thank you.”

Xixu thought he had not applied too much or too little, but just enough, in a uniform manner. He may have made it a little too glossy, but it could have only seemed that way due to the natural luster Sari’s lips possessed. When he returned the lip brush, she giggled and thanked him. She didn’t check her appearance in the mirror, perhaps because she had been able to tell that he hadn’t made a mistake by feel.

Sari smiled sweetly. “I’m sorry you had to push yourself so hard. But I’m glad you came.”

Xixu held back his surprise. Those were not words one would use for applying rouge; Sari had to be talking about the forced pace he’d set for himself to return to Irede. Though he hadn’t mentioned it at all, she must have realized that he’d come all this way on horseback just for this. Xixu wasn’t sure whether it had been her intuition as a proprietress that had told her or something else, but what he did know what she was far more attuned to the emotions of others than he.

Blue eyes, carrying a hint of shine, blinked. “Be careful on your way back. Oh, and don’t spend too much time with any women over there. It could be dangerous.”

The warning was dressed up as a joke, but—possibly due to the faint light within Sari’s eyes—sounded like a death sentence.

Xixu didn’t know if it was because she had been making progress in aligning herself with her true nature, but as of late, the moments where a fragment of her divine self peeked through despite her seeming her usual self otherwise had been happening with increasing frequency. Her true nature—Saridi—was unifying, moving from the proud young girl he’d first thought of her as toward the composure and unfathomability of a courtesan. No doubt it was a result of her own image of who she should be.

That being said, Xixu had no plans to involve himself with women, death sentence or not. His liege had not even put the slightest of pressure on him to enter a marriage of convenience either; not since the soirée incident.

“The trouble in the capital shouldn’t take much longer to deal with,” Xixu said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Mm-hmm. Don’t do anything dangerous, okay?”

Red-painted lips smiled at him.

Xixu had the vague feeling that staying any longer in Sari’s room would be bad. He bowed to her, said the bare minimum smattering of words that would still protect his courtesy, and quickly took his leave.

He felt as though his left hand, still ungloved, still retained the sensation of when he’d touched her; a faint warmth that still lingered there. When Xixu noticed it, he frowned at his own lack of propriety.

Four days later, after Xixu had returned from the capital, Thoma had been both astounded and disgusted. *“What do you mean nothing’s happened between you two?!”*

Xixu felt as though the gazes that Irede’s residents directed at him contained the same question...but he dearly hoped that was just his imagination.

2. Scar

The striking scent of rice wine wafted from the shattered fragments of white porcelain, scattered across the tatami mat floor.

Crimson thread fell upon the growing stain. Fallen bells, crushed pitifully out of shape, lay throughout the room.

There was no music.

From the beginning, sound born of man had not existed in this room. There had only been the dance. But now, there was no sound at all.

There was a woman with no warmth. Her question fell down upon the man below, cowering with his head in his hands.

“You chose me. Yet now, you would renege upon that choice?”

Her voice sounded like the ringing of a bell, but like the small, scattered dancing bells around her, the quality of its sound was warped and injured.

Moonlight spilled in through the paper sliding door. The man did not raise his head. A long, hoarse exhalation of breath fell upon it.

“You...”

Any further words were drowned within her sigh.

There was no sound.

The cooling air cracked. There was frailty in it, but all the same, it continued to deny eternity.

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That her sleep was becoming more shallow was proof that the new moon was approaching. Shortly after daybreak, Sari awoke as though surfacing from a deep pool. Her gaze absentmindedly drifted across the ceiling. Her bodily senses still felt quite vague; perhaps because she had yet to fully slip out of her dream. She brought her weightless right hand to her mouth, slightly bent one of her fingers, and bit into it. It was the solid sensation of her teeth, more than the

pain, that brought her consciousness back to reality.

“Cold...” Sari murmured to herself. But she didn’t really know why she’d spoken.

It took Sari a considerable amount of time to sit up. It had not been that long since the proprietress of the courtesan house had gone to bed, but she found herself awake regardless. For no particular reason, she pressed down her disheveled silver hair with both hands and vacantly maintained the posture. At a glance, it would’ve looked like she was cradling her head in her hands.

Sari wasn’t sure how long she spent in that position, unmoving. But just as she was about to get to her feet and perhaps take a hot bath, there was a knock at the door, quiet enough that she wouldn’t have noticed if she had been asleep.

“Yes?” Sari called out blearily. “Good morning.”

“Miss Proprietress, you’re awake.”

The maidservant sounded surprised. She must have thought that at this hour, when almost all of the courtesans were asleep, Sari would not be awake either. It was indeed a rare exception, and Sari was still half asleep. She nodded, despite the fact that nobody could see.

“I am. What is it?”

“A shadeslayer has come to request your aid. He said it was fine if you were still sleeping though, so...”

“I’ll go,” Sari said immediately, already rising to her feet. However, her haste caused her to lose her balance, and she narrowly avoided a faceful of bed by propping herself up with her arms. Although the chill she was feeling had cleared her thoughts, it appeared as though it hadn’t done a thing for her physical post sleep lethargy. As Sari flung off her rumpled and open yukata, she called out to the maidservant outside.

“Give me a minute, I’ll be ready soon.”

“Of course, Miss Proprietress.”

Sari stumbled her way into the steam-filled bathroom in order to wash her face. A shiver ran through her entire body when her pale, bare feet touched the

cold stone of the floor. She ignored the cold though, as well as the urge to curl up into herself, and sat upon the wooden rim of the bathtub, dipping her legs into the hot water. With both hands, she scooped some up to soak her face, and lightly patted herself on the cheeks.

“Hot!”

The warmth of reality swept away the cold lingering in her memories. No trace of her absentminded languidness remained.

Sari knew this was for the sake of the young man who had come calling for her.

“Xixu.”

As Sari glided down the corridor, she saw a young man waiting in the entryway, looking uncomfortable. He had one hand on his military sword, and when she reached him, he proffered his other toward her. The only makeup Sari had chosen to apply was a touch of lip rouge.

“Sorry for coming while you were asleep,” Xixu said. “There’s been a report.”

“It’s fine,” Sari replied. “I had just woken up on my own anyway. Besides, I knew it was you, Xixu.”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?”

Judging from Xixu’s pained expression, he must have only taken her words as an ill-natured joke. However, the young man who had come from outside of Irede was the only shadeslayer who would have called upon Sari during her usual sleeping hours. The request that she was to be left undisturbed if she was still sleeping sounded exactly like him, too, so Sari had known that it was Xixu without even having to ask. She had gained this conviction, if nothing else, in the last year she’d spent with him.

Sari took Xixu’s hand and stepped down onto the hard-packed clay. “Right then, shall we?”

Xixu hummed his agreement.

There was no need for further words. The maiden set off after the young

man, walking half a step behind him.

Sari looked up at Xixu's profile. She found herself realizing that it was a little closer than when they had first met.

Xixu could not read her thoughts, of course, but as they exited Pale Moon's gate, he said quietly, "You've grown taller."

"Mm-hmm. But I think this might be as tall as I get."

At best, Sari only had a year or so left to grow. In that regard, she was no different from an ordinary human. She glanced down at the bracelet around her right wrist.

When she had been a child, she had always wondered when she'd become an adult. Among courtesans, opinions differed on the matter. Some said fifteen, and some said thirteen. Others thought that it was whenever a girl began formally arranging her hair and applying rouge, and it was also said that it was when one first parted with their innocence and began receiving guests.

However, Sari had decided that her own turning point would be when she turned seventeen.

During the first half year after taking over from her late grandmother, she had been overwhelmed by the incessant stream of tasks before her, and had made numerous blunder after blunder. Fortunately, due to the assistance of those around her, each one had been resolved without significant incident. However, Sari had known that if she wished to be the maiden of Pale Moon, she could not remain that way.

That was why she had decided that seventeen would be when she stopped being a child, and she had stopped waiting for the fantasy that somebody would come along to make her an adult for her.

Beneath the dim glow of the morning sky, the pair made their way toward Irede's central district. The surrounding silence invited drowsiness, so Sari pressed her cold fingers to her eyes. Xixu took notice of the gesture and frowned.

"If you're not feeling up to this..." he began.

“I’m fine,” Sari said. “More importantly, what does the shade look like this time?”

“According to the preliminary report, it was an infant with red eyes crawling along the street.”

A moment passed. “That’s terrifying.”

By now, Sari was not particularly afraid of shades themselves. But at the end of the day, some things just looked plain scary. It was akin to how a loud voice from behind would startle a person, even if they knew it was coming.

And given how even Sari was currently feeling about the matter, it was all too easy to imagine how horrified the initial witness had been.

Half a step in front, Xixu pointed toward a certain street, empty of people due to the early morning hour. “Its appearance considered,” he said, “I thought it might be best to deal with it before customers and tourists start coming out.”

“G-Good idea.”

“It would’ve been best if I’d been able to handle it alone, but when it caught sight of me from afar, it started crawling up a wall—”

Sari very carefully made no sound.

“—and quite fast, at that, so I lost sight of it.”

“That’s *terrifying*! We have to do something about it! At once!”

The only non-residents of Irede who knew that its shades possessed physical bodies were the regulars who had long since grown accustomed to the character of the town. If an unsuspecting tourist happened to catch sight of an infant crawling up a wall, there would be an uproar.

Sari broke into a brisk trot, pulling the young man behind her along by his sleeve. “Let’s hurry! Where was it?!”

“Behind the locksmith’s.”

The locksmith’s shop was on a main street. Sari immediately began to run.

The new moon was close. However, as she was now, Sari did not consider it to be a period of weakness. She removed her bracelet, tucking it into her kimono

sash, and retrieved a small cloth bag from within her sleeve.

As Sari periodically dropped the bag's contents onto the street as she ran, Xixu asked, "What are those?"

"Konpeito," she said. "I'm experimenting with using them as a medium for my techniques."

Ring.

Sounds not unlike the ringing of bells echoed from the small pellets of bumpy candy. Since only Sari could hear them, however, perhaps "sound" was an inaccurate description. Regardless, the ringing sounds stood out against the backdrop of Sari's thoughts like fireflies lighting a night path, becoming ripples that bounced off of one another and echoed further away.

Sari had been making gradual progress learning techniques from the notes of past maidens. If the ripples made contact with a shade, she, as the practitioner, would know. She popped one of the konpeito into her mouth and crunched down on it.

Xixu looked at her, incomprehension in his eyes. "Is eating them part of the search?"

"No, I just wanted to eat one. I picked konpeito so I could do both."

Sari stopped, turned, and pushed a piece into the mouth of the young man right behind her. Xixu's eyes widened in surprise. He was always willing to play along with her though, and this time proved no exception—he bit down. As he swallowed the sweet candy, the usual troubled look on his face grew more and more uncomfortable.

"You...shouldn't do things like that," Xixu said.

"It's *you*, Xixu," Sari retorted. "It's fine."

"It is not."

The young man, whose time in Irede had almost reached a full year, had learned much about the town. Yet he still remained stubborn and unwilling to budge on certain matters. Upon hearing his obstinate warning, Sari's blue eyes narrowed mischievously and her mouth drew into a faint smile.

“Xixu, it’s not good to accept food from strangers, you know.”

“You’re not a stranger.”

“You’re right.”

Sari left it unsaid that his warning was exactly the same as hers.

Most people of Irede would have realized, but she didn’t mind if Xixu hadn’t. All the small things that a person piled up, knowingly or not, would one day catch up to them. For better or worse, when the time came, one would have to face their past.

Sari dropped a piece of white konpeito onto the street, and popped another into her mouth. The god kissed her thumb, where the taste of sugar still lingered, and smiled, sweet and unseen.

“Come to think of it,” Sari said, “I heard that Vas is most of the way back to moving around like normal.”

“He is,” Xixu confirmed. “I saw him the other day. It was...a bit of a relief.”

“Huh? Why did you meet with him? He didn’t want to scold you or anything, did he?”

“Not particularly. He was quite welcoming.”

“Wha...?

It felt quite strange to Sari that Xixu and Vas were socializing together outside of her knowledge, but then again, Xixu’s personality endeared him easily to others. Because of his innate goodness and how comfortable it was to be in his company, he was well-regarded throughout Irede as “that one funny shadeslayer.”

“Is everything okay in the capital?” Sari asked.

“Matters appear to have calmed down for now, yes,” Xixu replied.

Despite his words, both of them knew that disquiet still lingered, here and there.

The older gentleman who had spread the white flowers through the royal capital had lured a number of businesses from Irede to the neighboring country

—a country with which Torlonia's relations were only worsening.

Below her breath, Sari murmured the prophecy she'd heard from the king. "'In several years, a great upheaval will occur in a number of countries, including our own.'"

Was that upheaval upon them now, so soon?

Sari's beautiful features drew into a frown as she pondered—but then a silhouette suddenly appeared in front of her, causing her to stop in place. It had fallen from above, and as her senses caught up to the situation, it landed at her feet with a wet, meaty sound. After a heartbeat, Sari looked at it.

She shrieked.

It was a bloodstained infant child with its head split open. Its skin was puffy and ashen, its eyes were red, and it had no hair. Its small, soft hands reached out for her feet.

Sari's reflexive scream echoed throughout the early morning town. The realization of her own mistake shook her free from her shock.

Xixu pushed her aside. The shadeslayer's blade came down upon the infant crawling on the ground.

But it missed its mark, and cut nothing but air.

The infant had sprung aside using its four pudgy limbs, and was now clinging to the nearby wooden wall of a shop. As Sari watched its bloodied hands leave crimson prints soaking into the old wood, she unconsciously found herself picturing the terribly displeased expression on the proprietor's face.

In the meantime, Xixu had drawn closer to the wall. Sari raised a hand and aimed a finger at the infant, which had begun climbing upward.

"Bind."

An invisible thread pierced through the infant's back.

The shade convulsed and fell. Xixu was already below it, standing ready with his military sword. But as he aimed at his falling target, a woman screamed, shrill and piercing.

Sari turned, surprised, and saw a young courtesan, her hair in disarray and the blood drained from her face. Had she come to see the fuss after hearing Sari's shriek from earlier? When Sari noticed the courtesan gaze was fixated upon the shade in the form of an infant, she stepped in front of her to protect her.

"It's fine, Xixu," Sari said, cutting herself off when she realized that the shadeslayer had already gleaned her intent. *Don't mind her, just kill the shade.*

The infant had narrowly managed to secure a grasp on the wall to halt its fall. Xixu leapt off the ground. His blade was audible as it cut through the air.

The small body dispersed after being bisected through the torso. Sari watched it vanish—and then a sharp pain struck her cheek.

"Ngh!"

Flinching in surprise, Sari reflexively pushed away whatever it was that had struck her from behind. Her hands came into contact with the courtesan from earlier. The woman's complexion was ghastly pallid, and her pretty features were contorted in hysteria.

"Monster!" the woman shrieked. "How could you?! You killed a child!"

Sari was taken aback. "A...child?"

She held her tongue, refraining from saying that it had been a shade. It was obvious from the look in the woman's eyes that the words would fall upon deaf ears. Her bloodshot eyes were blotted with tears as she glared at them, but her gaze was unfocused and shaky.

Sari reached her hands out, intent on first calming the woman down, but Xixu held her back by the shoulder. "See to yourself first, Saridi," he said."

"To myself?" Sari questioned.

"You're bleeding."

Sari touched her left cheek and found that Xixu was right: she *was* bleeding, and not insignificantly too. The courtesan's nails must have caught against her skin. Sari let out a groan in spite of herself; sure, she wasn't an ordinary courtesan, but as the proprietress, she still had to greet customers directly.

"M-My face! But I need that for our business!"

“You monster! How could you kill a child?!”

The courtesan leapt for Sari, but Xixu grabbed her by the wrists and raised her arms above her head, leaving her unable to do anything but stamp her feet against the ground. Her eyes, bright and glaring at Sari, were all that was animated about her gaunt expression.

“You’re Pale Moon’s...” the courtesan trailed off. “It must be nice, being able to have a child!”

The loathing burning in the woman’s eyes carried with it a profound sense of grief. Sari simply watched, unable to breathe, as tears quickly began to spill forth. Xixu, frowning, brought the woman’s arms together, still holding her in place.

Then, a newcomer’s voice, male, spoke up. “I’ll take her from here. She had to give up on her unborn child recently, you see. She’s not doing well, mentally or physically.”

“Tagi?”

Upon hearing Sari speak the name, the man who had appeared from around the corner of the courtesan house smiled cynically. A piece of red quartz was bound to the hilt of the katana at his hip. The shadeslayer of Irede had tousled brown hair, delicate features, and wore his dark purple kimono sloppily, but there was a sharpness in his gaze that was unmissable.

He approached the struggling courtesan and pressed his fingers against her slender throat. When she passed out and went limp, he took her from Xixu’s hands. The man, who was not seen very often since he moved between various courtesan houses on a routine basis, looked at the blood trailing from Sari’s cheek and smiled.

“There won’t be any need for her to apologize, I imagine?” Tagi nodded toward the courtesan he was holding. “The fault lies with you, Young Miss, for screaming at the sight of something as trivial as a shade.”

“I know,” Sari said. “Please make sure no blame is placed on her because of it.”

The man snorted, gently adjusted his grip on the woman in his arms, then left,

shooting Xixu a steely glance as he went.

After he turned the corner and Sari heard the sound of a door sliding shut, she abruptly exhaled. She produced a handkerchief and held it to her cheek.

“Let’s go, Xixu.”

“Saridi...”

“He was right, it was my fault. The scratch will heal up quickly with some salve. It’s fine.”

The truth was that it was easy for wounds caused by nails to leave a permanent mark behind, but there was no need to expressly tell that to Xixu. Sari smiled cheerfully and set off back down the street they had come from.

“I’m sorry.”

The words, muttered quietly behind her back, caused Sari to turn around in surprise. “Huh? Why?”

“No, it’s just...” Xixu gave a light shake of his head. It appeared that he had no intention of saying any more.

The pair began making their way back to Pale Moon through the empty morning streets in uncomfortable silence. Sari, holding her throbbing cheek, looked up at the faintly pale sky.

Perhaps whether Irede’s sky seemed vast or confining depended on the circumstances of the one who beheld it.

With such thoughts running through her mind, Sari shifted her gaze to the young man walking half a step in front of her. “There are a lot of houses in Irede that don’t let their courtesans bear children,” she said.

Several moments passed. “I see,” Xixu said.

“As you’d imagine, part of it’s because they wouldn't be able to receive guests for a while, but it’s not just that. Death or injury from childbirth is common, and even if the child is born safely, it would mean that they were a child of Irede. That, despite not choosing to come here themselves, they would have to live their lives here. Some establishments think that goes against Irede’s way. Regular guests take the children in their care, sometimes, but it’s not a given

thing.”

That was why some courtesan houses put an end to pregnancies with certain medicines. As Sari talked of Irede’s darker side, the emotion vanished from her blue eyes. She recalled the man who had been born here as a courtesan’s child, and who had grown to hate Irede.

Sari couldn’t say what was right, and what was wrong. Each courtesan house had its own customs, and it would be an abuse of her power to meddle with them. It was for this reason why Irede had such a long history of unwritten rules, created and upheld by its people. Joy, anger, grief, pleasure—every human emotion could be found within the night, down to the last.

While Sari wore a weak, scarcely perceptible smile, Xixu’s astringent expression was no different than his usual. “Does the father not take the child in?” he asked.

“It’s not always clear who the father is. Besides, most children born to courtesans of Irede...don’t have fathers.” Sari tilted her head, wondering if she could manage to express it clearly.

She didn’t mean that the fathers abandoned their children. It was just that the courtesans were fiercely reluctant to give their children away. They often tried to raise them among their private circles, covering for one another where they could. The way these women could sometimes shun outside help—as though anything “outside” was their enemy—suggested unconditional love for their children, certainly, but also something close to obsession, as well as a heartfelt wish.

Sari smiled bitterly. She could smell the scent of blood. “I might be the only one whose father is well known.”

The proprietress of Pale Moon only received a single guest in her lifetime. This was known to every person of Irede. Yet until now, Sari had never thought of that as a privilege she’d possessed. A bundle of mixed emotions caught in her throat.

“That woman...said that it must be nice to be able to have a child...”

“Don’t let it get to you, Saridi.”

“I’m not. It’s just...” It felt as though a tiny burden had suddenly been placed somewhere that had been blank all this time. Sari looked down at her own slender stomach. “It just doesn’t feel real at all.”

The history of the women—each one the god herself—who inherited blood and being had continued unbroken. But Sari was unable to see beyond herself. She thought she knew what Thoma would say about that uncertainty: *“You only think that way because you haven’t found the man who’ll be your offering yet.”*

The seventeen year old girl looked up at the young shadeslayer. “Hey, Xixu,” she said. “If it were you, would you be the father of my child?”

Silence, for a few moments. “Why are you asking?”

“Just because.” Sari smiled. “For reference.”

Perhaps Xixu had been able to see from her expression that her question had possessed no ulterior motives. He sighed deeply, shook his head, and said nothing.

The fingers holding the handkerchief to her cheek were growing cold. Sari slowed her pace so that she was yet further behind Xixu as they walked through her familiar town.

She couldn’t even imagine giving birth to her own child. But she knew that it was those very ties of flesh and blood and the emotions that they were born from that kept the maidens who were not human here upon this land. One day, that was what Sari’s anchor to Irede would grow into, but right now, it was nothing more than a fine thread. The desire to change Xixu’s fate. The meager warmth befitting of a girl.

“But I’m not a little girl anymore...” Sari murmured.

Thus, as the maiden tasted the scent of her own blood, her thoughts—for the first time in a while—turned toward her mother. She wondered what kind of person she had been.

When Xixu accompanied Sari back to Pale Moon, the maidservant that came out to greet them shrieked. He suspected it was because of the scratch on Sari’s face. As he left alone to go make his report, an unpleasant taste tumbled about

in his mouth.

I shouldn't have requested her aid.

The thought almost formed, but Xixu quickly denied it. The problem wasn't that he'd called for her help. It was that he'd left Sari alone with a courtesan who had clearly been acting strangely, and had let her be hurt. Irede only had one maiden, and shadeslayers were soldiers that borrowed her power. The fact that he hadn't been able to protect her despite the fact that she had assisted him made him a disgrace as a shadeslayer.

The man named Tagi who had taken the courtesan with him had clearly thought the same, if the look he'd sent Xixu's way was anything to judge by. His scorn hadn't been directed at Sari, but at him.

"What am I doing...?" Xixu muttered venomously.

He kicked the gatepost of a vacant building. It was one of the ones that had remained empty after closing down as a result of the Nerei incident. Although there were far fewer vacant establishments these days, they were still scattered about Irede. Each time Xixu saw one, he could not help but wonder when the golden wolf would return. He was fairly certain that a large part of the reason his liege had not formally implemented his return to the capital was so that he could remain here to protect Sari from it.

Nevertheless, Xixu had allowed her face to be injured. His own inexperience did not bode well for the future ahead of him.

Sari herself had smiled as though nothing was wrong, but she had been a little strange when they had parted. The look in her eyes, somber and fixed upon a point somewhere far away, had likely been tinged heavily with her divine nature.

Be that as it may, to Xixu, both her human personality and divine nature were simply "Saridi." He was of the opinion that she could show whichever face she wished. Around others, Sari inevitably had to behave in a manner appropriate to whichever occasion she found herself in, so Xixu wanted for her to at least not have to worry about such things when she was with him.

But was it greedy of him to want her to smile without sorrow? Unconsciously,

Xixu sighed.

“Seventeen...”

In the year since Xixu had first met her, Sari had grown taller, and somewhere along the way without him noticing, the innocence in her features had faded entirely.

Xixu thought she had become an adult. A courtesan grew up far faster than an ordinary girl.

It was as though he was bearing witness to the too-fleeting moments before a flower that bloomed at night blossomed in its full glory. The thought caused a burning feeling in the back of Xixu’s throat.

He didn’t know what the feeling was. So as such, it was difficult to accept.

A sudden, coarse sound made the young man come to a halt. Curious, he looked beneath his shoe. Lying beneath was a single, fallen piece of crushed white candy.

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The courtesan house Pale Moon was unique among its kind in Irede, for it had ties to a mythical bloodline. If one were to choose its most peculiar feature, it would likely be that its women chose their own guests. Only at this courtesan house did money not guarantee your patronage. If a man could not win the heart of one of its women, he would not be permitted to stay within its rooms.

The women of Sari's generation, who had inherited a tradition leading back to the age of myth, numbered eighteen in total—each one a woman of Pale Moon, and each one with their own idiosyncrasies.

"Huh? A referral?"

"Yes. Would you be able to meet with her?"

Sari, who was sitting in the flower room before opening time along with Isha, a courtesan who was akin to being her older sister, felt her eyes widen upon receiving this request. She returned the cup she'd been in the process of lifting to her mouth to the table.

The essence of the request was whether or not Sari would be able to interview a new, prospective courtesan. Apparently, Isha, who had once been a member of the southern nobility, had been contacted out of the blue by one of her past connections, asking if she could act as an intermediary with Pale Moon. The connection in question was a woman from a relatively well-off family who was seeking employment.

Sari frowned. "I don't mind meeting her, but I can't guarantee her a place here."

"Of course," Isha said, smiling ruefully. She was no doubt aware of the reason Sari was frowning. "She says she's well aware of that."

Women from outside of Irede often came to Pale Moon under the impression that it was a place they could stay without selling their bodies. Such women tended to be ruined nobility or the daughters of bankrupted merchants, and as far as Sari was concerned, they were operating under a sincerely grave misunderstanding. Having the right to choose one's guests was quite different from not having to choose one at all. A courtesan who had no intention of choosing anyone from the beginning was inexcusable, and discourteous to the

guests.

Certainly, Pale Moon had courtesans who went months—even years—without receiving guests, but that was simply a matter of happenstance; the kind of guests they wished to receive had not visited. The plain truth was that they were waiting for the man who they would love, just like their proprietress, Sari, was.

Isha folded the fan that she had been using to conceal her mouth and smiled apologetically. “I did warn her, but I myself haven’t ever taken a guest other than Thoma, right? So I’m not sure if I really got through to her. I’m not personally acquainted with her either; she asked me through her great aunt.”

Sari hummed consideringly. “I can meet her. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll turn her down myself.”

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s all right. It’ll be a good learning experience for me too.”

Every one of Pale Moon’s current courtesans had been around since Sari’s grandmother’s generation. She herself had not welcomed a new courtesan since she had become the proprietress. Whether she accepted or refused would be a test of her judgment.

With the decision settled, Sari looked up at her brother’s lover. A sudden question occurred to her. “What did you say when you joined Pale Moon, Isha?”

Though it had almost been ten years by now, Sari was fairly sure that Isha had been referred to an interview with her grandmother through an acquaintance as well.

Isha laughed, her eyes unfocusing to study a faraway memory. “I said, ‘I’ll do anything.’ ‘I’ll do anything you want, so please let me stay in Irede.’”

And then her first guest as a courtesan had been the proprietress’s grandchild, Thoma.

Sari’s memories of the time were hazy. She thought perhaps she might’ve been staying at the Werrilocia estate in the capital. All she knew was that,

before she'd grown conscious of it, Isha had settled in to Pale Moon, and her brother had begun to drop by all the time to see her.

Calmly, as though it were meant to be, Isha had waited for one man. Sari had thought that her quiet passion was just like the maiden of Pale Moon, and as the young proprietress had never known her mother, Isha had become her role model for how a courtesan of Pale Moon should be.

Unconsciously, Sari touched her slender fingertips to her cup for warmth. She stared at her hands absentmindedly.

"Is something wrong, Sari?" Isha asked, concern evident in her voice.

"Huh? Oh, no."

As Sari came back to her senses, she found herself unsure of what she'd even been thinking about. It was as though a veil of mist had seeped into her thoughts. She shook her head and stood up.

"I should be lighting the lantern soon. Let's discuss the rest later."

"Sure."

The bright night sky was already becoming visible beyond the sizable windows. The shining white moon resembled ice spread across the water's surface.

The woman who Isha had acted as an intermediary for arrived three days later.

She appeared with her pale golden hair, reminiscent of sunshine, bound into a single tail, and in a lilac kimono—no doubt choices that represented her determination to become a person of Irede. Sari took a slight liking to the woman for the fact that she was clearly unfamiliar with the attire, but subtracted points for the surprise that flickered onto her face the moment she'd seen who she'd be meeting with. It was likely that she had simply been taken aback by the sheer youth of Pale Moon's proprietress, but a woman whose emotions were so readily apparent could not work as a courtesan.

Sari herself exercised perfect control over her features—maintaining a smile,

she beckoned the woman standing in the entryway to come further inside. “Please, come in,” she said. “I look forward to talking with you.”

“Oh, um, of course...”

The woman removed her thonged sandals. Her movements were elegant, clearly indicating the quality of her upbringing. Her features were attractive, with no cause for complaint. She was pretty, more so than beautiful, and her delicate appearance—perhaps because she was nervous—gave off the impression that she would fall over without support. Sari knew very well that there were men who preferred courtesans of her type.

Sari led the woman to the empty flower room and indicated a table in the corner. “Please, take a seat. First, I would like to hear what you have to say. Afterward, I’ll have a number of questions for you.”

As the pair took their seats, a maidservant came by with tea, so prompt it seemed she had been lying in wait to serve them at the very moment of their arrival. The tea was of a southern variety, newly procured, with a unique aroma. The scent made Sari smile as she watched it being poured, and she noticed in the eyes of the woman across from her profound nostalgia.

When Sari inclined her head, curious, the woman hurriedly bowed her own. “Y-You have my deepest gratitude for granting me some of your time today,” she said. “My name is Mifileu Dié. I came here from the royal capital, and I am twenty years old.”

\Sari listened quietly as Mifileu spoke. It seemed the act might be helping the woman calm her nerves, for she gradually became more eloquent as time passed.

According to Mifileu, while her family possessed no particularly notable pedigree, she was the daughter of wealthy merchants. However, the recent worsening international climate had hindered imports—her family’s main business—to the point where they could no longer reasonably sustain their trade. If things continued to worsen at this rate, they would not only have to sell off their business, but also their family’s estate. As such, Mifileu had come to a decision, sent queries through her connections, and had finally arrived at Irede. The young woman had chosen to live as a courtesan for the sake of both

herself and her family.

Once Mifileu finished, Sari placed her empty cup back upon the table. “I believe I have a grasp of your circumstances now,” she said. “but if I may ask, wouldn’t an arranged marriage be the more conventional and quicker option toward achieving your goals? Pardon my frankness, but you’re young and beautiful. There must have been many gentlemen in the capital willing to take you as a wife and support your family.”

Although Sari’s question bordered on mistrustful, she was confident that she had not missed the mark. Mifileu, to put it plainly, had a certain air about her that incited a man’s protective instincts. Her pretty features did not stand out too much, her presence was fragile, her smile invited thoughts of quiet affection, and she kept her heart hidden. She was the type of woman who made men daydream thoughts like: *I could make her whole, and we could spend a quiet, warm life together.* Mifileu herself was likely not aware of this; at least, not to such a detailed extent.

The woman blushed slightly and said, “Yes, there was a gentleman like that. However...” The slightest hint of pain flickered across her eyes. “No matter who it may be, I do not wish to marry.”

Sari’s eyes betrayed no emotion as she watched Mifileu, but her instincts told her that she should not pry further. She changed tack.

“In that case, may I inquire as to why you came to Pale Moon?” she asked. “As much as it embarrasses me to say, we are not a particularly prosperous establishment, and neither do we receive that many guests. I cannot guarantee that you would be able to earn enough to support your family.”

If a courtesan did not take guests, she did not earn a living. As a matter of fact, to prevent that reason from forcing a woman’s hand, Pale Moon provided its courtesans with a stipend that allowed them to live comfortably. It was not, however, enough to support an entire family.

And yet, Mifileu’s reply to the question of whether or not she would be better off at a different establishment was decisive.

“If I am to live in a town with such ancient traditions, I wish to learn of Irede’s ways in the most genuine manner possible. I have already taken Pale Moon’s

remuneration into account. I am fortunate enough that my great aunt has provided me with a sizable loan under the condition that I become a fully-fledged courtesan, so that should suffice to support my family for some time. All that remains is for me to repay the loan at a later date."

"I see."

"Oh... But if it would affect the dignity of your establishment to have someone with such a debt receiving guests, then I am happy to learn in the role of a maidservant, or do other such work, after which I will go elsewhere. So, please..." Trailing off, Mifileu bowed her head.

It was clear from the woman's frank honesty that she was in earnest. At the very least, it did not appear as though she had come to Pale Moon simply because she did not wish to sell her body. That much resolve, if nothing else, Sari could sense from her.

Mifileu placed her pale, elegant hands formally upon her knees. "I will do anything you wish," she said. "Please, allow me to stay in Irede."

Sari considered her silently.

Mifileu's long eyelashes were downcast and trembling. She looked desperate, but Sari did not think of her as pitiable.

The echo of Isha's words had invoked a feeling in Sari that she couldn't ignore. She could not help but wonder what would have become of her or her brother if Isha had never joined Pale Moon.

Still, Sari held back her emotions, as well as a sigh; right now, she was a level-headed proprietress. She closed her eyes, exhaled, and relaxed her shoulders. Then, she smiled and lifted her lids once more, looking at Mifileu.

"In that case, Mifileu Dié, there are a number of further details we must discuss. First, you shall have to decide upon a new name."

"D-Do you mean...?"

"Yes."

Sari raised a hand, and a maidservant stepped over with a tray bearing a single sheet of paper. Sari took it and handed it to the woman before her; it was

a contract between a courtesan and her courtesan house. Gingerly, Mifileu accepted it.

The proprietress of the world's oldest courtesan house smiled gently. Her voice was quiet, but firm. "Welcome to Pale Moon," she said. "However... I would advise you to be a little less stiff when you smile. A flower should be more at ease."

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As Pale Moon's proprietress, Sari's work was quite diverse already, but currently, she was also devoting some of her time toward expanding her abilities as the maiden.

It was dusk, and her pale, bare feet trod upon the grass of the back garden. Her delicate toenails seemed to soak up the moonlight and store it under her skin.

Sari took a deep breath and puffed out her chest. The world she could see even with her eyes closed, which she could only glimpse due to her status as an inhuman being, seemed faintly bright. When her senses were sharpened, she could even grasp what was behind herself with perfect clarity.

Currently, Sari was attempting to expand her senses as much as she was able. She raised her right hand and focused power into her fingers. *From nothing to existence, from afar to here.*

Sari's will commanded fruition, and it formed her power into small droplets of pale, white light. They fell upon the grass, and the earth they touched began to faintly glow. Gazing sharply at the luminescence spreading below her, Sari exhaled softly from between her pursed lips, as if blowing air into the beginnings of a fire.



Stronger. Further.

Sari's attempts to control and exercise her power slowly cooled her mind. Her thoughts turned from those of a human to that which even she could not grasp.

How far could she go, if she continued? How far *would* she?

Without stirring from her position in the garden, she lifted her gaze upward. Everything began to grow distant. Further away. Her emotions started to fade. As though she was still herself, but not. It was not an unpleasant feeling—rather, it was natural. After all, she was not human.

Sari exhaled. Ice was mixed within her breath. She looked down upon the frost-covered grass with emotionless eyes, recalling the cold stone chamber that she often saw in her dreams.

Then, a maidservant emerged from a hallway behind her. The girl, dressed in a white coverall apron, called out to her proprietress.

"Miss Proprietress, it's almost time for..."

"I'll be there once I change," Sari said without turning around.

The maidservant jumped slightly. Perhaps she had assumed that Sari would be too focused to hear her. But while Sari had been focused, that did not mean she was unable to grasp her surroundings. Slowly, she withdrew the power she had extended.

The maidservant had been right; if Sari didn't change soon, she would be late to light the lantern. She had taken a bath earlier, but that was the extent of her preparations.

Sari waved the maidservant away, picked up her thonged sandals, and headed for her room. As she stepped through the grass, she brushed back her loose silver hair.

"Just a little more, I think..."

Sari had learned a number of techniques from the notes of the past maidens, but she felt as though she was still one step short of where she needed to be. Her likely opponent was, after all, another god of old. Even if Sari possessed the most strength of any maiden in generations, the wolf was not a being who

could be defeated with a half-hearted attempt. Her inexperience had caused her to be thoroughly on the back foot during their last encounter, but next time, she wanted to settle the matter under her own power, without inconveniencing anyone else. If she couldn't manage that, then she wouldn't be capable of overturning a certain person's fated death.

As such, it was essential that she expanded and achieved better control over her divinity.

"In the end, it all comes down to practice."

The response *was* there—she could feel it. It was still too early to give up.

Sari returned to her room, changed, and adjusted her makeup, then headed toward Pale Moon's entrance to light the lantern. Partway there, she ran into Mifileu, wearing a plain kimono colored a solid pale pink.

It had been two weeks since the woman had joined Pale Moon, and she was still unused to wearing a kimono. After greeting Sari, she asked uneasily, "How do I look, Miss Proprietress? Is anything off?"

"You're fine," Sari said. "It suits you well."

Mifileu's unpatterned kimono was one of Pale Moon's. Though the establishment's courtesans usually selected their attire from their own collections, many of them left their clothing behind when they departed the courtesan house. As such, the storehouse contained several dozen such articles, kimono included, and any current courtesan could borrow from among them as she so wished.

Mifileu, who had borrowed several kimonos of Sari's choosing, nodded shyly and followed after the proprietress. She had yet to formally go before Pale Moon's guests, and had so far spent her days learning of Irede's ways from observing Sari and the maidservants at work.

Sari exited the manor's entryway with the apprentice courtesan in tow. Just as she was about to light the hanging lantern, however, she noticed a person pass through Pale Moon's gate.

"Xixu."

The young man in militia uniform must have come to request her help for a shade. The look on his face upon noticing Sari was, as always, apologetic—but then it froze. His eyes, which were usually drawn into a frown, were wide open in surprise.

Sari leaned her head to the side; it was the first she'd ever seen that expression on Xixu. "What's wrong?" she asked. "You came here about a shade, right?"

"Saridi..." Xixu said, "who is she?"

"She? Do you mean Fi?"

When Sari said the nickname that Mifileu was currently using in place of her courtesan name, the young man returned to his senses, and his expression finally returned to its usual sour look. But then, as Sari studied him suspiciously, a subdued voice called out from behind her.

"I-It's a pleasure to see you again, Prince Kilis."

"Huh?"

Sari was not obtuse enough to fail to recognize the owner of the slightly trembling voice. She turned, saw that Mifileu had gone pale, then looked back at Xixu.

"Oh. I didn't know you two were acquainted. Actually, who's Kilis?"

"It's...my real name," Xixu said.

The conversation between shadeslayer and maiden refused to align, instead falling apart onto the stone paving, askew and half empty.

Come to think of it, Xixu does *have a proper full name as the prince*…

As the thought ran through Sari's head, she heard a stifled sigh from behind her.

The delicate mood was more than enough to prompt understanding from the girl who had grown up in a pleasure town. An ordinary girl would perhaps not have noticed. But the brief exchange between Xixu and Mifileu had been enough to give Sari the rough idea of what kind of relationship the two had once had.

The young shadeslayer's handsome features twisted into a deep frown. He seemed on the verge of saying something, but then swallowed his words and instead turned to Sari.

"Who is she?" he asked.

"A newcomer," Sari replied. "She's going through her apprenticeship."

"As a maidservant?"

"As a courtesan. Can't you tell by looking?"

At Sari's indifferent reply, Xixu's expression grew increasingly sour. Sari felt her fingertips grow cold, as if to match. She looked up at the unlit hanging lantern.

Sometimes, even she couldn't quite grasp what she was thinking.

It was a phenomenon Sari had experienced a number of times recently. Perhaps it was related to the differing layers of her consciousness, but she would occasionally be aware that she was thinking something, yet was unable to recognize what it was. When she reflected upon those moments, she could only picture her own emptiness.

Currently, she was experiencing a similar blankness. Still, Sari's expression didn't change. She maintained her smile as she looked up at the young man before her.

"Xixu?"

"I..." He trailed off.

It seemed Sari might have let a little more of her hardening emotions show than she'd intended; the look on the shadeslayer's face was growing uncomfortable. She schooled her expression into that of the young girl he was so familiar with.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You're being more inarticulate than usual."

"You make it sound like I'm always inarticulate..."

"Well, you are. If you started being all eloquent and cheerful out of nowhere, I'd be scared."

Laughing, Sari turned her gaze away and lit the lantern. Once she confirmed that its half moon was shining brightly, she turned back.

Mifileu, who had remained standing behind her, looked at her with flustered eyes. “Um, Miss Proprietress...”

“Yes?”

“I-I beg your pardon. May I...please have some time to talk to that gentleman...?”

“I don’t mind.” Sari turned her head toward the young man behind her. “Do you?”

Xixu shook his head, his expression curdling as though he had bitten down on something unpleasant. “Sorry, but I’d appreciate it if you could lend us a room.”

“A room?” Sari repeated.

The tremor that ran through her chest vanished into the depths of her heart before she even realized it was there. She had but one thought: *Does he realize the meaning behind his words?*

Her fingertips were growing cold. Her feet, upon the stone paving, seemed to her as though they were bare upon the floor of a stone chamber.

Sari placed a pale hand against the half moon of the lantern. She didn’t think. She simply replied, as though it were natural.

“Okay,” she said. “But I’ll have to charge you, you know.”

“That’s fine,” Xixu said. “I’m sorry for the trouble. It’s just...”

“You can use the bellflower room then. A maidservant will show you the way.”

Sari stepped back into the entryway as she spoke, taking a wooden room tag from the shelf built into the wall. It bore the burnt-in design of a bellflower. She handed it to Mifileu; the woman looked tense.

A maidservant appeared in the entryway, looking startled at the exchange, but Sari’s gaze prevented her from voicing her thoughts. A heavy air of tension accompanied Xixu and Mifileu as they were guided to the second floor.

Once they had disappeared from sight, Sari unconsciously put a hand to her temple. “Now then...”

What should she do? Well, there was only one option, really.

Sari waited until the maidservant had returned, then issued a simple order. “I’ll be going out briefly, so please handle the rest. As for his companionship fee, the cheapest rate will be fine.”

Then again, even the cheapest price for the companionship of a courtesan of Pale Moon was exceptionally high. She giggled, imagining the look on Xixu’s face when he heard the sum.

Sari went to head out, but was stopped by the maidservant calling after her in a flustered voice; the girl was turning pale.

“M-Miss Proprietress? Where are you...?”

“To Ironblade, or Tagi. Any shadeslayer, really,” Sari said. “It looks like he forgot that he came here about a shade. I’ll be back after I finish the job.”

That was the only thing that was required of her. Nothing else. Abruptly, Sari laughed and snapped her fingers. The droplets that leapt forth from her pale fingertips dyed the ground in the blink of an eye. Once again, she reflected upon her own emptiness.

“So that’s how I got stuck with the job?”

“It would do you some good to actually fulfill your original role once in a while.”

Sari looked down coldly at the man who was carrying her on his shoulders. Usually, she would proclaim that she could walk on her own, but they were currently atop a tiled roof, so it was for the best that she left matters to him, rather than allowing her stubbornness to be her literal downfall.

Tagi, who had climbed atop the courtesan house from the second floor with Sari in his arms, set her down at the roof’s edge, then sat beside her. A familiar courtesan leaned out the window below, looking up at the pair.

“Do me a favor and make him work more,” she teased. “All he does is laze

about all day, anyway."

"Oh, shut it," Tagi retorted. "I'm performing my bodyguard duties perfectly acceptably."

"A shadeslayer who spends all of his time sleeping is nothing more than a freeloader."

The woman's words were mocking, but carried deep affection. Sari smiled to hear the warmth within them and looked down upon the street below, watching the flow of foot traffic with keen attention.

The courtesan, leaning on the window frame with her chin in her hands, studied the maiden's smile dubiously. "So why didn't you say anything to the shadeslayer, Miss Pale Moon?" she asked.

"I'm not sure what to tell you," Sari replied. "He actually *over*works, so I wouldn't begrudge him a little leisure."

"That isn't what I meant." The woman's red lips twisted into a frown.

The shadeslayer sitting beside Sari leveled a cool gaze at the girl next to him. "At Pale Moon, being chosen by a woman and going to a room with her is the same as purchasing her company, isn't it?" he asked. "And the courtesans of Pale Moon can never choose a guest who another of their number has already chosen—including the proprietress. Why didn't you tell him that?"

"I... I'm not sure what to tell you," Sari replied, repeating herself.

Even if they asked her for a reason, she couldn't give one. She hadn't been thinking anything—or if she had been, she couldn't recall.

Although, at some point, she *had* thought that it would be okay to let Xixu go, if that was what he wanted. In the end, he was different from her. He was both human, and someone who had lived his life under the light of day. And yet...when she put things like that, Sari felt as if something was a little off.

"If I had to explain it..." Sari began, "I think I hesitated because he's never had room to make a choice before. So I wondered if that the time for that was now."

"What kind of reasoning is that?" Tagi shot back. "Still considering things as

though you're above everyone else, huh?"

"Sorry."

When Sari had come to Tagi in her strange, reverse call for aid, he'd asked her why she was doing so, and she'd explained the whole situation to him. Now, she thought perhaps she should have kept the matter to herself.

But Sari didn't get the chance to pay the matter any further thought. Her smile abruptly vanished from her face, and she pointed toward the street. Her power struck a red-eyed shade in the form of a man, walking amongst the stream of pedestrians.

"Bind."

"That's my cue," Tagi said, without a moment's delay. "Get back, Young Miss."

Sari did as he'd ordered and backed up—albeit unsteadily—across the tiles of the roof.

Tagi began to reel in the shade bound to him as though it were a fish. Still in the form of a man, it struggled and flailed about as it was hauled up toward the roof, the spectacle drawing the attention of passersby.

"This is exactly why the reports never come around to you," the courtesan said exasperatedly. "You're making a scene."

"It's a good attraction for drawing in customers," Tagi said without a hint of shame.

Sari wasn't concerned about the shade; she knew that Tagi's skills as a shadeslayer were beyond question. She had no doubt, however, that their position on the roof had left them standing out, and not in a good way. The fact that they weren't in broad daylight was their only saving grace.

"It's good that we're dealing with the shade quickly," Sari murmured to herself, "but the method..."

Why were there no normal shadeslayers in Irede?

There was a lot Sari wanted to say regarding the matter, but she refrained—she didn't want to jinx the situation and have *another* strange fifth shadeslayer

come along.

Sari unconsciously pressed a hand to her temple, but was quick to remove it. She stood there, unmoving, atop the roof.

Her hands looked no different than usual at all, but at some point, her pale fingertips had become as cold as ice.

3. Regret

It had happened the night of a festival, Sari remembered. It had probably been in Irede.

Still a child, she had been led along by her brother's hand, walking underneath the light of a myriad lanterns. The sounds of music and conversation had blended together. They had strode together through the night as though swimming, and even the tumult of the crowds had seemed to give them cause to feel merry.

Sari had looked up at a scarlet lantern through the gaps left between the adults passing by. A small bird spun of pale-blue glass had been hanging from the eaves of a stall. To Sari, the little bird, catching the lantern light with its delicate head held high, had looked more beautiful and undaunted than the moon itself.

"It's so pretty..."

The boy had belatedly noticed that his little sister had slowed her pace, and had stopped and turned back. "Sari?"

"Isn't it beautiful?" She'd asked, pointing at the bird. Her heart had still beat with excitement as her brother's gaze joined hers, scarlet light spilling across his handsome features.

Some small part of Sari had waited in anticipation for what her brother would say, but when he'd looked at her, his expression troubled, she'd swallowed her breath. The boy—almost a man—had patted his sister on the head.

"It *is* beautiful, but you'll probably break it," he'd told her. "Come on, let's go."

"B-But..."

I'll take good care of it. Please buy it for me, Sari had almost pleaded. But she'd held the words back, keeping them from breaking free.

She'd remembered that, just a few days before, she had broken a cup that her

grandmother had cherished. When her grandmother had seen the shattered fragments, she had given Sari a strict scolding, but what Sari had felt worse about was that she had looked pained about the loss.

Naturally, with that memory on her brother's mind, Sari had known there was nothing she could say that would convince him she would take care of the bird. She'd remained silent, and her brother had rubbed her head with a rueful smile. He'd seemed almost on the verge of walking away with her in tow, but, perhaps feeling pity seeing her head hung so low, he'd instead pulled her to the side of the street by her small hand.

Crouching down so that their eyes were level, he'd asked, "Sari?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you promise to take good care of it?" The tone of his voice had been kind.

Sari had been quick to realize that he'd probably been talking about the bird—but she'd shaken her head, balling her fists up and clenching them tight.

"It's okay," she'd said. "I don't want it."

"You don't? Are you sure? I'll buy it for you."

"It's fine." Tears had threatened to spill forth, but she'd endured by biting her lip.

The bird really had looked beautiful. She had already fallen in love with it. She'd wanted so badly to reach out and touch it. So why had she stopped herself? In that moment, Sari didn't know.

She had understood one thing, however—she felt hurt. It had hurt to know that she couldn't take care of the things that were important to her, and it had hurt that her brother had pointed that out. It had also hurt to know how silly she was being, to want something so badly but be unable to voice that feeling out loud.

Sari had continued shaking her head back and forth, silent.

The boy had spent a while trying to cajole her out of her stubbornness, but once he'd realized his little sister wasn't going to give in, he'd sighed and stood

back up.

“Okay,” he’d said. “Then let’s go. But...are you *really* sure?”

“Mm-hmm.” She’d had no other answer to give.

And so, they'd walked away, the night around them vivid with color. Sari had kept her gaze fixed on the ground as she’d walked, her jaw clenched and her vision blurry.

Her brother hadn’t turned back. The little blue bird had grown farther away. Emotion had threatened to burst forth from Sari’s throat, and it had really hurt.

She’d kept walking, all her thoughts focused on trying her hardest not to look up.

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“I’m being ridiculous...” Sari murmured.

It had only been a dream of an old memory, but nonetheless, it had caused her pain. Was that proof that she still hadn’t grown up?

Sari, who had awoken lying on her back, wiped away the tear tracks that still lingered on her face. She looked around her room, which was at the moment enveloped by twilight. The only illumination was the moonlight filtering through her window.

Eyes falling on a little blue bird hanging from a frame, Sari smiled despite herself. She’d found the small piece of glasswork she’d wanted so much left behind on the windowsill of her room the morning after that long-ago festival.

She knew that Thoma must have purchased it for her, knowing that she was refusing to be honest with herself. Back then, and even now, she caused nothing but trouble for him.

The self-deprecation thought spurred her to sit up. She brushed back her hair with her still-warm hands. “It’ll be fine.”

There’ll be no problems tonight either, Sari told herself. There would be nothing to be sad about. After all, she had already become an adult—even if something that saddened her did occur, she would be able to hide her emotions far better than she had been able to as a child.

And yet, even as she prayed for that to be the case, Sari could not help but think about how foolish she was being.

Running a courtesan house naturally made Sari privy to all manner of rumors. Some were vaguer than the information gathered by her cousins in the capital, but others could be equally credible or surprising. She'd learned one such rumor just now, in conversation with two elderly gentleman she was familiar with, who'd invited her to join them for tea.

Sari's blue eyes blinked in surprise as she confirmed what the two of them had just told her. "Their customs are changing?" she inquired.

"Indeed. Or perhaps you could say they're deviating." The elderly man shrugged theatrically as he entertained himself by stacking playing stones upon a go board. "It's a rather spine-chilling topic, isn't it?"

"Don't say it like that—you'll frighten the maiden," the other elderly man, who was sitting opposite, said coldly. He flicked a go stone with his finger, and it collided with the stack, bringing the entire structure clattering down. "I don't doubt that there's somebody out there pulling the strings. Otherwise it would be just plain ridiculous."

The topic of the conversation was the neighboring country to the east. Apparently, the situation in the country—which itself was the subject of all kinds of disturbing rumors—had recently begun degenerating.

Evidently, an ideology had been spreading that purported "pleasure" as the greatest virtue, and that all of the labor outside of it should be equally shared. As a result, the lives of the country's people had begun to change. It seemed that the majority of the transformation centered around the capital, and the strange twists and turns it had taken had been enough to mark things as clearly odd to even outside observers.

Sari tilted her head to the side, ruminating over the story she had just been given the broad strokes of. "But that seems like a good thing, at first glance," she said. "Everyone's taking an equal share of the work, right?"

"But there's always a limit to such things," one of the gentlemen said. "It's simply eerie when a greedy miser decides to suddenly distribute everything he

owns amongst the poor, no? Yet as things stand over there, that's considered a virtue. The country's been warped all the way down to its sense of right and wrong."

"It's one thing if our set of values are different from a nation such as the Country of the Open Sea, but this is our neighbor we're talking about," the other man remarked. "It makes you wonder if they've all fallen ill or something."

"That's..." Sari trailed off.

The first thing she thought of was the white flower she had seen in the royal capital—its scent had been able to affect a person's mind. Was Tesed Zaras currently using the flower to some unknown end beyond the border?

Sari was careful not to let her suspicion show on her face. "But our relations to that country have worsened to the point where war might even break out, haven't they?" she asked. "How will they fight a war under an ideology like that?"

"That's just the thing," one of the elderly gentlemen said, annoyance in his tone. "Apparently, from their point of view, Torlonia is wicked and dedicated only to its own self interest. They despise us just for carrying on with our regular commerce, so what can we do? If that wasn't bad enough, they're eager to 'free us of our excessive greed and set us back on the right path.'"

The other man gave an exhausted-seeming, rueful smile.

Both of the elderly gentlemen were retired, but their successors did extensive business across national borders. It was no wonder they were well informed about the troubles currently plaguing the international climate.

One of the gentlemen sighed lightly, his breath falling upon the table. "That's why I told my son to come back for the time being, you see. Business is important, but what happens if a mob with all the wrong ideas in their heads attacks our employees or some such? I couldn't bear it."

"I'm as riled up as you are about it, but there's nothing to be done," the other gentleman said. "All we can do is pray it doesn't last too long."

Both of the gentlemen's words were spoken in a joking tone, but Sari didn't

doubt that they were their honest opinions.

A feeling of unease squirmed inside Sari's chest as she politely excused herself and headed straight for the manor's entryway. Just as she had put on her sandals, a shadeslayer arrived.

Sari, still sitting inside the door, looked up at the black-haired young man before her. "Oh, Xixu," she said. "Welcome."

"Saridi..."

Xixu seemed just as unable to express himself as always, but Sari felt as though something else about him was ever so slightly different. She gave him her young girl's smile.

"Yes? Is it a shade?"

"No, not that. I wanted to apologize about the other day."

"Why? Everything was fine. Tagi got the shade, and I'm always happy for Pale Moon to see more business."

The young man remained silent, a sour look on his face. Sari laughed pleasantly. She'd heard that Xixu had indeed been surprised to hear the companionship fee, but as expected, he had paid it without reluctance.

Six-tenths of the money had gone to Pale Moon, and the other four-tenths had been passed to the courtesan in question. Mifileu had refused to take Xixu's money, saying that she couldn't do such a thing, but Sari had likewise refused to concede the issue.

The youngest proprietress in Irede stood up, taking care that the hem of her kimono didn't catch on anything. "So, why have you come to visit?" she asked. "Should I call for Fi?"

"I'd like to talk to you first," Xixu said. "Could you spare me some time?"

"If you're okay with talking here."

She could no longer let him into the proprietress's room. Behind her eyelids, Sari pictured the blue glass bird and smiled.

Xixu hesitated, clearly wary of the wide-open doorway, but soon began to

talk. “Is it possible for a courtesan of Pale Moon to resign from her employment?” he asked.

“If she has no debts to us,” Sari confirmed, replying immediately. She had expected a question along those lines. “And if that’s what she wants.”

However, it seemed that her answer was not the one Xixu had wanted to hear, even if he had likely expected it. Looking troubled, he lapsed into silence.

Now that Sari considered it, she realized she had liked that expression of his. She smiled ruefully at her own sentimental thoughts. “Is that all you wanted to talk about?” she asked.

After a few moments, Xixu said, “No, there’s a little more.”

“Okay. I can hear you out, at least.”

“She isn’t suited to be a courtesan. She’ll cause trouble for Pale Moon in the future.”

“I’ll be the judge of that, and it’s no use trying to interfere, even if you *are* a shadeslayer,” Sari declared in a single breath. The fruitless, roundabout exchange was beginning to annoy her. Folding her arms, she glared at the tall shadeslayer before her. “Stop being so indirect. If you don’t want one of your acquaintances to be selling her nights, then just say so.”

“Saridi, that isn’t what I—”

“It *is*. Everybody from the capital looks down on courtesans, including you and her. You don’t need to say it; I can tell. And I understand. I just haven’t said anything because I also know that you both understand my side of things too, and you respect that. But that doesn’t mean you can drag me into whatever quarrel it is that you have with her.”

It was only once Sari finished saying her piece that she realized that she’d grown heated. Suppressing the urge to click her tongue, she managed to recover her composure, but irritation still burned in the pit of her stomach, reminding her of the days she’d lived as a human. She had the fleeting delusion that perhaps she really was human after all, and it made her want to cry. And yet even these emotions, intense as they were, could be forced to fade away as soon as she wished it so.

The young shadeslayer stared at her, confusion visible on his features. Perhaps her anger had caught him by surprise. Sari, harboring emptiness, looked up at him. Her body was gradually cooling, and she thought it felt quite comfortable.

Xixu reached a hand toward her, but in the end, lowered it without making contact. As if in exchange for the gesture, he called her name, though his tone was reserved.

“Saridi.”

Several moments passed before she replied. “Yes?”

“That wasn’t what I intended. I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t.”

That alone was the truth. This situation wasn’t his fault. It was her own fault that she didn’t know herself, and that she pushed away the things that were precious to her.

Sari exhaled a breath mixed with lingering emotion and walked over to the nearby shelf. She took a single wooden room tag and handed it to Xixu. As he frowned, she said, “You might know her better, Xixu, but as far as I can tell, I don’t think she’ll cause any problems. If you want her to quit, then convince her yourself.”

“Saridi...”

“Even if you can’t persuade her right away, as long as you keep visiting her, she’ll earn her companionship fee from you. That might solve the problem too.”

While Sari doubted that money was Mifileu’s sole motivation, there was no denying that it was one of the burdens on the woman. She had also said that she didn’t wish to marry anybody. Maybe if she told Xixu her reason why, the two could reach a quicker resolution?

As the young man studied the room tag, looking troubled, Sari realized that she felt quite fatigued. She made to exit the entryway—but then, suddenly, she was overcome by an ever-so-human sense of lingering regret. She turned back, facing the shadeslayer that she knew struggled to adapt.

“Hey, Xix—”

Sari cut herself off. She had caught sight of the woman behind him, further down the hallway, hiding behind a pillar and looking as though she might burst into tears. She wore a rose-pink kimono, and drew one’s eye akin to how a forlorn flower might, if one were concerned whether it truly had the strength to bloom. Her pitiable innocence, as though she were waiting to be plucked, seemed so pure that one could not help but reach their hand out for her.

She was frail, transient, and human. A woman who was both earnest and capable of turning to others for help. Sari could think of nothing else but of how different she was from her.

Sari had never been able to say it—she had never been able to promise that she would take care of that which she wished to cherish. No matter how much she had been encouraged or asked, she had never spoken the words aloud. And because she had become an adult without saying them, she could no longer understand them anymore.

Sari changed her self and smiled charmingly—it was the smile of Pale Moon’s maiden. “I’m going out for a bit,” she said. “Feel free to brew whichever tea you wish for yourself.”

“Saridi?” Xixu asked. “Where are you...?”

“Just for a walk. Don’t worry, I’ll be back.”

She stepped out, saying no more.

Sari was not afraid of changing. As the darkness pressed in on her, she conversely felt her existence pushing its way out, and the contradiction swirled harmoniously within her body. Her rapidly cooling thoughts began to separate from that which was human. Her field of view, freely within her control to alter, parted from the earth below. The anchor to her existence was undone.

She could handle all of her power with ease. The wall she had once been unable to surpass seemed so far below, now.

Sari reflected upon her past, foolish self, and smiled, faint and bittersweet. And then, when the god who had been walking across the stone paving came to

a stop, she was exactly where she had wanted to be—right in front of the Werrilocia estate in the capital.

The royal capital's cityscape, or, at least, that of the estate district after sunset, was enveloped in a calm serenity.

Sari looked up at the familiar iron gate before her. She reached her pale hand out to push it open, but quickly retracted it. "Oh, drat. I'm not hiding my face."

Even if she had been, it wouldn't have mattered—she was still dressed in her courtesan's attire. They wouldn't let her in.

Sari considered the problem briefly, then lightly kicked her right foot against the flagstones below. The next moment, the scenery around her was completely different.

Having returned to her own room within the Werrilocia estate, Sari deftly took off her kimono and changed into a dress she retrieved from her wardrobe. Finally, she let down her hair, donned a veil, and stepped out of the room.

First, she headed for her male cousin's room, partly because she also wished to check up on his health. However, when Sari knocked on the door, there was no response.

"Hmm. I wonder if he's sleeping."

"Everie?" The voice coming from down the dark hallway belonged to Vas's sister. Fyra soon stepped into view, holding up a small lamp. She stared at the head of her family, then said, surprise evident in her tone, "It really is you, Everie. How did you get here?"

"I just hopped over," Sari explained. "Where's Vas?"

"What do you mean you 'hopped'?" Fyra studied her for a moment. "Well, I suppose it's not important. My brother's currently out. I believe he has some matters he wishes to look into."

"In his condition?" Sari frowned. When she had visited Vas a month prior, he had still needed a cane to walk.

Fyra shrugged casually. "It should be fine. He's been entirely back to normal

recently. Don't tell me you came by to check up on him?"

"That's part of it, but I also wanted to ask him something. Which of you two is looking into the changes happening in the neighboring country to the east?"

"That would be me." Fyra's delighted smile spoke of her confidence in the information she possessed. But, as Sari opened her mouth to begin asking for details at once, her cousin raised her left hand to stop her. "We could certainly discuss the matter here, but why don't we go check if any new tidbits have come in, while we're at it?"

"'New tidbits?'" Sari repeated dubiously. Were there set locations where you could buy and sell information like that?

Fyra, clad in a dark-crimson dress, laughed. "Let's go to the pleasure district, Everie," she said, in a tone that sounded as though she were discussing the weather. "Though you can hardly go dressed like *that*; I'll have to help you change first."

Sari gave no response. She wasn't sure whether she could consider this good luck or bad.

Swallowing down the words she wanted to say—*I have to swap clothes* again?—Sari went to change back into her original kimono, lamenting the futility of it all the entire while.

The royal capital's pleasure district was far more chaotic and decadent than Irede. The atmosphere, though dim and dirty, never failed to attract the eye, and the locale was permeated with the kind of obscenity that made one feel as though simply looking at it was immoral. The passersby here, unlike those of Irede, were clad in an air of gloom that seemed to blend into the darkness of the night, and their expressions only ever seemed to contain emotion when seen under the light of the lamps of buildings nearby. A saccharine, inviting scent lurked underfoot, seemingly reminiscent of a restful bedchamber.

"Here?" Sari asked.

"Yes. Go right ahead."

Following Fyra's directions while taking care to avoid catching anyone's eye,

Sari slipped down a short stretch of alleyway toward an unassuming courtesan house with pastel-red walls. When she opened the door, she found herself in a snug, circular room with a tall, domed ceiling. She saw no other visitors; it appeared that the front door was located elsewhere.

Sari took a few moments to look around the dimly lit room. The inner walls, like the outer ones, were pastel red, with small portraits of various women hanging here and there along them. Below sat an arrangement of wicker chairs with silk draped carelessly over their backs. A large depression further back into the room, carved into the gentle curve of the wall, created space for a table and its accompanying chairs.

Fyra sat in one of the chairs at the back with the ease of familiarity, whereupon an old woman brought her a flat, wide-brimmed drinking cup. One was placed down in front of Sari as well—she was sitting next to Fyra—and when she brought it to her mouth for a taste, her expression softened in relief.

“This tastes like House Radi’s wine.”

“We have to go all the way to Irede to stock up on it.” The voice, which exuded charm, evidently belonged to the proprietress of this establishment. Wearing a dress that revealed much of her chest and legs, Resenté gave Sari a carefree smile. “Hey, Miss Princess. Make yourself at home.”

“Thank you for having me,” Sari replied, standing to bow.

Fyra, in contrast, simply continued to smile; the expression made it difficult to tell what she was thinking.

Resenté’s eyes had widened for a brief moment as she took in Sari’s kimono-clad appearance, but her expression quickly reverted into a mysterious smile. It was in fact the man following behind her who seemed to have been more deeply shocked; he was still frozen in mute disbelief.

Sari gave Eid—who was apparently still in Resenté’s employ—a quick wave. “Good evening.”

A few moments passed before Eid replied, “Why are you here?”

“There’s something I’m curious about. I’ll go back soon.”

“Is spending four days out of town ‘soon’ to you?”

Eid looked displeased; he had to have assumed that Sari had come by carriage. She assured him that she really would be back soon, and left it at that.

It was certainly true that until very recently, she hadn’t been able to hop between such distant locations. She had been able to achieve the feat on rare occasions before, but only within Irede. Sari was quite sure that those present wouldn’t understand how she had gained the ability even if she explained it, and felt as though there was no need for them to understand regardless.

Sari sipped her rice wine while Resenté and Eid took their seats, upon which time tea was brought in for all four of them.

Resenté spoke first. “So, Miss Princess, may I ask what you are after?”

“I wanted to ask about the changes happening in the neighboring country to the east,” Sari said. “Is Tesed Zaras the one behind them?”

This was the concern that had brought Sari here, to the royal capital. If Tesed truly was the cause, there was a chance that he would target Xixu again.

Resenté began twirling a lock of her red hair by her cheek. “Let’s see...” she murmured, before raising her voice. “It does seem that way, I suppose, although he isn’t working alone. That’s not all there is to it, though.”

“What more is there?” Sari asked. She seemed to be the only one of them that took particular notice of Resenté’s ominous words; judging by Fyra and Eid’s composed demeanors, they already knew the details.

Resenté smiled charmingly and rested her chin in her hands. “It’s not just the neighboring country—changes have been happening in other surrounding ones too. Some are becoming more violent, while others have begun to value extremely strict systems of discipline and order. Each country is becoming dominated by a different ethos. It’s as though someone is trying to experiment and see what kind of countries they can intentionally foster.”

“Experiment...” Sari repeated. That sounded ominous indeed.

Sari repressed the urge to shiver. If the prior incident involving Tesed had not come to light, then Torlonia might have been undergoing the same process by

now. Perhaps this was the upheaval that the king's maiden had foreseen.

Sari pictured the gradually changing countries beginning to jostle and turn, creating strife between themselves. Before long, they would violently collide, just like spinning tops. And somebody was behind it all, showing the whole thing off as though it were some poorly crafted excuse for a theater production. Her stomach turned at the thought.

"So, what do you plan to do now that you've heard about this, Miss Princess?"

"Who knows? I'm not sure."

Sari considered whether she'd be able to hop to the neighboring country. She had never been there before; it would probably be difficult. But she'd never pick up the knack for it if she didn't at least try.

Despite the fact that she had been careful to keep her expression neutral as she considered the idea, however, a curt male voice interrupted her thoughts. "Don't even think about going. It'll mean no end for trouble for those of us around you."

Sari paused. "Please don't read my mind."

"You're indirect when people are usually direct, and the reverse is true too. It always makes cleaning up after you that much more of a chore."

"You don't *have* to clean up after me."

Back when Eid had been a shadeslayer, he had always laughed Sari's apologies off with an easygoing smile. Evidently, though, the true thoughts he'd hidden behind the expression hadn't been so magnanimous. Having only learned of this now, after all the time they'd known each other, Sari pouted while sipping at her tea, which had gone cold. It had a nostalgic flavor, one that she had often tasted as a child, and unconsciously, her gaze drifted around the table.

"You're right," she admitted. "Going to that country is unrealistic..."

Most pertinently, Sari's role as Pale Moon's maiden role was to protect Irede. If that protection were to be extended beyond the town's borders, then it

would be to the Werrilocia family alone. It was not her place to get involved in the stability of her country or its neighbors. That was how Irede had always persisted throughout the ages, changing hands between the countries that had owned it.

Yet, even so…

“But I promised.”

Not long ago, Sari had been asked to change Xixu’s fate, and she had decided to accept that request. And so, that was what she intended to do.

Even though her self had changed, she would not go back on her word. If she could not protect him from by his side, then she simply had to crush the danger at its roots.

Sari gently closed her eyes, which could see the unseeable, and...something was placed in front of her with a *clack*. She lifted her lids once more, and was greeted with the sight of a tiny ceramic pot, now sitting on the table. Upon opening it, she saw that it was filled with golden honey.

“Is this...?”

Sari looked up at the man sitting opposite her. Eid kept his gaze turned to the side, as though she didn’t even exist, as she picked up the silver spoon sticking out of the pot.

Eid was the only one here who knew that Sari always wanted to add honey to the tea she had so often used to drink. Perhaps he had noticed her searching for a honey pot out of unconscious habit.

Sari wordlessly dropped a dollop of honey into her tea, then drank, bringing her cup to her mouth with both hands. The mildly sweet taste was nostalgic, inviting a melancholic kind of homesickness.

After Sari drained her cup, she smiled. “Thank you,” she said. “I think it’s time I should be going now.”

“My, already?” Fyra asked. “Shall I summon a carriage for you?”

“I’ll be fine on my own.”

“You’d better not be thinking of sticking your neck somewhere stupid again,”

Eid warned.

“I said I’ll be fine!”

Sari stood up and headed for the door. As she went, Resenté’s musical voice called out from behind her: “It looks like you’re not human anymore, are you, Miss Princess?”

Sari didn’t reply. Resenté’s words had struck upon the truth; the woman had a discerning eye indeed.

Once Sari’s moment of surprise had cooled, she turned and smiled. She thought of herself, and how, as a result of seeking her own power, chasing after her desire to find a path forward, and successfully controlling her own divinity, she had parted ways with her humanity. She gently clenched her own icy fingers.

“I no longer need my sacred offering.”

Perhaps it had simply been too long since she had awoken as the god and found the seat next to her empty. Or perhaps she had struggled too hard in her attempt to gain the power to unify her own dual nature. Whatever the case, she suppressed her loneliness. Her existence was no longer unstable.

She did not need somebody else to make her whole. She had become an adult. She would not wait for another to depend on. The absence of her other half no longer bothered her.

Thus, just like the god upon her initial summoning, long ago, Sari completed herself. Her cold body no longer needed the warmth of human touch.

Xixu remembered the sound of Mifileu Dié's crying well; their last parting in the capital had been punctuated by her sobs, as had a number of other occasions. Despite that, however, he had almost never seen her tear-stained cheeks, for she had always hidden her face in her hands.

As Xixu stared at the well-polished low table before him in the dim light of one of Pale Moon's guest rooms, these memories occupied his thoughts. For a long, long time, he remained silent.

Finally, in a quavering voice, Mifileu asked, "Why are you here?"

It was the second time she had asked Xixu that question since they had been reunited, and yet he still did not have a clear answer to give her. Sitting cross-legged on the tatami-mat floor, he pressed his fingers to his brow, which was threatening to sink toward the ground.

A number of possible responses came to Xixu's mind, but in the end he chose the one he thought to be the safest: "You aren't suited to being a courtesan. You should turn back from this path while you still can."

Since their last meeting, Xixu had requested an acquaintance of his in the capital look into Mifileu's family's troubles. As such, he had a rough grasp of the amount of debt they were in. It was well beyond what an ordinary shadeslayer could immediately shoulder, but fortunately, Xixu had been granted a manor of his own along with his royal status. Although his liege would likely pull a face at the idea, selling the property would provide him with enough wealth to assist Mifileu's family and still have some money left to spare.

That had been Xixu's plan, at least, but he'd yet to receive any response from Mifileu other than quiet sobbing, and his own inability to determine what was wrong had left him mute.

"I am not worth such consideration," Mifileu murmured at last, the words so soft they could have fooled one into thinking they'd never been said at all.

After a moment of silence, Xixu replied, "It isn't a matter of worth."

"I betrayed you."

"I don't see it that way."

Xixu's thoughts shifted, going back to the time when their paths had diverged from each other's. In his mind, the reason was simple—they'd merely been unable to mesh their lives together due to their respective circumstances.

Xixu had first met Mifileu while he had still been a commoner attending the military academy. At the time, she had been popular amongst the cadets for her prettiness, which had also attracted customers to her family's shop. Her reputation had had no bearing on Xixu's first visit to the business, however; he had simply stopped by to make a purchase.

Reflecting on it now, their past relationship had been singularly unremarkable. It had begun with a basic introduction, then expanded into idle conversation over time. Eventually, they had opened up enough to talk of each other's interests and hobbies. They'd discovered that the both of them liked tea, and had an identical obsession with paying attention to detail, and before long, Xixu had found being in her company pleasant. The emotion he had experienced, nurtured slowly over time they had spent together, was akin to the reassurance one felt when with their family.

Eventually, Xixu had realized that he and Mifileu had come to a place where they were roughly able to understand one another's intentions without words. From that realization had flowed an additional layer of knowledge—at some point along the way, he had subconsciously come to expect a future in which he asked for her hand in marriage. Not long after that, however, talks of Mifileu being married to another had surfaced.

The day that she had come to him in tears and informed him that she had to marry someone else had already become a distant memory in Xixu's mind. Her would-be partner had been the son of one of the most prominent businessman around, with a big name even within the capital; he was a suitor incomparable to a commoner who had only just graduated from the military academy. For Mifileu to reject the man and choose Xixu instead would have been the same as abandoning her ties to her family entirely. Knowing that, Xixu had simply acquiesced to her family's wishes and stopped seeing her, convinced that it was the best choice for her happiness. He had never imagined a future in which she would become a courtesan.

Reflecting back to a time where he'd been even more inexperienced than he

was now, Xixu pondered over the footprints he'd left upon the path he had walked. "Did you...not marry?" he asked.

Mifileu shook her head. "I declined his proposal. And I am sure that, given the state of my family now, he is glad he did not marry me."

Xixu had never before heard such self-deprecation in her voice. He held his silence, feeling as though any words he could say would prove nothing more than superficial comfort in the face of her hardships.

Glancing at the clock adorning the wall, Xixu noted that over an hour had already passed since he had come to Pale Moon. It would be best for him to return to his patrolling, even if the moon *had* already waxed past half.

Xixu rose, picking up his military sword. He hesitated over what to say in parting, than chose to opt in the favor of simplicity.

"I'll come again."

Several heartbeats passed before Mifileu asked, "Why?"

Yet again, Xixu could not find an answer. Instead, he repeated the words he had heard from the maiden. "You'll be able to earn your companionship fee from me, if I visit regularly," he said.

Mifileu's delicate shoulders stiffened, though she did not lift her gaze. "I can't accept that from you."

Seeing her stubbornness, Xixu wanted to sigh. "Please do not refuse. That would cause trouble for Saridi. This is Irede."

Try as they might to live their lives here, at the end of the day, both he and Mifileu remained people of the capital. Xixu himself knew this better than anyone else. No matter how much effort he expended to learn and understand Irede's ways, he could never claim them as his own. Thus, as a perennial outsider, it was his duty to respect the spirit of Irede instead. Even now, his mood was gloomy at the thought that he had allowed a personal complication of his to hurt Sari.

Mifileu lowered the hands covering her face for the first time since she'd begun to cry. She looked up at Xixu, her expression warped by tears. Then, from

her pretty lips, there came a hoarse, vehement accusation.

"You don't understand *anything*."

Ten fingernails gouged into the tatami-mat floor. Eyes brimming with tears pierced Xixu straight through.

The young man looked back at his once-sweetheart in mute astonishment. It was the first he'd ever seen her make an expression of such profound grief.

Xixu tried not to let the gloom hanging over his mood follow him outside of the guest room, but he knew he wasn't one to look friendly even in the best of times. The thought brought to mind how Sari had joked that it would feel unnatural for him to be jovial and bright. He loosed a delicate sigh at the memory.

Xixu walked down Pale Moon's hallway, descended the stairs, and then returned the wooden room tag he was holding to the maidservant at the entryway. As he settled his bill, he asked, "Where's Saridi?"

"She hasn't yet returned."

"Still?"

It seemed a long time for her to be gone just to take a walk. This time, when the urge to frown surfaced, Xixu didn't hold the expression back. Wondering what had happened, he looked beyond Pale Moon's open entryway to outside.

Then, the maidservant in a white apron bowed. "I believe she'll be back shortly," the woman said. "Would you like to wait in the flower room?"

"I... No."

Xixu knew that would only burden Pale Moon's young proprietress further, and he figured he had already caused her trouble enough, given the complications with Mifileu. It was just that he simply wished to see her, if only briefly.

Realizing what he was thinking, Xixu grimaced sourly. He wasn't sure whether the lingering regret he was feeling was the fault of his mood or not, but he began putting his shoes on in an attempt to shake it off.

“Tell Saridi I’d like to apologize,” he said. “And that I’ll come by again.”

“Of course.”

Anything further, Xixu could only tell her in person. Resolving to return to Pale Moon as soon as he was next able, he made his departure.

The moon that night was terribly bright.

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After that night, Xixu had visited Pale Moon several times, but only met the young maiden once. Even then, their encounter had been brief, a mere crossing of paths as Sari headed out to someplace else. She had only stopped long enough to stare at his face for a short while, then tell him, “Be careful.”

Xixu hadn’t been sure what he needed to be careful of, but the young maiden hadn’t given him the chance to inquire further, and when he’d asked a maidservant, the girl had merely told him that Sari had gone out on business, without specifying the kind.

“I hope she isn’t doing anything dangerous...” Xixu murmured.

He had thought that perhaps he could find out where Sari had been going from the other courtesans, but each time he visited Pale Moon, a maidservant was always quick to call for Mifileu. Thus, his visits had always resulted in him passing the time with Pale Moon’s newest courtesan in oppressive silence, unable to even enter the flower room. Such treatment was his own fault, Xixu knew, but he nevertheless found it unpleasant and somewhat suffocating.

Thus did time pass, until a particular day arrived. Xixu’s mood had been heavy all afternoon, and had accompanied him throughout his patrol. Now, he stared up at the pale moon where it hung in the evening sky, counting days.

In Irede, once the moon had waxed beyond half, shadeslayers would no longer be able to call upon the maiden for her aid. As far as most people knew, this was because her power—which corresponded to the waxing and waning of the moon—ebbed during this particular time of the month. Xixu, however, knew differently—in truth, her powers increased to a degree that made them difficult for her to control.

This meant that, as the only one of Irede's four current shadeslayers who knew the true identity of Irede's maiden, Xixu often found himself called to accompany Sari during this period in order to help her experiment with new techniques.

This month, however, shades had stopped manifesting considerably earlier than was usual. Xixu harbored mild doubts that the matter was merely a coincidence.

In the midst of walking down a narrow, dimly lit back alley, Xixu sank into thought. "It couldn't be..." he murmured, attempting to dismiss the possibility that had occurred to him. It was not one he wished to accept.

Stepping forward, Xixu emerged from the alley onto a lane running parallel to a canal, then stared at the moon's reflection on the water's surface. His mind flickered back, dwelling on a certain threat he had once confronted. Then, suddenly, he felt something akin to foreboding.

In the corner of Xixu's vision, he glimpsed the slightest of shifts in a stretch of tall, dense grass. He took one step back, half out of instinct, and then his thoughts caught up to reality.

"Ngh!"

A naked blade had just passed before his eyes, swung at a speed no human was capable of. It was a miracle that he had dodged it. Stunned, Xixu studied his assailant, who had stepped out of the grass. They wore black, and their face was hidden.

The stranger readjusted their balance upon the flat path and faced Xixu, adopting a stance with their blade—a katana with a straight *hamon*, or edge pattern. Moonlight bounced erratically off of the stone paving, causing the ground underfoot to glimmer as though it were ice.

Xixu cast off his surprise and placed a hand on his military sword, which was still in its scabbard. He realized the air around the black-clothed assassin had gone tight and close; the intensity of it had subconsciously caused him to tense up.

"Who are you?" Xixu asked forcefully. "Why are you doing this?"

No response came. In its stead, a golden light flashed along the length of the assassin's blade, a vivid color that seemed to hold within itself the light of the sun.

Xixu felt a familiar presence in the still night air and shuddered, realizing who it was that had returned. The words of caution spoken to him by Irede's maiden's now made sense.

He had expected this day to come. What he had not expected was to be attacked so suddenly without warning.

"No..." Xixu muttered. "I suppose I *did* have warning."

The realization made him want to kick a nearby gatepost. He had *just* been considering this possibility, wondering whether, just like last time, the lack of shades was due to the power of a newly arrived god suppressing them.

But although the idea had occurred to him, he had been too slow.

Keeping his inhuman opponent at the center of his focus, Xixu adopted an stance, leaving his blade in its scabbard as he prepared to draw. He knew had no chance of victory in a prolonged struggle; he needed to end this while it was still a pure contest of swordsmanship.

Eyes fixed on his opponent's feet and shoulders, the young man awaited his chance. He noted that, although the entire face and physique of his assailant was hidden within their black attire, they clearly did not appear to be a woman or child. Xixu then gauged the distance between himself and his opponent, bearing in mind that the god's last puppet, Nerei, had been a shadeslayer.

"Did you come back for Saridi again?" he asked, attempting to unbalance the black-clothed man. "Haven't you learned your lesson already? You're destined to fail."

Xixu was not going to allow matters to proceed as they had last time. If he had his way, Sari would not cry again.

Silence stretched, and Xixu realized no response would be forthcoming. He focused intently on his opponent, tuning everything else out.

As though to match Xixu, the assassin adjusted his grip on his blade.

Xixu stilled his breath. He could hear the murmuring of the canal's waters. Time seemed to come to a stop—and then, a *splash*, as though a fish had leapt from the water.

Xixu's blade slid from its scabbard. A flash of moonlight illuminated two crossed blades.

There was no sunlight. No sound of exhaled breath. Only after Xixu glanced down at the blood splashed across his body did he feel the pain.

His opponent's blade had pierced into the base of his right shoulder. It was a fatal blow for Xixu's ability to wield his sword, but only a single thought ran through his mind. *Now he can't get away*.

Forcefully clearing his mind of the ache of his wound, Xixu took in the damage his own sword strike had caused. He appeared to have landed a clean, upward cut across his opponent, but the black-clothed man showed no sign of serious injury, and the blow had felt so insubstantial to Xixu that he might as well have been cutting through a bundle of cloth. Even still, Xixu doubted that his blade was *entirely* ineffective.

Pressing forward half a step, Xixu switched his military sword to his left hand and made a close-quarters slash at his faceless assailant. He was rewarded with the dull sensation of his blade sinking into flesh.

Immediately afterward, Xixu found himself—weapon and all—being blown back toward the canal. His hand scrabbled for purchase as he tumbled across the ground, narrowly preventing himself from falling into the water. The movement caused an intense pain to blare to life in his right shoulder, where his opponent's blade had just been yanked free.

"Damn!" Xixu cursed.

He began pushing himself up, fearing a follow-up attack, only to see his opponent adroitly turn on his heels and break into a run. He melted into the darkness mere moments later.

Staggering to his feet, Xixu stared in the direction his opponent had gone. "He's...headed for Pale Moon..."

The maiden—the girl he had to protect, and his opponent's target—was

currently at Pale Moon.

Before Xixu's thoughts had the time to catch up, he was already running. His black-clothed, inhuman assailant might have already vanished from sight, but Xixu knew he knew the paths toward Pale Moon better than anybody else.

Not even taking the time to staunch the bleeding from his wound, the young man sprinted through the pleasure town under the light of early sunset. He chose narrow, unpopulated alleyways as his path—they were the shortest route to the courtesan house in the north.

Before long, Xixu had reached his destination; he slipped past the unlit hanging lantern and shoved aside the sliding entryway door.

A maidservant who had been sweeping in the entryway flinched and stared at Xixu, clearly startled by his appearance. "What? Um—"

"Where's Saridi?!"

"Th-The proprietress is still in the secondary build—"

Xixu did not wait for the rest, stepping up onto the wooden floor of the manor with his shoes still on. He ignored the maidservant's slight shriek of protest and ran deeper into the manor, taking a route that guests normally did not traverse as he headed for the detached building where Sari lived. A voice far behind him was still crying for him to stop, but he stormed up to the second floor and forced open the door to the proprietress's personal room.

"Saridi!"

"Huh?"

Sari was alone in her room. She must have bathed recently, because her long silver hair was down, and droplets of water still clung to it as she turned around. Her smooth limbs were slick with moisture, and since her silken underrobe was wet, the pale skin beneath was almost entirely visible, making the garment so see through it was nearly as if she was wearing nothing at all.

Xixu stared at her blankly.

"Xixu? What's wrong? Did you make some kind of groundbreaking discovery?"

“No, I...”

Xixu couldn’t see any sign of outside influence in Sari’s blue eyes. What he *could* see, though, was that this was an awfully compromising situation. Coming to his senses, he tore his gaze away from the bewitching sight of her and turned to the right.

Sari’s pale hand reached out to grab him. “You’re hurt,” she noted. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Xixu said. “Sorry for coming in with my shoes on.”

“I’m not really worried about that part. You’re bleeding onto the floor.”

The implication being, of course, that the same amount of effort went into cleaning both up anyway.

Sari turned Xixu back around, and he immediately averted his gaze toward the ceiling. She paid him no regard and inspected the wound in his right shoulder. “This is a stab wound,” she said. “Who did this to you?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Xixu said in a clipped tone. “I *really* will, so *please* put some clothes on.”

“Later? But that must really hurt. Hold still for a moment, I’ll fix it up.”

“What do you...?”

Xixu was capable of stopping his own bleeding, so he wished she would just let go of him. As he opened his mouth to say as much, however, the words died in his throat.

The sensation he felt invoked a rousing feeling of vertigo in him.

Sari, standing on tiptoe, had brought her face to his shoulder. With a faint, wet sound, she ran her tongue along the bleeding wound there.

A violent shudder ran down the back of Xixu’s neck as he felt her breath against his sweat-drenched skin. He went utterly still, disoriented by the absurdity of what she had just done. As she leaned against him, he did not even possess the wherewithal to recognize how cold her body was.

Several long moments passed before Xixu said, “Saridi...”

“Hold still.” The brief command brooked no dissent.

Sari’s slender fingers seized ahold of Xixu’s clothes. Her eyes were closed. Xixu watched as more and more of his blood trickled down her cheeks.

Sari continued to carefully lick the blood from Xixu’s wound, seemingly uncaring that her beautiful features and underrobe were being stained. The sounds she made could have passed as those of a spoiled kitten, lapping away at treat. They resounded unpleasantly through the twilit room, agitating Xixu’s base instincts. He felt his consciousness fading as an uncontrollable fever welled forth.

If, in this moment, his heart was prepared for pain, then perhaps...

Without realizing, Xixu shifted forward, on the verge of embracing the body leaning against his. But instead of taking that next step, he suddenly looked up, freezing when his eyes met Sari’s. She wiped the blood from her lips and tilted her head to the side.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“What? I...” Xixu trailed off, feeling as though, if he was not deliberately careful with his words, he would end up saying something unthinkable. But when the young shadeslayer realized that he was trembling, he calmed down slightly and examined his right shoulder. “The wound’s...closed.”

“What about the inside? Does it still hurt? Can you move it?”

“I...think so. It seems fine. Did you use a maiden technique?” Xixu was surprised; Sari hadn’t been capable of such feats before.

Sari gave him a small smile. “As I am now, there’s power in my bodily fluids. My blood would be too potent, but I thought my saliva would be just right. And it’s you, Xixu; you’re used to it.”

“I am?”

“To my power, yes.” Sari snapped her slender fingers, then left him as she moved over to the dresser and began wiping the blood from her hands with a cloth.

Xixu’s eyes followed her as she went, but he quickly jerked them away when

he saw that the lithe curve of her back was visible through her underrobe. He headed for the door, intent on quietly taking his leave, but the room's owner called out to him as she studied his reflection in the mirror.

"Oh, hold on. Who injured you? You haven't told me yet."

After a moment, Xixu replied, "It was Nerei's replacement. I ran into him earlier."

"What?!"

Xixu was torn; as much as he dearly wanted to leave this discussion for later, it was best that he told Sari that *it* had returned as soon as possible. Half out of that judgment and half out of resignation, he kept his gaze fixed on the hallway outside as he recounted what had happened. When he finished, Sari groaned softly.

"It's back *already*?" she grumbled. "And while I've been investigating over there too... Which one is the real source...?"

"Over there?" Xixu repeated. "Real source?"

Sari groaned again. "With things like this, it feels like you'll die the moment I take my eyes off you."

"Me?"

"*Yes*, you."

Xixu wanted to refute the foreboding claim, but Sari appeared to be genuinely concerned. In any case, he needed to bring them back to the topic at hand, as well as apologize. Still facing the hallway, he said, "I don't have any intention of dying, but I *am* sorry about rushing in here. It was rude of me. I didn't finish him off, so I thought he would come for you."

"It's fine," Sari said. "I'd be honestly surprised if he'd been that easy to kill. Don't worry, it's not as if this is one of the guest rooms. I'm just glad you're safe."

Sari's detached tone of voice was a marked difference from when he'd first met her. There was a lack of warmth in it that made Xixu skeptical of it being simply a matter of her having matured.

The young shadeslayer began to hear rustling sounds; he supposed Sari was perhaps putting on clothes. He quietly made to leave, but she once again called out, stopping him.

“Wait. This is a real problem... The biggest one currently on my hands, in fact. I don’t know where it would be safe to leave you, Xixu.”

“That’s not something you need to be worried about. You should be more concerned about yourself.”

“I’ll be fine. You know I’m not human.”

The words lacked the tinge of loneliness he’d once heard in them, yet Xixu frowned to hear them nonetheless. His refutation came reflexively. “It has nothing to do with whether you’re human or not. You’re you. I won’t let anybody hurt you.”

For that was what Xixu’s liege had ordered, and what he himself had decided. He would protect Sari from all that would seek to harm her. His sword was for the purpose of that one duty above all else, and he would not fail to keep the promise he’d made her. That she was not human had no bearing on the matter. He had long since accepted who she was.

Xixu realized that his military sword was still hanging naked from his hip, and checked its blade. It seemed as though he hadn’t hallucinated the feel of cutting his opponent; there was a faint smear of blood remaining on the steel.

As he carefully returned his sword to its scabbard, Xixu heard the sound of somebody hurrying up the stairs. The maidservant he’d encountered at the entryway soon appeared, the color draining from her face when she caught sight of Xixu. Behind her was Mifileu, who screamed when she saw that he was covered in blood.

“K-Kilis! You’re hurt!”

“I’m fine. It only looks that way.”

“But...you’re...”

“Fi.” The voice, devoid of any warmth, came from within the room. The words of the proprietress, mistress of the courtesan house of the rightful bloodline,

struck the other woman as though they were tangible. “I don’t recall granting you permission to enter this building. Don’t step outside your bounds again.”

“M-Miss Proprietress?”

“Return to the manor. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

The order was gentle, but given with cold dignity, and left no room for argument. Mifileu, seemingly at a loss, looked at Xixu timidly.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, nodding.

The woman still seemed hesitant to leave. Xixu was about to show her the closed wound as further proof, but then Sari reached out from behind him and pulled him back.

“All right, I’ve decided,” she said. “I’ll be too worried about you if I leave you in Irede, Xixu, so I’ll take you along too.”

“Take me along?” he asked. “Where?”

“It’s fine, just follow behind me.” Sari forcefully tugged Xixu back into the room, then poked her head out of the doorway to look at the flustered pair of women outside. “We’ll be going ou— I mean, we have some business to take care of. It’ll be over in two hours, so don’t enter this building in the meantime. Please take care of the lantern lighting.”

“O-Of course, Miss Proprietress.”

“Then I’ll see you later.”

Sari shut the door with a *clack*, then turned back to Xixu. He looked at her in surprise; until that moment, he had not noticed that she was bereft of her usual white kimono, and was instead dressed as an ordinary city girl from the capital.

“Why are you dressed like that?” he asked.

“A kimono would stand out too much,” Sari replied. “You shouldn’t stay in those clothes either. Oh, and it’s best if you hide your face.”

“Why? What are we doing?”

“You’d prefer not to cross-dress, right? Although, I guess my clothes wouldn’t fit you anyway...”

Did you even need to ask? Xixu thought, feeling his weariness compound. He almost sighed, but his eyes widened when he noticed the glass box atop the dresser. Within it, sitting atop a stretch of red-velvet cloth, were two large pearls—the gifts he had given Sari for her birthday.

As he searched for something to say, she casually took his hand. “Let’s stop by your room first then,” she said. “You can change clothes and find something to hide your face.”

“Again, where are we—?”

Before Xixu could finish, Sari tapped her toes against the floor. His field of vision warped violently, and when it settled, what he saw shocked him. They were in the doorway of his room, in the dormitory he resided in.

“How did we get here...?” he mumbled.

Sari looked up at him and smiled. “We’re going to where Tesed Zaras is, Xixu.”

“What?”

Xixu knew who that was, of course. What he didn’t know was why Sari was bringing up the name of an old man who to the best of his knowledge was currently in a neighboring country. As he stared at her in amazement, Sari smiled mysteriously.

“Xixu?” she prompted. “If you can’t change alone, I’m happy to help you out of your clothes.”

“No, wait—I get it, I’ll change.”

He couldn’t go *anywhere* as he currently was, really. Xixu stepped into his room and headed for his chest of drawers to retrieve a change of clothes.

From behind him, Sari, now crouching in the doorway, added, “Not your militia uniform. Pick something that will hide your identity. And make sure it covers your face.”

“Right...”

Xixu hadn’t been sure why she had requested that he hide his face at first, but the answer was relatively easy to discern, if one thought about it. Tesed Zaras knew who he was. If they were going to see the man, a disguise would be

imperative.

Xixu changed into a set of plain clothes, stifled a sigh as he did so. “All else aside,” he said, “I know you’ve appeared in my room before, but I wasn’t aware you could travel so freely.”

“Mm-hm. Back then, it wasn’t something I could do whenever I wanted, but now, I can pretty much do it at will.”

“Hold on. So we’re really going to the neighboring country?”

“Don’t worry, it isn’t my first time making the trip. I’ve been there several times to look into things.”

“What?”

Xixu dropped his jacket in surprise. He turned to look at her as he picked it up, but she kept her gaze on his door.

“More importantly, Xixu,” Sari said, “you should wipe the blood off before you put your jacket on. It’ll stain your clean clothes.”

“Ah... Right.”

The blood was already beginning to congeal, but it hadn’t progressed so far that it wasn’t simple to clean off. Xixu dampened a handkerchief and scrubbed away at the area around his wound. Though it had been quite deep, there was no longer any trace of it ever having existed. He stared at his right shoulder in awe, and then the memory of how it had been healed caused him to almost drop his handkerchief. He felt his face reddening.

“What am I thinking...?” he muttered to himself.

Sari didn’t appear bothered by what had happened at all, no doubt because healing him had been the foremost concern in her mind. Yet here he was, allowing his imagination to get the better of him. He felt like kicking himself. Instead, he directed a number of curses his own way, gripped his handkerchief tightly, and began kicking a nearby wall post.

“Hurry up, Xixu,” came an exasperated voice. “I said we’d be back in two hours.”

“Ah. Sorry.” Xixu paused. “Wait, you were serious about going to the

neighboring country?!”

“*Yes*. Now if you don’t hurry up and change, I’m coming over there to help you.”

“Okay, sorry, sorry. Wait, please.”

Xixu may have wanted to scold Sari for her recklessness, but he didn’t want her to touch him any more than she already had more. He finished changing with deft movements, then wound a length of cloth around his nose and mouth. He had once encountered a tribe of people in the east who had kept their faces concealed in a similar manner as part of their daily attire.

Upon turning around, he found that Sari was watching him, looking as though she was enjoying herself. She offered him a pale hand.

“All done? Let’s go.”

Her hand was beautiful. As Sari smiled happily, Xixu felt the strangest sense that something was out of place. When he touched her fingers and found that they were as cold as ice, that sense became something that bordered on certainty—and then an instant later, he was standing upon a path in the middle of an unfamiliar forest.

Trees extended to his left and right as far as he could see, making the forest appear dense and endless. The only vestige of human influence was the tidy gravel path that he and Sari stood upon, formed from white stones and lacking even a single weed. There was more moisture in the air than in Irede, and through the breaks in the trees, Xixu could see the night sky.

“Where is this?” he asked.

“We’re near the field,” Sari replied. “I was thinking of cleaning it up first before moving on.”

Xixu went to ask what kind of field she meant, then hummed in understanding, the answer coming to him after a moment’s thought.

A short time ago, Tesed Zaras had sparked turmoil in the royal capital by introducing a strange white flower. It seemed safe to assume that the flower in question was crop of this nearby field of Sari’s. That would also give credence to

the information he'd heard from his liege, about how the countries surrounding Torlonia had begun to deviate from their usual behavior.

Sari began walking ahead, alone, the gravel path under her feet striking under the moon's light. Mere steps ahead, the little makeshift road forked into two branches, one of which was made of dirt, and lacked gravel or stones. This was the one Sari chose, and Xixu followed after her, watching her shining silver hair. There was something almost ethereal about the silky strands.

When a clearing came into view, Xixu walked up to Sari's side. "We might run into somebody," he said. "You should stay behind me."

"Ah, no!" Sari protested. "Just stay quiet and watch, Xixu. I only brought you because it was too dangerous to leave you alone in Irede."

"You keep saying that, but..."

Certainly, he had been seriously wounded earlier, but Xixu did not even want to entertain the notion of his being weak enough to warrant the concern of a girl five years his junior. Sari seemed to be treating him akin to a child who she was hiding behind her back.

Despite Xixu's misgivings, Sari said not a word more and broke into a run, not sparing him a glance as she went. He was on the verge of calling out for her to stop before he stopped himself; it was impossible to know who else might hear. Ultimately, he set off too, one beat after her. Her long silver hair served as a shining guide upon the dark path.

It wasn't long before Sari broke from the trees and into plunged into a field of flowers that stretched beyond the forest. Xixu, who had followed after her small figure, found himself at loss for words, overcome by the scenery before him.

It was a sea of white. The flower field, ringed by the forest, was vast enough that it could have ensconced a small village. Under the pale light of the moon, the large petaled flowers in full bloom possessed such magnificence that one could have mistaken them for jewels, unless one was aware of their special trait. But perhaps, to those who did know, they were jewels in a different sense.

Xixu looked out over the field of white flowers mutely. To him, the sight

seemed in equal parts beautiful and sinister. His reverie soon broke, however, and he made to follow after the girl who was pushing her way through the flowers. Sari took notice and turned to look at him.

“Stay there,” she said. “And be careful of their scent. We can’t have you ending up like last time.”

“Ugh...”

Xixu didn’t want to remember that particular event from the past. Though, being strictly precise, he quite literally couldn’t. Regardless, he pressed a hand over his cloth-covered nose and mouth.

While the flower had no effect on Sari, likely due to her inhuman nature, its efficacy had been demonstrably proven on Xixu. To make matters worse, if he fell under its influence now, of all times, he had a vague inkling of what he might end up doing—as much as he didn’t want to imagine it.

When Xixu, doing as he was told, stopped at the periphery of the flower field, Sari smiled and proceeded further inward.

Not a single other person was in sight. Sari raised her pale right hand toward the moon, seemingly drawing the moonlight into her palm. Glancing down at the gilded forelimb, clad in luminescence, Sari swept it in a wide, horizontal sweep. Gleaming droplets splashed out into the night, raining down upon white petals.

Then, the change began.

The petals that had been touched by the spray began to freeze. Clear frost crept down from stalk, to leaf, to root, icing over even the ground as its grasp reached out for yet other flowers.

With Sari at the center, the rapidly spreading chain of droplets soaked into the blooming flowers, and spread. The sound of shattering petals in every direction gave Xixu the vivid delusion that he was listening to the ringing of countless tiny bells. Watching this scene, which felt pulled straight out of a fantasy, play out before him, the young man came to a realization—the light that clung to Sari was not moonlight after all.

“It’s...cold air...” he muttered to himself.

When Sari's divine power intensified, her body temperature dropped to extreme limits. It seemed well within possibility that she could manipulate that to kill the flowers. She had frozen the very earth, meaning not even their roots would be left. In doing so, she intended to dispose of every flower in this field.

The moon was bright that night.

Adorned in pale light, the girl danced amongst the flowers. But though she almost appeared to be a performer on a stage, when one looked upon her, the sight seemed imbued with a sense of eternal isolation.

As Xixu watched the flowers before him crumble, his handsome features twisted into a grim frown.

Sari returned a dozen or so minutes later, once the vast field of flowers was entirely frozen over. Despite such a significant exertion of her power, she looked unruffled as she patted Xixu on the arm.

"Okay, let's go," she said. "Tesed Zaras is in an estate nearby."

"Wait, Saridi."

Xixu took Sari's hand before she could walk off, and she turned as he held her delicate fingers in his. He couldn't detect even a hint of heat from the digits in his grasp; he felt only a chill far beyond the bounds of a simple lack of warmth. Sari was not merely cold; the young shadeslayer felt as though he were holding ice. But now, he was certain.

Sari looked up at Xixu curiously. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Did you come up with an idea?"

"No," he replied. "We should return for today. This is bad for your health."

While the girl who was a god possessed immense power, Xixu knew said power came with aftereffects. If Sari overused it, her body would chill through, and the backlash would cause her to be bedridden for a time.

Sari herself had once said she disliked the times when her body temperature lowered thus, as it made her feel lonely. Perhaps she'd had no choice but to use her power to dispose of the flowers just now, but there was no need to force

anything more. And, where Tesed Zaras was concerned, Xixu knew it was possible that they could request the king's aid.

Xixu touched Sari's cheek. It was as cold as her fingers. "It might be rough on you, but can you travel one more time?" he asked. "Let's return to Pale Moon."

"What?" Sari blinked. "No, we're not going back."

"But, Saridi—"

"We're not. I'm fine."

Xixu studied Sari as she watched him. She looked puzzled and slightly irked, but she didn't seem to be putting on a brave face. Once again, he felt as if something was out of place, but he wasn't about to let her talk him around. He held his palm against her forehead, as though to check her temperature.

"Haven't you noticed? You're practically frozen. You shouldn't push yourself."

"I'm not. And *of course* my body's cold. I'm not human, remember?"

"Saridi..."

Something was wrong. Xixu could sense it, rubbing against his deepest thoughts like sandpaper. He lapsed into silence, mulling over the sense of nagging discomfort that had risen in him, which bore such a close resemblance to impatience.

Sari smiled faintly at Xixu, looking slightly awkward. "I'm fine, really," she insisted. "Come on, let's hurry. I shouldn't leave Irede without me for too long."

"No, wait," he insisted. "You're more important. Did something happen?"

Xixu took both of Sari's hands. Her slender wrists still seemed as though they would break in his grip—that, at least, had not changed. It was the skin which laid over those wrists which bore a difference; they conveyed to him a frigid coldness that felt almost akin to rejection.

The young shadeslayer found himself wondering how Sari had become able to achieve feats such as he'd those he'd recently experienced, which she had not previously been capable of. He knew that her divine nature was increasingly manifesting itself, but this seemed to him like something different. Was it related to the return of her brother god?

Sari gave him a smile, the meaning of which he could not fathom. Her touchingly innocent lips spun the gentle words, “Nothing happened,” into his ears. “Don’t worry, I’m fine,” she continued. “Once this is over, I won’t ever cause trouble for you again, Xixu.”

“Saridi...?”

Once again, the maiden girl smiled happily. Beautiful in every way, the expression was a mask oft worn by the women of Irede. A face that was distant, loving, and that permitted no approach; one learned by girls who had become adults.

Again, Xixu felt a rush of impatience at the back of his throat. He was about to call Sari’s name again when another voice spoke from behind.

“So, you do not need him? I see. Then I shall accept this offering in your stead.”

“Huh...?” Sari’s blue eyes widened.

Xixu turned; the voice sounded familiar. His right hand curled around the hilt of his sword, but before he unsheathed it, transparent fingers touched his chin. A silver-haired girl floated in the air, laughing happily with pure, bright eyes.

“As promised, my sacred offering, I have come for you.”

“No, wait!” Sari lifted her right hand.

Intending to cover her, Xixu drew his military sword—but his arm was bound by some unseen power, and he was unable to swing. The transparent girl reached both her arms out and pulled Xixu into a gentle embrace.

“You’ve made me wait quite a while. But...I shall forgive you, as long as you give me this.”

The tone of her voice was more childish than Sari’s, more distorted. Xixu recognized her.

“Distira?!”

The name had been told to him not long before by the king’s maiden, who had said that he may have need of it. And indeed, Xixu had said the name when he had faced the golden wolf, and the transparent girl who resembled Sari had

appeared and saved his life.

Back then, she had said that she would come back for him, but Xixu hadn't considered that to be a serious possibility. He *had* brought her name up to Sari and Thoma, but the former had simply looked confused, while the latter's expression had been an emotionless mask. It had been Thoma's reaction in particular that had made Xixu hesitant to pursue the topic any further, so in the end, he had dropped the matter, and Distira's existence had faded from his mind, becoming more of a vague apparition with each passing day.

Currently, however, the girl had him trapped in her arms.

Distira's body was as cold as water. Xixu stared, overcome by the inhumanness of it, but then something pulled hard on his clothes from behind, causing his upper body to jerk back. He heard Sari's voice from right next to him.

"Stay awake! She'll take you away!"

"Take me away...?" Xixu repeated.

"Don't obstruct me, little girl."

White sparks scattered before Xixu's eyes—the result of two powers clashing, no doubt. They arced through the air and rained down toward his body, but he immediately flicked them away with his sword. The movement had the secondary effect of grazing Distira's arm, and the transparent girl clicked her tongue and released her hold on Xixu. Sari stepped into the gap.

"Xixu, get back!"

Sari's small head hovered right below the young shadeslayer's eyes. Her silver hair, which so often seemed lustrous in the light of the moon, now was itself faintly luminescent. A finger clad in pure cold pointed at Distira, who remained afloat upon the air.

"Ghost of the past," Sari intoned. "It seems you have escaped your seal through the act of another calling your name."

"Me, a ghost? What a strange thing to say. As long as my existence persists, I am a god. Just like you."

Distira cheerful laugh rung out once again, and the falling moonlight illuminated her outline, making her slender body seem to glow. As much as she proclaimed not to be a ghost, it was difficult to see her as anything otherwise.

Xixu studied Distira from over Sari's shoulder. "Saridi," he said. "Is she...?"

"Be careful," Sari replied. "She's my equal."

This confirmed Xixu's expectations; Distira was not an opponent who could be overcome by the strength of a mere human. He felt a tension grow in him that he could not find the will to suppress.

Distira looked down at him, smiled sweetly as her eyes softened. "There is no need for you to be in such awe of me," she said. "You are a man who will become a sacred offering, are you not? You have been marked by that little girl's power."

"I..." Xixu fell silent.

Nerei had said the same thing to him, once. He supposed that was just how gods saw him, due to his frequent presence by Sari's side as they chased after shades.

Still, that was no reason for him to be abducted to become another god's sacred offering. The young man adjusted his hold on his sword's hilt, gripping it tightly.

Sari held Xixu back with her left hand. "And why do *you* need a sacred offering?" she demanded of the apparition before them. "Why must mankind provide one to an echo with no duty to fulfill?"

"If I am able to receive an offering, then I *shall* fulfill my duty," Distira replied. "That has always been my intent. 'Twas *mankind* who refused *me*."

A bare hint of pain flickered in Distira's eyes. Sari must have noticed it too; her delicate shoulders trembled slightly.

The two gods, alike only in appearance, faced one another. The floating girl sank lower in the air, then smiled.

"I was refused by my offering," Distira said. "But you... You refused yours. Surely it is evident which of us deserves to receive one, then? Why do you care

if another acquires what you have thrown away? You have no right to interfere.”

The challenge in Distira’s gaze was piercing. In response, Xixu thought he caught the sound of Sari grinding her teeth, but since she stood in front of him, he could not see her expression.

“Saridi...” he said slowly, reflecting upon Distira’s words. “Did you really ‘throw me away’?”

“Oh, *be quiet*, Xixu! Things will only get more complicated if we get into that now!”

Several long moments passed before Xixu replied, “All right.”

He did want to know more, but this was clearly not the place nor time.

Sari’s feet scuffed against the gravel underfoot as she glared up at the floating girl. Then, she raised her right hand, shining with pale light.

Even from behind her, the condensed cold air sapped the warmth from Xixu’s body. Leaving him—the human—where he was, Sari took a step forward.

“Xixu is a guest of Pale Moon,” she said. “I can’t hand him over to you.”

“Then shall I change places with you?” Distira asked, her voice full of pure, innocent confidence. “I will become the caretaker of Irede, Pale Moon, and the snake. All of it. For I am also the mistress of that town.” She beckoned to Xixu with a finger.

Sari stood frozen, her body encased in clear, bright moonlight. “Don’t be unfair, Mother,” she murmured, her voice so low it only just reached Xixu’s ears.

“What?”

Before Xixu could say anything more, Sari had already leapt off the gravel and into the air. Distira laughed as a violent spray of sparks burst from between her and Sari, illuminating the nighttime forest with white light.

The clash between gods was more striking than a full moon. As Xixu stared up at it, he ruminated upon the words he had just heard.

“She’s...Saridi’s mother?”

That would make her Thoma’s mother too, as well as the wife of the head of House Radi in the royal capital. By no means could that women be a transparent girl in a place such as this. And yet... Avague recollection nagged at Xixu.

“No, wait...”

Xixu reeled in a thread of memory, recalling something Thoma had once told him. The heir to house Radi had spoken of his father, and how the man had once rejected the divine side of Thoma and Sari’s mother. This had caused her to cut that part of her loose and seal it away. If that was true, the Distira was—

A violent explosion resounded throughout the forest, shaking the trees.

Xixu, who had been preoccupied with his own thoughts, came to his senses and looked up at the night sky. Against the backdrop of the moon, he saw the silhouette of a girl falling, as though she had been blown back. Recognizing who it was, he ran for her, catching her in his arms the moment before she slammed into the gravel path.

Still staggering from the impact he had not been able to completely mitigate, Xixu lowered Sari onto the ground. As he rose, he slashed at nothing with his blade, the keen cut passing swiftly through empty air.

Distira let out a choked cry, then fell silent. Sari, sitting upon the gravel, looked up at Xixu with wide eyes.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I just had the feeling she was there, so I swung...” Xixu replied. He hadn’t intended to do anything extraordinary.

The young shadeslayer glanced at his military sword, his eyes widening when he abruptly realized that a streak of blood still remained on its blade. It must have been from earlier, when he’d cut that black-clothed man in Irede. He’d forgotten to wipe his weapon clean.

“Is that why...?” Xixu wondered.

Perhaps it had been a lucky break then, that he’d gotten injured; it was only in

taking that blow that Xixu had managed to land his own. Not that current circumstances lent themselves toward any kind of celebration.

Xixu looked at the blood coating his arms, then down at the girl at his feet. “Saridi, you’re hurt...”

“It’s not fair, not having an actual body,” Sari grumbled irritatedly. “It means I’m the only one who ended up like this.”

A large gash ran from Sari’s right shoulder to her stomach. The wound seemed quite deep; blood was pooling steadily across the gravel. Xixu fell to his knees and took Sari into his arms.

“We’re leaving,” he said. “Can you manage the trip back to Pale Moon?”

“I think so.”

“Then hurry.”

Xixu removed the cloth he’d wound around his face and used it to put pressure on Sari’s shoulder. As he did, their surroundings changed, and then they were back in her room at Pale Moon.

When Sari and Xixu had departed on their journey, it had been the latter who was drenched in blood. Now, upon their return, Xixu found that his companion had swapped places with him. He wasn’t unable to see the hint of irony in their situation, even despite the confusing circumstances, but at the moment such things didn’t matter. Sari’s wound took precedence—it looked serious.

Xixu carried Sari’s cold body over to her bed, then laid her down. “I’ll call for a doctor,” he said. “Just wait.”

“No, don’t,” she protested. “I’m fine.”

Sari’s voice was hoarse, but the clear determination in it stopped Xixu from leaving the room. He turned around.

“You don’t look fine,” he said.

“I will be—I can close the wound myself. It’ll be worse if someone examines me.” Sari paused. “More importantly, can you help me stop the bleeding? I

might run out of blood before I can close it.”

Lying upon the bed, which was growing increasingly stained with blood, Sari pressed her hand against her shoulder, white droplets welling from her fingers. It was possible she was attempting to alleviate her pain by chilling the wound.

Xixu returned to Sari’s side, then picked up a length of bleached cloth that had been left nearby. In more normal circumstances, the fabric would have been used as an undergarment.

“I’ll make the bindings tight,” Xixu said as he checked over Sari. He noted she was breathing roughly. “Is it okay if I undress you?”

“Mm-hm... Sorry.”

Sari’s cotton clothing was already heavy with the blood it had absorbed. Xixu gripped the portion of the garment that had been cut open, then tore it wider. As he began to bind her wound, he noticed the stomach end of it had become shallower; no doubt that was because of Sari’s attempts to close it.

Xixu frowned as he worked; Sari’s body was still as cold as ice. When he finished, Sari exhaled lightly—perhaps she felt a little better.

“Thank you...” she said. “I’m going to sleep for a little while. Try not to touch me—I’ll drain your vitality if you do.”

“Saridi.”

“But stay close, okay? It’s...dangerous...”

Sari’s eyes drifted shut. When Xixu saw that her breathing had immediately lapsed into the faint, steady rhythm of sleep, he sat down on the floor beside her bed. Gently, he extended a finger toward her pale face.

If somebody had asked Xixu what had changed, he wouldn’t be able to say. Too much was happening that was beyond human understanding, and he couldn’t keep up.

Yet, even still...

“Saridi,” Xixu murmured, holding her cold hand.

As Sari slept, she looked a little uneasy, a little lonely—just as she had the last

time. Xixu's hand drew closer, his fingers brushing the blood from her cheeks.

Was that slight tremble in her shoulders because she was cold, or because she had lost so much blood? It could have been both.

Xixu frowned, pondering for a moment, then stood up, careful not to wake her. He lay down close by her side and brought her slender frame into his arms.

"I'm probably going to catch a cold..." he muttered to himself.

In addition to embracing a girl who might as well have been a block of ice, she was also, in her own words, draining his vitality. It seemed inevitable that he would come down with a cold later, at the very least. But if sacrificing his own health was enough to help her recover, then he didn't regret the cost at all. Xixu pulled Sari's head toward his chest and closed his eyes.

"You'll be okay," he murmured.

He would not leave her to be alone. He would not run away. If the burden a god bore was a promise, then what a human gave them in return was their sincerity. Xixu hugged Sari closer, taking care not to harm her delicate frame.

Darkness took his consciousness, but soon it began to waver, drifting in lazy circles. Before Xixu knew it, he found himself alone on the path to a cold stone chamber.

5. Transience

There was a fresh puddle of blood on the white gravel path.

Tesed Zaras, who had left his estate to investigate the flash that had lit the sky shortly before, along with the explosion that had accompanied it, looked around at his subordinates. He had thought perhaps that one of them might have suffered an injury during their patrol. This was disproved, however, when all of them shook their heads.

The conclusion to be drawn was that somebody had intruded into this place—and therefore, onto his private land.

Tesed leaned down over the gravel path, considering the possibility that the puddle of blood before him was an animal's. He touched it; it had not yet congealed.

He flinched.

The crimson liquid rippled invitingly. It appeared to be nothing but mere blood, but to Tesed, it was something more—a vestige of the unknown. For when he'd touched it, he'd found it cold as ice, and its frigidity had numbed the tip of his finger.

※

"You see, Xixu... To me, you were just like that blue glass bird."

The female voice reached Xixu's ears, the words it spoke echoing directly inside his head. Despite this, he did not think the voice had been addressing him—its words had sounded like a soliloquy, meant for the speaker alone. Still, the steeped-in plaintiveness that exuded from it tore at Xixu's heart.

"It was beautiful," the voice continued, "and so I yearned for it. But it was beyond my grasp—our natures were too different."

Each word trickled forth slowly, bearing as much emotion as they could hold. Even so, the voice was calm; the kind of calm that came from revealing words one had kept suppressed deep inside.

This was how she had always lived: resolute and self-restrained, the latter a quality she herself had never consciously recognized. She had always strove to fulfill her duty to perfection.

“Thoma gave me the bird,” she said, a hint of emotion entering her tone. Almost...self-deprecation. “But you’re more than just an ornament, Xixu. So...”

There was a brief pause. Then, like the final droplet being wrung from a cloth, a murmur spilled forth as though it were a tear.

“So...I’m fine now. I’ll give up.”

She let out a long sigh. Upon hearing it, Xixu’s body was abruptly freed from its restraints, and he at last found himself able to breathe again.

He was standing, but he couldn’t tell where, and his vision had gone hazy. Still, Xixu found himself thinking he could possibly be in a stone chamber. Perhaps.

Looking around the indefinite, flickering world about him, Xixu saw the gleam of a remarkably bright light, glowing from some distance away.

“Saridi,” he murmured.

The name came to his lips without prompting as he reached his hand out toward the light.

He could not see her. He did not know whether his voice would reach her. And yet, step by step, Xixu approached the gentle glow. He felt no fear.

Xixu stepped into the light, his body dissolving into it. And as he did, he called the girl’s name.

“Saridi, are you there?”

Again, he reached his hand out. He took another step closer.

And then, with no warning at all, he was jerked back, far, far away.

“What the *hell* are you doing?!”

Xixu, was dragged back to reality by an angry shout that threatened to tear his eardrums. His thoughts lagged behind as he gazed down at his body—only

belatedly did he realize that he'd been hurled onto the floor.

The young shadeslayer looked up at his friend, who was gripping him by the back of his collar. His thoughts were still jumbled, perhaps because of the rough awakening, but when he turned his gaze back to the bed where Sari laid sleeping, half naked and stained with blood, his mind finally grasped the meaning of the words that had just been shouted at him.

"Wait, no—this isn't what it looks like."

Thoma doted on his little sister. Xixu would not have found it surprising if he cut him down first and asked questions later, after walking in on a situation such as this.

Xixu's hazy mind scrambled for an explanation. "I swear I didn't do anything," he proclaimed hurriedly.

If pressed on whether he'd done anything he should feel guilty about, Xixu doubted he'd be able to declare his conscience to be completely clean, but at the very least, he had not crossed any problematic lines. Whether that would hold up as a defense was a different question, however.

But before he could explain himself further, he was again rebuked.

"I'm not talking about *that*! Are you suicidal, you idiot?!"

"What...?"

"If she'd taken any more vitality from you, you'd have fallen into a coma! Look, just go rest and warm yourself up! I'll take over!"

A woman's hand touched Xixu's shoulder, and when he looked backwards, he saw Isha kneeling down behind him. Her touch felt like boiling water, and it was only then Xixu realized how abnormally cold he was. He looked back at Sari's sleeping form; her complexion seemed healthier now, but she showed no sign of waking.

Thoma climbed onto the bed, sat down, and lifted his sister into his lap, embracing her. He wrapped her slender frame in the blanket and closed his eyes.

"I'll get the story from you later," he said. "There's something I want to talk to

you about too. For now, go sleep in the proprietress's room. Get Isha to brew you something medicinal."

"I... Sorry."

Sari herself had told Xixu not to touch her because it was dangerous, yet he had voluntarily chosen to share his vitality with her anyway. If he'd fallen into a coma because of that choice, he didn't know how he'd have managed to ever look her in the eyes again.

Xixu accepted Isha's help and stood up, pressing a hand to his brow as vertigo hit him. A small blue bird hanging from the windowsill entered his unsteady field of vision.

"That bird..."

Xixu recalled the words he'd heard spoken in his dream, which had told the tale of the gift Thoma had once given his sister. He wanted to take a closer look, but was reluctant to disturb the siblings any further—Sari was asleep, and Thoma's eyes were closed. And so, at Isha's encouragement, Xixu left the detached building. For the first time in a long while, he made his way to the proprietress's room.

Isha pointed to the sliding screen door at the back as she prepared a medicinal infusion in a small iron teapot. "The bedroom is ready for you," she said. "I prepared a change of clothes, so please make use of them. As for the militia, we've already contacted them."

"Right... Sorry."

Xixu pressed his hands to his skull, both of his elbows resting upon the low table. His head felt unbearably light, as though if he stopped making a conscious effort to stay focused for even a moment, he'd be out like a light.

Isha smiled faintly and offered him a teacup of hot medicinal brew. "I know how you feel," she said. "She took a lot out of you, didn't she?"

The words jogged Xixu's memory, and he recalled that Isha usually volunteered to sleep with Sari when she was unwell. He looked at the slight woman with admiration.

“It was rough,” he agreed. “Though I’m glad that it seemed to have helped her.”

“It was likely more severe than usual because of how deep her wounds were. Thank you for protecting her.”

Isha’s bearing as she bowed her head was gentle, as usual, but her gratitude only served to make Xixu feel uncomfortable in a way he couldn’t put into words. He felt that, if anything, he should be apologizing for exposing Sari to danger—after all, although she had only gone to the neighboring country in the first place because of the unrest in the capital, the fault for her subsequent conflict with Distira lay at the feet of Xixu himself.

Xixu downed the bitter medicinal infusion Isha had given him, and the courtesan stood up.

“I should return to the flower room,” she said. “I’m sorry that I can’t stay longer, but...”

“No, it’s fine. Sorry for the trouble.”

The other courtesans had to be at a loss without Sari or Isha around. Although, perhaps they were making the most of their freedom, but that seemed troubling in its own way—for the guests.

Isha stopped before the sliding screen door and bowed politely, both hands together. When the daughter of noble blood raised her head and looked at Xixu, there was much contained within her gaze.

“Thoma may have a lot to say to you later,” she said.

After a pause, Xixu replied, “I know. I’m prepared to hear it.”

“Before that, however, I have also have a matter I’d like to discuss with you.” Isha considered her next words for a moment. “Why do you think Thoma has not yet bought out my contract?”

“Thoma...?” Xixu wondered what this had to do with anything, but Isha was not the kind of person to indulge in meaningless tricks. After some thought, he gave what he thought was the answer. “Pardon me for saying so, but is it because his family opposes it?”

House Radi was a notable family even in the royal capital. It seemed possible that they would object to their future head taking a courtesan as a wife, even if Pale Moon *was* the legitimate heart of Irede. Upon hearing Xixu's answer, however, Isha smiled ruefully and shook her head.

"House Radi is one of the three sacred houses. They have no objection toward a courtesan of Pale Moon. The reason is simply that once a guest has bought out the contract of a courtesan from this place, he cannot be allowed into a guest room ever again."

"He can't use a guest room ever again?"

Xixu had not heard of this before. Now that he had, however, it made sense why Thoma had not yet taken Isha away—it would make it rather inconvenient for him to visit his little sister. Not only that, but it would also deprive Sari of her surrogate older sister, something that would cause Thoma to worry even more about her wellbeing.

"You're facing the same problem right now, aren't you?" Isha added.

"Me?"

Xixu had no memory of being involved in any issues related to buying out a courtesan's contract. Or did this have something to do with being a sacred offering? His expression grew pensive.

Isha gave him a beautiful smile. It was the perfectly arranged smile of a courtesan, and yet the emotion lurking within was also a courtesan's, profound in its own way. The sorrow in her was plain to see, reflected in the downward cast of her long eyelashes.

"Yes, you," she replied. "So please, be careful. Those of Irede, we... Our desires are intense."

Is that a burden Sari carries too? Xixu wondered after Isha had gone.

He went into the bedroom and collapsed, giving in to his exhaustion. The dream he sank into contained no stone chamber, something he thought was somewhat of a shame.

As he drifted deeper into sleep, Xixu recalled a memory of a girl's face, seen

from the side. She had been crying.

Xixu wasn't sure how long he slept for. It was already bright outside when he awoke and dragged his sluggish body into the room's bath. Once he'd finished washing, he cleansed the room, then changed into the kimono that Isha had left for him. Thoma arrived only seconds later, as though he had been waiting for that exact moment.

The man looked weary, likely because he had surrendered some of his vitality to his sister. He sat across from Xixu on the other side of the low table, poured two cups of strong tea, and carelessly shoved one over. "First things first," he said, "Sari already told me what happened."

"She's awake?!" Xixu exclaimed.

"She was, but she's gone back to sleep now. I scolded her ear off. Sorry you got dragged into the mess that surrounds our mother."

"I..." That confirmed it then; Distira was their mother. Xixu wasn't sure what to say.

Thoma paid him no mind and continued. "We'll handle it, one way or another. It *should* be our parents' problem, but they're useless, so it's up to me and Sari. Either way, we won't trouble you with it anymore."

"I don't particularly mind..." Xixu trailed off. "More importantly, I'm troubling *her* with the matter involving Tesed Zaras."

"We'll wash our hands of that. Sorry, but we'll hand over all the information we've gathered, so take it to the capital and sort it out there."

"Understood," Xixu agreed readily. He hadn't ever intended on involving Irede's maiden in that particular problem in the first place.

"I'll put everything down on paper later," Thoma concluded.

Relieved by the progress their conversation was making, Xixu sipped at the poorly brewed tea. He was slightly annoyed; the leaves themselves were lovely, but Thoma had handled them crudely.

"How can you be so oblivious to the taste of tea as a brewer's son...?" Xixu

grumbled.

“My taste is just fine, it’s the brewing methods I’m clueless about. If you’ve got a problem, drink some wine instead.”

“Alcohol makes me tired.”

“Sounds like you drew the short straw when it comes to your constitution then. Not to mention all your other disadvantages.”

“Leave it. I don’t consider my constitution to be a disadvantage.”

In fact, if Xixu was being honest, he had a feeling his usual exhaustion would be slightly alleviated if only Thoma and Sari would practice more restraint where he was concerned.

However, the man in question just calmly drained his own tea and, as though he were only continuing their idle chatter, said, “So, Xixu.”

“Now what?”

“About that woman—buy out her contract and return to the capital. I’m sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you up until now.”

Thoma placed his empty teacup back onto the table with a *clack*. Xixu watched the action, uncomprehending. He wondered who “that woman” was, and why Thoma was bringing up the topic of buying out a contract. But—perhaps because this was all so sudden—his thoughts seemed stuck in rut, and all he could recall were Isha’s words, of how the people of Irede had intense desires.

The confusion must have shown on his face, because Thoma looked at him incredulously. “I’m talking about that old acquaintance of yours,” he said. “You’ve been purchasing her company recently, haven’t you?”

After a long pause, Xixu finally responded. “I...forgot about that.”

“You can really be the lowest of the low from time to time, you know that?”

“Ugh...”

No matter how harsh Thoma’s accusations were, the simple truth was that Xixu had forgotten Mifileu entirely. So much had happened since the previous

evening that he'd been unable to spare any thought for her at all. Still, as Xixu held his head in his hand, he thought he should at least attempt to explain himself.

"I wasn't purchasing her company."

"Yeah, I heard, but you still chose her and entered a guest room together. It's the same thing, in the end."

"I...guess it is." Until now, he'd essentially been presuming upon Sari's kindness to meet with Mifileu, but it was obvious how his actions would appear to an onlooker. Xixu hung his head, crestfallen. This new perspective had brought with it a string of other revelations. "But if I purchase her contract, I won't be able to enter Pale Moon anymore, correct?"

"Y-You knew about that?! *Seriously*?! Who are you, and what have you done with Xixu?!"

"Is it really that surprising...? Isha told me."

"Oh, she did? If she was going to tell you now, I'd rather she had just stopped you earlier."

Thoma ruffled his own hair absentmindedly, seemingly irritated by how events had played out without him. That was when Xixu finally recognized the man's earlier words.

"Did you just tell me to return to the capital?" Xixu knew that Thoma did not mean making one of his usual temporary trips back to his home. He was asking him to cut his ties with Pale Moon and Irede completely.

Thoma gave him a pained smile. "I'm not saying it out of any kind of malice. It's that woman's fault, and yours too, for being so oblivious. But Sari isn't without her share of the blame—it was her choice to remain silent. Instead of telling you about Pale Moon's ways, she just handed you a room tag without a word."

"Pale Moon's ways?" Xixu frowned, worried. Had he caused some manner of problem without knowing, just like he had been ignorant of what it meant to buy a courtesan out of Pale Moon's contract?

Thoma tapped his finger on the low table. “Yeah. At Pale Moon, guests can’t change the women they see. Regulars have two choices. They either frequent the reception room without ever entering a guest room, or continue to purchase the same woman’s company.”

“So, that would mean...”

Xixu could see two facets to the problem. The first was that he was now being treated as Mifileu’s guest, and the second was that the maiden received her guest as a courtesan. He now finally understood the position he’d maneuvered himself into in his ignorance.

Thoma looked at him with a mixture of exasperation and pity. “Well, the long and short of it is that you’re no longer qualified to be a sacred offering. You haven’t been let into the proprietress’s room recently, right? I guess one never really knows what life will have in store.”

Xixu had no response to give.

“So, it’s Sari’s fault, really. After going on about how harsh it was to not tell newcomers about Irede’s unwritten rules, she did the exact same thing when one stepped into her domain. She chose to be pointlessly stubborn, and it came back to bite her.”

“No... This is my fault.”

Xixu had thought that Sari was acting strangely. It had begun ever since Mifileu had come to Pale Moon, or perhaps even earlier. But in the end, he hadn’t pressed her about it. Unlike her brother, who fussed over her to the point that it was exhausting sometimes, or her childhood friend, who had tried to rush her into adulthood, Xixu had wanted to provide her with the space to make her own choices. Yet, as a result, his lack of action may as well have been born from indifference.

Xixu knew Mifileu’s character well, so his intent had been to resolve matters with her in a way that wouldn’t trouble Sari. Yet in his attempt to do so, he had achieved the exact opposite.

Now that he had an objective view of the entire mess, Xixu felt like slamming his head into the table. “I’m sorry...”

“You’re overreacting,” Thoma replied. “There’s no need to be so down. I’m telling you, it’s Sari’s fault.”

Xixu didn’t reply; there was nothing he could say. Perhaps his careless actions had arisen from the private sense of ease he’d developed as of late, thinking that he was growing accustomed to Irede. Regardless, he settled his resolve on apologizing to Sari, for the time being.

“I’m not finished,” Thoma said, and Xixu looked up. Thoma was studying him with a rare look of seriousness. “Listen,” the other man said. “Yes, you’re oblivious—we’ve established that. But the problem here is *Sari*.”

“Everybody’s prone to bouts of stubbornness,” Xixu said. “To say nothing of how Saridi’s the proprietress of this house.”

“Stop being so quick to jump to her defense.” Thoma snapped, then sighed. “No, that’s besides the point. Look, what I’m saying is, she’s not herself anymore.”

Thoma’s handsome features twisted into a bitter expression. He looked hesitant to say anything further, and regretful that any of this had happened. As the tension began to seep into Xixu, the man sighed heavily, and his next words were ones Xixu had never expected to hear.

“Sari’s... Her thoughts are becoming completely inhuman. She’s no longer the Sari you knew.”

Xixu’s first reaction was confusion. He had already known that she was not human. But as he began to say as much, he was stopped by the recollection of how abnormally cold she had been, as well as how off she had seemed when he had asked her about it.

In the face of Xixu’s reflexive silence, Thoma stood up and began brewing another serving of tea. “You know what I’m talking about, right?” he asked. “There’s no way you wouldn’t, I guess, after sleeping with her in your arms.”

“I...wasn’t that because she had used too much of her power?”

“No, far from it. That’s just her normal temperature now. Or lack of temperature, I should say. It might have been a factor of why she was so strangely stubborn. Her attachment to people is becoming abnormally diluted.”

What did it mean, for Sari's thoughts to become completely inhuman?

Xixu watched vacantly as Thoma drowned the tea leaves in now-cold water. "Distira didn't seem that way," he said.

"Hey, hey! Don't say her name, idiot. And anyway, that's because she's the divinity that my mother cast off before her union with my father. She's immature. Basically the opposite of Sari."

"Opposite?"

"If my read on it is right, Sari forced herself to unite with her divinity alone, without coupling with an intimate partner. I didn't think that would result in *this*, though."

Xixu hummed in understanding. "That makes sense. Her divinity has been manifesting strongly recently, even while she's closer to acting like her usual self."

"You *noticed*?! Then why didn't you stop her?!"

"What do you mean 'why'? Wouldn't it be wrong of me to stop her? That side of her is Saridi too."

"I mean, *yes*, but... You..."

Thoma's hung his head, clearly dejected. The sight made Xixu feel slightly guilty, but it didn't change his opinion—intervening in Sari's integration with her divinity would be wrong. Even if her true nature was manifesting more strongly, that did not change the fact that Sari was still herself. It wasn't something to be viewed as a problem.

"That's the ideal mindset for a sacred offering, you know," Thoma said. "The problem is that you're not one. *Why* couldn't you have been one...?"

Despite the man's complaints, Xixu thought that it would have been much more problematic if he had arbitrarily stepped into the role of Sari's offering when she hadn't even chosen him. Yet, saying as much seemed too akin to placing the blame on her for Xixu's comfort, so all he said was: "Sorry."

Thoma scratched his head. "No, *I'm* sorry for taking my anger out on you," he replied. "At the end of the day, this is Sari's personal problem. It seems like she

was too hasty to give control over to her divinity self because of the matter with her brother god. She was putting a lot of practice into her techniques and on expanding her power."

The more Sari's power expanded, the more it must have influenced her consciousness. Gradually, the divine influence must have altered it and diluted her attachment to humanity, as well as her childlike straightforwardness. And so, ever so slowly, Sari had become accustomed to the solitude that came with being other.

"So," Thoma continued, "now that she has accepted that solitude as natural, she's grown even more distant from people. It's a vicious cycle. She probably tried to keep you at a distance at first out of some strange sense of stubbornness, and since you played along, that feeling of isolation drove her even further away from others. She's always had times where she would refuse to give in, but who could've known how far she'd take it this time? It would've been better if she'd just thrown a run-of-the-mill tantrum."

Thoma clicked his tongue and poured the tea he'd been brewing into Xixu's teacup. The water had gone lukewarm, so flavor of the leaves had hardly steeped, but Xixu didn't comment on it. He simply drank his tea-flavored water.

"You say she's changed," he said. "Does that really make matters so different now?"

"It does," Thoma replied. "In crude terms, she's a bundle of apathy now—emotionless and cold. I know how much I've poked and prodded at you regarding her up until now, but I can't go so far as to make you take care of that."

"She didn't seem that bad yesterday."

"Her head still works just fine; she can act the part of her usual self without a problem. The issue is that she doesn't have any of the emotion to back it up. I consider myself your friend, you know. I can't push a doll made of ice on you."

"A doll made of ice..."

The harshness of the phrase struck Xixu almost physically. He doubted that Thoma liked saying it any better. It simply went to demonstrate how distant Sari

had become from humanity.

Xixu stared at the water before him, which held a flavor only barely reminiscent of tea. “Is that why you’re telling me to return to the capital?”

“It is. There’s no hope of her returning to her usual self. The first god, summoned by the king of an ancient nation, gained warmth through consorting with humanity. In other words, she met humanity halfway. But what Sari did was the opposite—if we don’t step carefully in how we deal with her, the entire country could suffer for it.”

Silence fell.

In the light of the midday sun, the proprietress’s room looked diminished compared to Xixu’s memories of it, as though he were viewing it from a distance. He turned to the ornamental alcove, always kept clean and free of any dust. The ceramic flower vase on display within was empty, giving the room a sense of disuse.

Xixu, recalling the words he’d heard in his dream, drained his teacup of water, then raised his head and fixed his gaze on the man sitting opposite him. “I’d like to talk to Saridi,” he said.

“Don’t,” Thoma warned. “Or, in more plain terms: leave her be. She’s Irede’s problem now, and we’ve already got the added trouble of other gods loitering about despite our lack of desire for their presence. Regardless of her current state, Sari’s decision making so far has been beyond reproach.”

“You saw how badly injured she was after she faced one of those gods one-on-one,” Xixu reminded the other man. “We can’t make her handle everything alone.”

“Doing so would still be better than adding more enemies to the pile,” Thoma refuted. “Better the capital deals with its own problems, and Irede deals with Irede’s.” The heir to House Radi refilled Xixu’s empty teacup with water directly from the pitcher, then continued, “Look, just go back. The sacred houses will write a letter explaining the circumstances for the king. He’ll give in once he understands that you can’t become a sacred offering, whether you stay here or not.”

And ultimately, that was what it came down to, Xixu knew. Even if he remained in Irede, he could not become anybody of import—in fact, if he did not leave, he would actually worsen the town's circumstances by dragging the capital's matters here with him. Just like how he had brought his friction with Mifileu to Pale Moon.

Thoma stood up, not waiting for Xixu's answer. "In any case, just wait here," he said. "I'll go have a maidservant count up the cost of purchasing that woman's contract. It shouldn't be that high, since she's a newcomer, and I'll contribute half for all of the trouble."

"Hold on," Xixu interjected. He hurried after Thoma, who had ignored him and already left the room. "Don't just settle everything without me."

The hallway outside Xixu's room was deathly silent, save for the sound of the his and Thoma's brisk footsteps as they headed for the entryway. The sun was still high, so likely the lack of noise was due to the fact that the courtesans of Pale Moon were still asleep.

Xixu reached out and grabbed Thoma, who responded by lightly shaking him right back off.

"You can say that all you like," the man responded, "but I knew if I left things to you two, you'd never get anywhere. You'd only make things more complicated."

"I'll talk to her. *Without* making matters more complicated."

"I'm telling you to give it up. Sari will just tell you the same thing I told you—as far as she's concerned, you're already another woman's guest."

"Does the difference stem from whether I entered the guest room or not?"

"It's more about whether you paid or not. You've been in the proprietress's room plenty of times before, haven't you?"

"The proprietress's room..."

From the first time since Sari had offered him her assistance when he had come to Irede, she had allowed him the use of her own guest room—a gesture of hospitality, for the sake of a young man who was unfamiliar with courtesans.

She had invited him in each time as though it were a matter of course, serving him tea and meals, and though Xixu had offered to pay for the cost of said meals many times over, she had always firmly refused. Because she, as the proprietress, had known the true meaning behind the act of paying back the value of what one was given.

But if that was the case, then...

Xixu stared after his friend as he descended the staircase. The maidservant at the entryway was visibly surprised to see Thoma stop by so abruptly, but he paid that no mind as he beckoned her over.

“Sorry,” he apologized, “but could I ask you to tally up an account? I have the proprietress’s permission.”

“Oh, um, of course. What manner of account would that be?”

“The total of how much I owe,” Xixu interrupted.

“What?”

Thoma whirled around, surprise clear on his face, but Xixu deliberately ignored him. From his position above the staircase, he looked down toward Pale Moon’s entryway. “There should be a record of the times Saridi let me into the proprietress’s room.”

If the proprietress was also a courtesan, then she, too, had to abide by the ways of Pale Moon. So Xixu continued, as though it were a matter of course, binding the almost-cut thread back together.

“Add up what I owe for the price of the proprietress’s company. Though I’m late, I’ll pay it all.”

6. Sentimentality

Someone was calling for her. Someone close, yet far away. But who was it?

Sari slowly lifted her head up from her cold bed. She had discarded her bloodstained sheets when she had last awoken, and her fresh ones were white and clean. Clad in only a *yukata*, she looked down at her body. There was not a single wound upon it.

“Who’s...there?”

She looked around, but there was nobody else in her room. Sari propped herself up, chin in her hands, and remained that way for a while. Eventually, she breathed a sigh and stood up to get changed.

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Mifileu was a newcomer to Pale Moon, yet the price of her company had been a considerable sum. Sari’s price was even higher—in fact, it was entirely possible that the sum for dallying with her would be enough to purchase an entire house. Even so, not paying it was not a choice Xixu could make. If he wished to remain in Irede, he would first need to conduct himself according to the town’s ways, else any negotiation could never even begin.

That was why he had made his request, but Thoma was so shocked his words quickly took on the form of a rebuke.

“Idiot! Do you really think that’ll hold water?!”

“I do,” Xixu replied. “The fact that I’ve made use of the proprietress’s guest room is simple truth. What’s the difference between that and my visits to Mifileu Dié?”

“Don’t use a courtesan’s real na— No, that’s beside the point. Even if you forced this through, you’d still be banned from entering Pale Moon for breaking the unwritten rule of changing courtesans.”

There was likely no precedent at Pale Moon for a guest purchasing the company of two of its courtesans. That was obvious enough from the

dumbfounded expression of the maidservant who happened to be present.

Yet Xixu, even knowing how unreasonable he was being, hadn't the slightest intention of backing down. "The proprietress gave her permission in both regards," he said decisively. "If one is valid, then the other must be too."

It had been Sari herself who had allowed Xixu into the proprietress's room, and it had also been her who had given him Mifileu's room tag, all the while knowing the unwritten rules of her own courtesan house. If what he had done was so forbidden that it would have barred him from Pale Moon, then it stood to reason that she ought to have stopped him.

That was the basis of Xixu's argument, but as he descended the staircase, Thoma's face twitched—a rare occurrence for him.

"You *know* that was because she didn't take your money," he said. "Don't play with semantics."

"I have no intention of doing that," Xixu replied. "I've received more than enough hospitality in the proprietress's room to warrant payment. It's a simple matter of equivalent exchange."

"She said you didn't need to pay. It was a special case, okay? An *exception*."

"If Saridi is an exception, then there's no need to treat her the same as the other courtesans. Indeed, it would be strange for the maiden to be bound by the same limitations as those of a lesser status. On the other hand, if she *isn't* an exception, then it is only natural to pay for the price of her company. Am I wrong?"

"You..."

Thoma scowled, clearly wanting to curse Xixu's wordplay, but said nothing more. Although, perhaps it was more accurate to say he was *unable* to say anything more. When all was said and done, Thoma was not a person of Pale Moon, no matter the fact that he was Sari's older brother. He did not have the authority to determine the right and wrong of a tangled mess such as this—not without his sister there alongside him.

And *that* was exactly Xixu's aim.

A tense silence spread over Pale Moon's entryway. The maidservant looked between the two men, clearly flustered and at a loss for what to do.

Thoma sighed heavily. "Ugh, to hell with it. Add it up for him. But don't let him do anything else. And work out the sum of the newcomer's contract while you're at it. I doubt it's more than a fraction of the price of Sari's company, though."

"O-Of course!"

Perhaps Thoma's offhand instructions could have been perceived as him giving into Xixu's wishes, but it quickly became clear that his words had merely been spoken in order to send the maidservant away. Once he and Xixu were alone, Thoma turned back to the young shadeslayer. His usual facade was completely absent, leaving behind cold, quiet eyes.

"Look... I know you have a soft spot for Sari, but it's about time you shored it up."

The words, neither teasing nor jestful, resonated within the walls of the house of old with a certain weight to them. The two men stood upon the polished wood of the hallway, casting wholly different shadows. The man who had been raised as the heir to a sacred house, he who in which the blood of a god ran, faced Xixu with bare austerity.

"Sari is the proprietress of Pale Moon. Don't turn her into the shameful kind of woman who expects all of her desires to come to her at the hands of others without saying a word of her own. Both I and our grandmother were strict with her because we wanted to raise her to be better than that."

After a brief moment, Xixu replied, "You made her put up with so much more than a regular girl, yet you won't allow those around her to reward her for it?"

"If she wants something, she should say so. If you spoil her by giving her what she wants without her being able to do that, that'll make her no different from any other little brat."

The declaration was spoken without a hint of disdain. This was the line Thoma Radi had chosen to draw in the sand: The proprietress of Pale Moon should carry herself proudly, with her chest thrown out. She should be a beautiful,

proud governor, unashamed in the face of others, no matter who they may be.

And yet, Xixu found himself thinking, that was the opinion of a person of Irede. How shameful was it, that a little girl could not even be honest enough with herself to say she wanted a glass bird?

But before Xixu could refute his friend's words, he sensed the presence of another person. He turned around and saw a woman in the hallway leading to the flower room, standing in the dark shadow of a pillar. When their eyes met, she cast her gaze down.

Thoma followed Xixu inside Pale Moon, turning toward the hallway. "Ah," he said. "So *you're* the rumored courtesan. Perfect timing. Go pack your luggage. Your contract's being bought out."

"Huh...? Um..."

From Mifileu's stiff, pale expression, perhaps she had been listening in; her white coverall apron suggested that she had been cleaning. Her gaze wavered at her feet before turning back to Xixu, as though she were seeking his aid. The sight made Xixu recall the events of several years past.

Back then, he truly hadn't understood what she had sought. He hadn't even had her gaze to deduce an answer from. At the most critical times, she had always covered her face and cried. And so, even when she had informed him that she no longer needed to get married, Xixu still hadn't known what she truly wanted.

Thus, their story had come to an end. The cover had closed on their tale—and so it would remain, becoming nothing more, and nothing less.

Xixu cast aside the sentimentality that had come over him, returning the warmth of his shared past with Mifileu to her as advice. "You aren't suited to be a courtesan," he said. "It hasn't been long since I've come to Irede, but even I know you don't match this town. The courtesans here take pride in their stations, and in their existence as offerings of gratitude to the god."

Of course, perhaps that was not true of every courtesan in Irede. Though they all wore the same face, their contents were as diverse as any group of human beings.

Still, it was an immutable fact that the foundation of this town was that it was an offering of gratitude to its god. It was for that reason Irede's residents chose to stay. Sometimes, it was even necessary for women to sacrifice their children to protect that ideal.

Knowing that, it was clear that this town—as well as Pale Moon, the ancient house of myth—was no place for Mifileu.

"Mifileu Dié," Xixu continued, "what your eyes see is not the god, nor your guests, but your own misfortune. As long as that is true, you cannot be a courtesan of Irede. You will remain a person of the capital."

Such an existence was neither right, nor wrong—it was simply different from those of this place. Sari had seen that, and Xixu understood this himself. As for Mifileu... She had likely realized it too.

Xixu looked at the woman before him eyes devoid of any sentimentality. She was pale and unsteady.

"If you wish to return to the capital, I'll help you," he said. "But I will not purchase your contract. Neither will I return myself."

"Ki-Kilis..."

"I am not a person of Irede, but I am here of my own will. Still, I will go so far as to bend to help you."

If he was asked why, Xixu would answer: for Saridi's sake. Just as Irede's people lived for the town's god, he was here for her. He would not leave her alone to cry, overcome by loneliness.

Xixu did not know what this emotion of his was; only that it was there.

Mifileu had frozen. Thoma glanced at her, his expression bitter, before folding his arms and glaring at Xixu. "You should've said that at the start," he said. "Instead you got her hopes up and made a mess of everything."

"I thought I did, indirectly."

"Indirectly for *you* is either plain wrong or so far off the mark it's unrecognizable. You never even stood a chance at getting it across."

After poking Xixu lightly in the head, Thoma abruptly looked up, as though

he'd noticed something. After brief moment, Xixu followed his gaze. A woman with a maidservant in tow had stepped out of the passageway leading to the detached building, and was walking toward the entryway.

Clad in a disheveled white *yukata* tied in place only by a sash, Sari observed the odd atmosphere lingering over the three by the entryway and cocked her head. "What's going on here? Is everyone joining in on the morning cleaning?"

"No," Thoma said. "Sari, were you told about the accounts we're settling?"

"I was. I didn't really understand though."

The blue eyes that stared at Xixu were like transparent, glass marbles. There was nothing within them—nothing to see through to. Inwardly, he felt tense; though her features were unchanged, her expression had become that of a doll's.

"I tried to make this guy buy out the newcomer's contract," Thoma answered, trying to address her confusion, "but he wouldn't have any of it. For some reason, he's saying he wants to pay the price for your companionship instead."

"Huh? That would certainly be a big windfall for Pale Moon, but wouldn't that bankrupt you, Xixu?"

After a moment's hesitation, Xixu replied, "It isn't as if I was going to use the money for anything else."

It wasn't that he was unaffected by the casual statement that he would be paying a vast sum; it was just that mild foreboding and unused assets paled in importance to his desire to keep his ties to Sari intact.

The woman who was not human shifted her gaze to Mifileu, whose complexion had become pallid. "Even still, you're her guest, Xixu. If I take your payment for my companionship, it'll mean that you've doubled up."

"You didn't explain to me that that was forbidden at Pale Moon."

"You're correct, I didn't. I'm sorry about that."

"In the capital, an improperly explained contract is no contract at all. Will you concede that to me?"

Sari's emotionless blue eyes remained on Xixu as she tilted her head to the

side. It was impossible to tell from her expression what she was thinking, as though behind her visage was a void that led to infinity.

After a moment's thought, Pale Moon's proprietress looked at Xixu, Thoma, and Mifileu in turn. "If I do concede, what will that change?" she asked. "If you ask me, you should buy out her contract."

Sari's high, resonant voice was so devoid of any superfluous emotion that it was practically a marvel of its own. She was like a doll of ice, who bore attachment to nothing—the moment those words occurred to Xixu, he wanted to rebuke himself.

Sari looked at Mifileu, who'd begun shivering. "You'd prefer to go back to the capital, wouldn't you, Fi? It seems that Irede isn't what you thought it would be, after all. Or is it that you would rather taste a little more misfortune?"

"M-Miss Proprietress..."

"It's fine if you do. Those who come here from elsewhere are always like that, at the beginning. The town leaves its mark on them though, after enough time."

The words, cast out as though they were speaking of nothing of consequence, caused Mifileu to shudder and stiffen.

Sari casually brushed back her untied silver hair. Not a single scratch was visible from the pale nape of her neck to the skin of her chest, visible between the loose front of her *yukata*. Upon realizing this, Xixu was both relieved and slightly unsettled.

Sari waved a hand at the trio and turned around. "Whatever you choose is fine," she said. "Tell me once you've decided. I'll accommodate you, to a reasonable extent."

"Then may I make a suggestion?"

It was a new voice, coming from the open door of Pale Moon's entryway. Xixu turned, recognizing its owner. Beside him, Thoma's expression drew into a deep grimace.

Sari stopped and looked at the unusual visitor in surprise. "A suggestion? What is it?"

“Transfer the rights of Mifileu Dié’s company from that tactless shadeslayer to me. Then, I shall purchase her contract and escort her home to the capital.”

The speaker looked over all those present. He wore a suit that complimented his slender frame and a thorny, cynical expression. Then, abruptly, the young noble of the capital, otherwise known as , frowned at the group of them, his left eye narrowed.

The only individuals present unfamiliar with the young man, who had intruded upon Pale Moon outside of its business hours, were Mifileu and the maidservant. In the wake of Vas’s strange proposal, the remaining three looked at him with varied expressions.

Sari, almost lacking an expression entirely, turned to him. “That would be a clear violation of our rules.”

“It should be possible, if everybody involved gives their consent,” Vas replied. “Pale Moon has a long history. That no records exist of its unwritten rules being broken is a matter I believe can be explained quite simply—the records must have been glossed over. Surely, such a unique courtesan house must have experienced its share of problems in its time.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

Sari’s quick acceptance surprised Xixu. Being an overserious person by nature, he had thought of Pale Moon’s unwritten rules as more unyielding than that. Then again, all it took was a sidelong glance at Thoma to reveal the man’s angry face. He was glaring at Vas, and his expression could not have been more stony. It felt quite possible that, had no onlookers been around, that the three utterly different blood relatives might have clashed in a more obvious fashion.

Sari looked back at Xixu, a trace of drowsiness still remaining in her eyes. “What do you think, Xixu?”

After a moment’s consideration, he replied, “If such a thing is a possibility, then I would like it to be done, please. As long as the person in question agrees to it, of course.”

“Kilis...”

Mifileu’s voice was barely audible as she called his name, stifled as it was. Xixu

had thought himself used to it by now, but her usage of his real name left him with a sense of discomfort—it sounded right, but rang hollow.

Perhaps he had become too familiar with being called by the name he used only in this town, though he could not pinpoint when the change had occurred. Still, the sentiment flickered inside him, a lingering emotion pulled from the vague past. He found it was as equally unclear to him as the reason why he had met with Mifileu at Pale Moon.

“Then what about you, Fi?” Sari asked Mifileu. “This gentleman is a noble from the capital, so I’m sure he’ll treat you properly. Have you heard of the Werrilocias?”

“O-Of course I have! But, I...”

Though Mifileu was nodding, her distress was apparent. Though it seemed that she was aware of how beneficial Vas’s proposal would be for her, it also appeared as if her thoughts had not progressed beyond that, and that she was unable to keep up with the situation.

Pale Moon’s proprietress took a breath, then said, “Fi. I should say that I do not believe that you are unfit to be a courtesan. Every woman who first enters a courtesan house finds themselves in unfamiliar territory at the beginning. For a courtesan to become a courtesan, she must learn how to smile, but that is not a feat achieved in the span of a single day. It is only natural that at first, you find yourself only capable of watching your own footing.”

Blue eyes glanced at the maidservant, who was waiting half a step behind the her courtesan house’s owner. The girl appeared timid, yet the bow she performed was precise and courteous. Sari, whose air had changed from a woman still half lingering in sleep to a stern proprietress, showed her approval with only her eyes.

“In the capital, it seems that the world courtesans live in is referred to as one of suffering,” she continued. “But in Irede, matters are different. It is not enough to simply accept one’s circumstances and endure. The holy courtesans of this town exist to provide warmth, as well as the comfort and joy that accompanies it. If the flowers suffer and wilt, will that not dampen the gaiety of the guests?”

So smile, she said. For to smile and bloom is a courtesan's part in life.

"Fi. If you wish to become a person of Irede, you cannot use being a courtesan as a tool to drive yourself into a corner. Become able to smile in the proper way, in the way of this town. Take as long as you'd like; I don't mind. But if you think you cannot, that is fine too."

Sari turned to Vas, and he nodded. Mifileu did not see the exchange; she was gazing at the toes of her feet as though she had only just discovered the position in which she stood. She stared at the floor of the hallway, which had been walked upon by thousands of women over the centuries.

"I..."

"Decide for yourself."

The decree echoed like the ringing of a bell. The god, expressionless all this time, smiled—a gentle, fleeting thing. In it, one could almost see her affection for the lives of humanity. Yet it expressed that affection from a distance, separated. To Xixu, it was beautiful, so much so that it felt like a blow to his chest. At the sight of her, he was struck by the keen realization that she truly was different from how she used to be.

"I would recommend not pondering the matter overly much," Vas said dryly, seeing fit to toss the frozen Mifileu a lifeline. "The way the people of this town think is difficult to comprehend for those such as us. There is no need to force yourself to join their strange ranks."

"Vas, that's awful."

"Miss, we are hardly acquainted. Please refrain from being so informal with me."

The young man brushed off the head of his family's grievance with ease. Evidently, he was feigning a lack of relation to Sari.

"While I must apologize for being presumptive, I took the liberty of speaking to your great aunt," he continued, speaking directly to Mifileu. "While you are nominally here in Irede to repay your family's debt, it would be more accurate to say that she sent you here in order for you to escape the recent unrest. She believed that even if the country were to fall to ruin, this town would continue

to remain unchanged.”

“Wh-What...? B-But, I...”

“You were unaware, of course. But your great aunt instructed me to pass on a message. ‘In order for you to live in Irede, I searched for a contact from the house which could provide you with the best working conditions. But if you find it difficult, you do not have to continue.”

Upon hearing this, the two siblings exchanged looks. The brother, cocking his head, was the first to speak. “I guess Pale Moon does have the ‘best conditions,’ in a sense.”

“To the people of the capital, we must seem like the headquarters of this town of oddities.”

“That’s rich, coming from *you*,” Thoma teased.

Sari shrugged. It appeared that her former languidness had already returned.

Ignoring the siblings, who both could be described as pureblooded people of Irede, Vas inclined his head toward Mifileu. “If you wish to remain here a little longer,” he said, “I can arrange to find you a teahouse where you can reside and work. If you wish to return to the capital, I can provide you with my backing and support. The choice is yours.”

The brisk pace at which the young man sought to settle the matter portrayed him as more of a talented clerk than an aristocrat.

Mifileu stared at him for a moment, then muttered in a dazed voice, “Why would you go so far for me...? Or is it that I have truly caused everybody that much trouble...?”

“No, nothing of the sort. The problem does not lie with you.” The young Werrilocia caught the gaze of the girl standing in the entryway with only his left eye. “I was simply pestered into cleaning up somebody else’s mess.”

For one single, short moment, Sari’s eyes flew wide open.

In the end, Mifileu had returned to her room, stating that she could not come to a decision so soon. Vas and Thoma had each had their respective business to

see to, and so had departed from Pale Moon shortly after, leaving Xixu with exasperated looks and a handful of stern words.

As for Sari, while she had appeared to be sleepy, she had readily agreed to Xixu's request to talk. Currently, the two sat at a table in the deserted flower room, facing one another.

Sari, who was far and away superior to her brother in terms of tea-brewing ability, placed a white cup before Xixu without making a sound. The aroma of the tea he had often used to drink during his time at the military academy caught the young man by surprise.

"I didn't know Pale Moon stocked this tea."

"We do. I thought it would be nostalgic for a person from the capital."

"It is. It's just..." For some reason, Xixu felt uncomfortable. Given all that had happened, he wanted to avoid saying or doing anything in front of her that would tie into the past, so he casually changed the subject. "Have your wounds healed?"

"Mm-hm. I heard you slept with me, Xixu. Thank you. I almost killed you."

"No, I..."

It had always been the case that his conversations with Sari could be unpredictable, from time to time, but now that her emotions had faded, Xixu found himself unable to foresee how she would respond at all. His eyes alighted upon her hands, and he noticed that, in what was an atypical choice for her, she was wearing white gloves.

Sari noticed his gaze and showed him both of her hands. "Without these, the tea will get cold when I brew it," she explained. "And it would be troublesome if anyone touched me and found me out."

The girl smiled, her lips the same flower-petal red they'd always been before. She had not lost any of her color, nor did it look as if she was cold. Yet Xixu knew that she would be cooler than water to the touch.

He stared at the surface of his tea. Steam was rising from it. "Thoma told me that you were no longer human," he said.

“I was never human from the beginning. Think of it as my disguise being cast off.”

Sari spoke frankly; there was no self-derision or remorse apparent in her words. She seemed to have accepted her change as the natural way of things—a realization that only compounded Xixu’s unease. Involuntarily, he began to recall memories of the events that had led up to this point.

“Are you going to stay like this?”

“Who can say? I myself don’t know how I could return to how I was in the past, nor do I wish to.”

“You aren’t lonely?”

“Not now.” Sari closed her eyes and smiled beautifully.

She proclaimed that she was not lonely, and yet it appeared she had been, before she had become as she was now. When had she begun to feel so? Whenever it had been, she had endured it without letting it show.

Unable to find a precise answer to his questions within his memories, Xixu grew irritated with himself.

Sari’s smiling expression abruptly vanished, and then she turned her gazed outward, running it over the spacious flower room. “When I awoke next to Thoma, I told him about a prophecy,” she said.

“A prophecy? You’re capable of foresight now?”

“No. It wasn’t something *I* saw.”

A brief lull fell over their conversation, and during the short silence, Xixu realized who Sari had been talking about. It could have been none other than the king’s maiden, who possessed preeminent foresight. She must have imparted something of what she saw to Sari.

The girl held her cup by the handle, careful not to make contact with the rest of it. “I wanted to avoid that prophecy, you see,” she said. “I did a lot to try and make that happen. But when I told Thoma, he asked me if the reason I hadn’t told anybody about it was because I assumed it wouldn’t truly come to pass.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that I was making light of it, and that was why I didn’t ask others for help. I didn’t think I was doing so, but maybe I was wrong. I mean, I almost killed you just by sleeping next to you, Xixu. It made me wonder if I was the cause after all.”

“That was my fault, and I’m sorry. But what does that have to do with the prophecy?”

“What indeed?”

Sari sipped her tea. The interest had already faded entirely from her eyes. She released a breath that had never been warm into the air, a fleeting weariness in the gesture that Xixu did not miss. It was as though she were tired of it all—tired of even existing.

The two of them faced each other, and yet if you drew straight lines projecting outward from their bodies, they would never intersect.

“What did you want to talk about, Xixu?”

“I wanted to talk about you.”

He wanted to speak of her and learn more about her. To know what choices would be best, and what he would have to come to terms with.

The girl who was a god gave him a smile devoid of emotion. “Then, would you be the father of my child, Xixu?”

“If that is what you wish.”

She had asked him the same question some time ago. If only he had been where he was now back then.

Sari laughed pleasantly. “Then...I won’t wish it. So live, and be happy, okay?”

A glove-covered hand was held atop Xixu’s own for the barest of moments. It was the final gesture Sari made before pushing her chair away and leaving the flower room.

She didn’t look back.

7. Fair Skies

House Radi's brewery in Irede was large, and occupied the southwest corner of Irede. In a room within the adjoining estate, Xixu faced Thoma, their positions mirroring the ones they'd taken several hours earlier.

The teacups upon the low table between them were, as expected, filled with a perfunctory attempt at tea, yet Xixu left his untouched. Sitting upon the tatami mat, he cradled his head in his hands.

Thoma picked up a slice of grilled fried tofu with his chopsticks. "I told you not to, didn't I?" he said.

Xixu remained silent.

"Look, you don't have to feel so sorry for yourself over it. It sounded to me like Sari had already decided to cut ties with you a while ago. That woman and your actions have nothing to do with it. Don't let it get to you."

After a pause, Xixu said, "She asked me the same question, once before."

He hadn't replied, thinking that it was one of her usual jokes. But had the change in her already begun, back then? As Xixu stewed in his remorse, Thoma held out a drinking cup with a moderate amount of rice wine.

"I told you not to let it get to you. You know, it was that part of you that Sari was charmed by."

"What, that I reap what I sow?"

"No." Thoma threw a piece of *konpeito* at Xixu. "Don't accuse my little sister of having strange tastes."

The young shadeslayer found himself relieved that the man across from him still referred to Sari as his sister. Even though she was distancing herself from humanity, he could tell that their connection would not be broken. That was what it meant to be blood relatives.

Xixu accepted a drinking cup from Thoma, feeling envious of the siblings' relationship. The wide, flat cup he received was white, with a depiction of a

blue cat in the center.

“Sari liked your decency,” Thoma explained. “You’re an inflexible stick in the mud, but when it matters, you check what others want and respect that, even if you’re tactless about it.”

“Tactless... But isn’t doing that only natural?”

“The fact that you say it’s natural is what sets you apart.”

Xixu remained silent and brought the drinking cup to his mouth, even though he found Thoma’s phrasing irritating. The liquid within held a taste reminiscent of sharp, clear water; it spread throughout his body.

Thoma hurled another piece of *konpeito* at him. “You’re nature is the complete inverse of Irede’s. *That* was what drew Sari to you. As for reaping what you sow, that’s true of her as well. If you force yourself to change, she’ll regret it more than you do.”

“It was beautiful. So I yearned for it.”

If the soliloquy he had heard in his dream was the truth, then Xixu’s answer to her question would remain eternally the same. If Sari herself chose him as her sacred offering, if she had truly become an adult, then he would acquiesce. He was willing to do so.

As he had spent time with Sari, Xixu had started wanting to become a source of support for her—her as an individual. Even if that meant entering a marriage with a god.

Xixu picked up the *konpeito* that had bounced off of his forehead and placed it back on the table. The blue piece of candy caught the light, but in a way that was duller than glass.

Thoma poured more rice wine into his own drinking cup. “Say, for example, that you really wanted a small clay doll,” he began.

“Why would I want a clay doll?”

“Shut up and listen, blockhead.”

Xixu brought his drinking cup to his mouth, and Thoma pushed over the plate of grilled fried tofu.

“So, the clay doll,” House Radi’s heir continued, “If you touch it, it’ll fall apart. But you want it. What do you do?”

“If those are the conditions, I’d have to cover it with a glass container. Then I could slip paper underneath it and carry it somewhere safe.”

There was a long, drawn out silence.

Taking in Thoma’s face, Xixu demanded, “What?”

“Nothing,” the other man said, sighing. “It’s just that talking to you sometimes makes me want to throw my hands into the air and give up on it all. I’m impressed that Sari actually enjoyed this.”

“Get to the point...” Xixu felt as though their conversation was digressing further and further.

Thoma looked at him pityingly, then continued, “The point is, there are two types of people: those who are willing to destroy something to obtain it, and those who’ll choose to never touch it at all. I don’t know which one you are, but Sari’s the latter. She doesn’t want to kill you.”

The god’s power was vast. Vast enough to rob a person of their life simply from the act of sleeping within her embrace. Such were the consequences of divinity, whether one wanted them or not.

So that was why Sari had let go, Xixu suddenly understood. She wished to avoid unintentionally breaking the fragile body of a human.

A girl looked up at a blue bird, but never reached her hand out toward it. Instead, all she did was lovingly follow it with her eyes as it took flight.

Sari’s choice had not sprung entirely from what had happened when Xixu had slept beside her gravely wounded self, he knew. While he had been by her side, he had been targeted by both her brother god and Distira. If she chose to be with him, human as he was, more such adversity would surely follow.

Xixu placed his empty cup back onto the table. “I never imagined that I’d be treated the same as a glass bird...”

“What are you talking about?”

“You bought it for her when she was a child, didn’t you? The blue one hanging

in her roo—”

Without any warning, the sliding screen door was pulled open, and a young man in a suit entered. Vas, for some reason holding a bottle of rice wine in one hand, placed his cargo in the center of the table.

“A craftsman asked me to bring it up as I was passing through downstairs,” he explained, situating himself between Xixu and Thoma.

“Oh, thanks,” Thoma said. “While you’re here, have a drink.”

After opening the bottle—which was apparently one of the brewery’s private samples—Thoma poured the contents into three drinking cups.

Vas accepted his and looked at his cousin coldly. “You’re being rather carefree, considering. Would you care to explain what’s happening?”

“Why?” Thoma asked. “You’ve already looked into it, right? You know how it is.”

“Not in the slightest. I only know that Everie was acting strangely.”

“She succeeded in unifying with her divinity under her own power. Her brother god finally came back, you see, and there’s another problem loitering around too, so her transformation came at just the right time. That’s my little sister for you.”

Thoma’s followed up his blandly delivered words with a sip of water, no doubt to clear his palate in order to taste the rice wine.

Vas appeared astounded by the man’s sheer shamelessness. He placed his drinking cup back down before it could meet his lips. “I’m not even sure where I should even begin to air my grievances with what you just said.”

“Must you air them at all? In a situation like this, it’s a lack of power that would be a problem, not the opposite.”

Evidently deciding that sending further inquiries Thoma was a futile endeavor, Vas turned to Xixu instead. “How did this come to be?”

The young shadeslayer, holding his second cup of wine, hung his head. “It’s my fault...”

“Don’t ask *him*!” Thoma cut in. “I don’t want to deal with him getting all pointlessly depressed!”

“What...?” Vas studied Xixu. “Are you drunk?”

“No...”

Xixu did not want to consider the idea that he was drunk after only one cup, and regardless his head hurt enough as it was anyway. Perhaps unable to bear seeing him mope, Thoma reiterated his explanation with visible reluctance.

Once he was finished, Vas glared at his cousin. “And you mean to tell me you did not *stop* her?”

“I didn’t notice,” Thoma replied. “She put up an act. It sounds like Xixu *did* notice, but he’s soft on Sari. He’d let her do anything.”

The man’s expression was no different from his usual one as he tasted his new rice wine—his true intentions seemed hidden behind a mask. Perhaps the two siblings of Irede were quite alike, in that regard.

On the other hand, Vas, their blood relative but a person of the capital, was looking at Xixu in amazement. “After everything I told you, you simply let Everie be? Do you think her an old wife you’ve long since grown tired of?”

“No...” Xixu replied. “I value her.”

“That is a good attitude to have,” Vas said simply. He shifted his gaze back to his cousin. “While it may be true that he is soft on Everie, you are too harsh on her about the strangest matters. If you can see that she’s just being obstinate, why not just yield to her?”

“She’ll end up rotten if she’s spoiled like that. Not to mention that’s rich, coming from *you*. You placed her under house arrest when all she did was come over for the storehouse reopening.”

“It was only for a handful of days, and it was in order to prevent any issues from arising. It was entirely reasonable. *This* issue spans her entire lifetime.”

“Stop blowing it out of proportion. This guy’ll get depressed.”

“And? Let the drunk wallow in his own misery.”

Xixu sighed heavily. Despite the fact that he'd remained quiet, he'd had a lot said about him. His thoughts and body felt heavier than he could handle—perhaps because it had been a while since he'd last consumed alcohol. Even so, he knew what he had to do.

Vas pushed a teacup of water at the silent shadeslayer. "So, will you be returning to the capital?" he asked. "If you are, I have an assortment of information that may prove useful to you."

"No."

Sari had wanted him to return. To leave Irede and find happiness.

But that was not the path Xixu would choose.

No matter how cold her hand upon his had been, it had still been *her* hand. And the truth was, Sari was at peace with who she'd become.

"If Saridi says she's fine this way, then it's fine," Xixu said. "I have no intention of forcing my opinion on her. Her personal freedom matters more."

His words did not stem from stubbornness; they were his true thoughts. If Sari was not unhappy, then things were fine.

As Xixu picked up his drinking cup, Thoma and Vas exchanged looks.

"See?" the former asked. "He's weird, right?"

"The strangest thing is that he appears entirely serious."

"I'm just stating the obvious..." Xixu muttered.

He felt as though the last portion of conversation had been nothing but Thoma and Vas incessantly treating him like an oddity. Suspecting that nothing more that he said would be treated seriously, he decided to shut up and drink his rice wine.

The young Werrilocia stared at the sullen prince. "I wonder... What was the relationship between them?" he asked Thoma.

"Things turned out this way because there wasn't a clear answer to that question. If it had been an ordinary love affair, they would have strutted about more and cared what others thought of them less."

“That *would* have been easier to understand. I wish matters had resolved themselves before something like this happened.”

“If nothing had gone wrong, they would have made for a fine husband and wife.”

The blithe exchange between cousins showed no sign of concluding any time soon. Xixu, who had only bothered to listen to half of it, looked up when there was a lull in the conversation.

“For the time being, we can’t let the number of her enemies keep increasing,” he said. “We’ll need to take care of them one at a time.”

“Easier said than done,” Thoma replied. “Tesed Zaras aside, the other two are gods. One wrong step, and you’re dead.”

“There’s a way. We just have to find it.”

Xixu reached for his military sword, which he had left upon the tatami. He always maintained the blade with thorough care, but given the circumstances, it was currently in the same state as it had been the previous night.

Sitting cross legged with his sword in his arms, the young man spoke aloud, but to neither of his companions in particular. “First, her mother...” He paused. “Ah, will it be a problem if I kill her?”

“No,” Thoma said. “Leaving her loitering around is a problem for House Radi too.”

“Likewise for the Werrilocias,” Vas added. “I have somewhat of a lead in that regard, so I’ll lend you my assistance.”

Xixu nodded, having gained the acknowledgement of Sari’s blood relatives.

Frowning at his own choice to willingly taking on the role of a god slayer, the young man rose to his feet.

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Sari felt detached, as though she were seeing everything from a distance. The townscape before her eyes resembled a precisely crafted child's toy. She alone had become lost in a tiny artificial world.

Sari shook her head lightly, casting off the irregular feeling. In her vision, Irede swayed under the bright sunshine.

"It's not as if it's really changed size..." Sari murmured. "I wonder why I feel like this...?"

Was it because the new state of her consciousness had made her sensitive to even the most subtle of changes? Or was it that she had become weaker to the sunlight?

Sari pondered the issue as she walked down a main street amidst other pedestrians, the breath spilling from her lips as frosty as ever. She had come out to make a shopping trip, thinking that it was for the best that she make occasional ventures outside, but perhaps it would have been better to leave it to a maidservant after all.

Sari turned her unsteady gaze toward the lively hustle and bustle—and then a shadow was cast on her from above.

"Huh?"

She began to look up, but was quickly forced to raise her arms to cover her head as a large silhouette streaked by it. The sound of beating wings was accompanied by the scent of blood.

"Ow!"

Sari crouched and examined her right arm. There were deep lacerations in it—talon marks. Her hair had been forcibly disheveled too, and she clutched it to suppress the throbbing pain. She looked up at the silhouette circling in the sky.

"What? A hawk?"

It was some manner of large bird, that was for certain, but the glaring sun behind it made its species difficult to discern. As the surrounding passersby buzzed with noise, the bird once again dived for Sari.

She considered raising her finger to knock the bird down, but the eyes of

those around her caused her to freeze. Then, as she hesitated, her vision was obstructed by a man's back. He wore his kimono in a casual, slovenly manner, and kept his eyes on the oncoming bird as he drew his sword.

That was as much as Sari took in before she turned around, facing a second person who was standing behind her. The man—a certain shadeslayer with a large build—studied her injuries grimly.

"You'd best wash those gashes, maiden," he said.

"Sorry for the trouble," Sari apologized. "You too, Tagi..."

"What did you do to even get the birds hating you, Young Miss?"

The man before her shifted in her direction, his sword still drawn. The bird must have fled; it was nowhere in sight.

Sari combed her disarrayed hair into order, then bowed to Ironblade and Tagi. "I didn't do anything," she said. "And thank you. Are you two on patrol?"

"No, I just received some information that I wanted to pass onto you," Ironblade said. "Can you spare some time?"

"Yes, it's no problem."

It wasn't as if she could continue her shopping with these wounds anyway. Sari pressed down on the gashes over her sleeve and gracefully turned back the way she had come.

Upon returning to Pale Moon, Sari had the pair of shadeslayers await her in the flower room. In the meantime, she cleaned the blood from herself and wrapped bandages around her now unwounded arm. After changing and returning to the flower room, she saw that Ironblade and Tagi were amusing themselves with a game of go.

"I apologize for the wait."

"It's no issue," Ironblade said. "We can't have you being scarred permanently."

"You suffered a scratch on your face a while back too, didn't you, Young

Miss?” Tagi asked. “Maybe it’s best if you stay inside Pale Moon.”

“I can hardly do that,” Sari said, pulling out a chair to sit in. “So, you wished to talk to me?”

Ironblade nodded firmly. “Yes. Maiden, it appears that war has begun outside.”

Sari paused, before saying, “I see.”

Irede had gone through this exact situation countless times before. Countries warred, rose, and fell. The “outside” did not refer to the nations beyond Torlonia, but to Torlonia itself, outside of Irede. Sari smiled—Irede’s position, from where it gazed upon the shifting waves of the world from afar, resembled her current self. Nevertheless, that did not mean that they could simply remain bystanders.

Ironblade placed a go stone down with a thick finger. “As you are aware, there is the possibility that spies and assassins will come to Irede, similar to the one we discovered some time ago,” he said. “While we will not be taking the initiative and purposefully rooting them out, the circumstances warrant caution for the time being. I realize that maintaining an appropriately measured hand will be difficult, but I must ask all the same.”

“I understand,” Sari replied.

Irede saw visitors from other countries too. If a war had begun outside, then they would bring with them friction and discord. However, even if the winds of conflict were to blow across the entire continent, Irede was the town that never changed its face. It could not allow its guests to feel unease or discomfort.

Despite this, it would also not do for Irede to become known as a haven from conflict. It was nothing more than a place where one could be granted a temporary rest. Nobody but the town’s residents could stay for any longer.

Sari listened as Ironblade went through the warnings to be distributed to all the major establishments of Irede, then settled a number of advance arrangements with the pair of shadeslayers to do with her role as the maiden.

When everything was finished, Ironblade observed the young proprietress closely. “Maiden,” he said. “It appears as though you haven’t spent much time

with the new recruit as of late."

"I'm not sure you can call him a 'new recruit' after a year has passed," Sari replied. "But yes, I haven't."

She had not seen Xixu since they had spoken in the flower room a week ago. They were in the period where her power suppressed the manifestation of shades, so naturally, there was no cause for any shadeslayers to come to her for aid.

Yet, that was not the only reason. Another part of the truth was that, between her and him, there no longer existed a tie like the one they'd once had.

As she sat there, entirely composed, Tagi smiled at her cynically.

At the same time, Ironblade said, in a worried tone, "You are both still young, so there will come times when you have your differences. But he is your lifelong partner. It would be best if you talked it over as much as you need to."

Sari did not reply. For some inexplicable reason, she felt as though it would actually be worse to correct Ironblade's misunderstanding at this point. As she searched for some manner of explanation, Tagi snorted.

"This after you were practically hanging off him all the time too. Was the reason you got rid of him so suddenly because his old flame got on your nerves?"

"No, that wasn't how it was."

"Well, with how lacking in tact he was, I can understand why you wanted to sever ties with him."

"That wasn't how it was either."

"Still, Young Miss, I have to ask. Is it fun for you right now? Being in Irede?"

Tagi's question, dripping with cynicism, felt to Sari like a thrust at her blind spot. Yet, it also felt like something she had already seen coming. The maiden looked at the man, her blue eyes open wide. Tagi spread his arms open as well, as if to ask what she was so surprised about.

"What's with that look?" he asked. "Don't tell me you weren't aware of it

yourself after walking around town with those cold eyes of yours. You looked disinterested in anything and everything. I'm not all knowing, but I can say that those weren't a courtesan's eyes, at least."

"I..."

She had been thinking that everything looked distant. As though it were artificial.

Sari had more than once looked at the people of the capital and thought them different from the those of Irede, but in truth, perhaps she had changed so much that she herself had been out of place. She placed a gloved hand to her own cheek.

"I didn't realize," she said. "I apologize. And thank you for telling me."

"There's no need to apologize to me," Tagi replied. "If it's not what you want, just leave. You're bringing the mood down." The carefree shadeslayer pushed his chair out with a clatter and departed from the flower room.

Ironblade sighed. "Sorry about his rudeness. When you make him actually do work every once in a while, it only gives rise to twice the trouble."

"That's just like him," Sari replied. "Besides, he's never wrong in what he says."

And he always poked at where it hurt the most, too. Then again, as Sari was now, she did not even think of it as painful.

She watched as Ironblade began stacking go stones with delicate care. The act of piling them up, one by one, reminded Sari of the fruits borne from the lives of humanity, and she kept her gaze fixed on the man's hands. Ironblade was more dexterous than his appearance would suggest, and the small stone tower gradually rose.

"Come to think of it, Maiden, I heard that the new courtesan transferred to a teahouse."

"Yes, I dropped by the other day to wish her well."

Mifileu had agreed to Vas's proposed idea and had transferred to a teahouse on a main street several days prior. Sari, as the proprietress, had gone to

present her with a gift, which had included money and a set of everyday necessities. From what she had been able to see, Mifileu, the daughter of a merchant family, had taken to the bustling activity of the crowded teahouse with the ease and comfort of familiarity.

The teahouse itself, being a daytime establishment, was different in atmosphere to a courtesan house, and it had seemed that Mifileu would continue her live-in work there for the foreseeable future. Sari thought it was the first time she had ever seen a lack of sorrow in the woman's smile.

As far as the records showed, Mifileu had retired from Pale Moon as an apprentice who had not taken any guests. The sums that Xixu had paid for her companionship had all been passed onto Mifileu to facilitate her transfer. Sari had thoroughly explained that, of course, and the woman had simply bowed her head and accepted it with gratitude. That she hadn't attempted to refuse it like she had in the past was perhaps a sign that she, too, had undergone some kind of change.

Still, there had been the chance that she would have become a fine courtesan, given enough time.

Sari loosed a cold, quiet breath. "I'm still inexperienced, aren't I?"

"Everybody is, right up until death comes for them," Ironblade said. "You're no exception, Maiden."

"If the proprietress is inexperienced, the women suffer for it."

And the shadeslayers will too.

Sari smiled and closed her eyes. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember what expression her past self would have made at a time like this.

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Upon opening the letter, Xixu saw that the contents were simple—all that was written was an explanation of Mifileu's new circumstances and some words of gratitude. He read the letter twice over, then returned it to its envelope.

"What does it say?" Thoma asked without looking in his direction. The man had just finished checking his horse's saddle. "Venting her grudge, maybe? 'You

didn’t understand anything,’ or something along those lines?”

“Nothing like that,” Xixu replied. “It was just an ordinary description of how she’s faring.”

Nevertheless, it was true that he *had* received similar criticisms. Xixu found his friend’s perceptiveness baffling—it was almost as though he’d witnessed it firsthand—but didn’t comment on it.

Tucking the letter into his breast pocket, Xixu joined Thoma by the horses. House Radi’s stables were located on the outskirts of Irede, and due to it being noon, there was nobody else around.

Xixu examined his bridle, touching the bit to ascertain that everything was in order. “I’ve...thought about it, a lot,” he said.

“About what?” Thoma asked.

“Why I visited her.”

He had been unable to explain what had driven him before. He had wanted to help Mifileu, but then she had refused his aid, and he had continued to visit her regardless, unsure of the emotion behind why he was doing so.

Yet now, Xixu could put it into words. They were the same words that had been written at the end of her letter.

“I think...I wanted her to be happy.”

Even if their paths diverged, he had wanted the one she walked to be peaceful. For her to be able to live the way she wanted to. That was the wish that had driven him to continue visiting her.

Xixu wondered if Sari was thinking the same thing about him, right now.

As the young shadeslayer took hold of his reins, Thoma smiled ruefully. “Yeah, I can see that,” he said. “That’s just who you are, isn’t it? Even if you’re terrible when it comes to the method.”

“Saridi...said the same thing to me,” Xixu said.

“So in short, she rejected you.”

Xixu did not reply. He felt as though saying anything more could only worsen

his position. Thoma took note of his mood and matched it, and the pair finished their preparations in silence before mounting their horses.

Once the two of them were outside of the town proper, they turned their mounts south.

“Right, let’s go,” Thoma said. “It’s almost time.”

Xixu hummed his agreement—the arrangements would be in order soon, and it was best that they move before anybody had the chance to notice them.

As they cantered down the highway, Xixu turned back to look at Irede in the distance. God’s town, illuminated by the light of the sun, was as tranquil as always.

In order to preserve that tranquility, Xixu and Thoma were off to kill the very god responsible for that light. The thought invoked guilt in Xixu—an emotion he’d found he could not help to feel, no matter how he dressed their actions up. He swallowed down a sigh that was on the verge of spilling forth.

The pair’s destination was an open grassy field away from the highway, located a short distance south of Irede. Vas, who was already there waiting, waved a hand in their direction when he saw them approaching.

Thoma and Xixu tied their horses to a nearby tree, then walked over to the center of the field to join Vas. The young man, who was dressed lightly for combat and had a blade on each side of his hip, looked up at the pale-blue sky.

“I had hoped to wait for the new moon before we attempted this...”

“That would have brought with it the danger of shades manifesting,” Thoma said. “It’s enough that we’re doing this during the daytime—Nerei’s replacement could be loitering around Irede as we speak. It’s best we get this over with quickly and head back.”

“If we are even able to get it over with quickly,” Vas said ominously. His eyes alighted on the military sword at Xixu’s hip. “Isn’t that your usual sword? Are you sure it will suffice?

“It’s fine,” Xixu said. “It was able to cut once before.”

“Cut what?”

“Dis—” Xixu narrowly managed to stop himself from saying the god’s name aloud. “Her.”

Thoma and Vas looked at him incredulously.

“What?” the former said. “You said she didn’t have a physical body, didn’t you?”

“She doesn’t,” Xixu confirmed, “but this sword should still be able to cut her. Even if it can’t, I have a back-up plan.”

The blood of a god had stained his blade. That fact meant it would likely be able to kill Distira, even if she lacked a physical form. Of course, the sword would be damaged if he left it like that indefinitely, so once this was over, he would have to send it to be resharpened.

Vas looked dubious, but lightly shook his head, as though he thought it would be tiresome to press the issue any further. “Very well,” he said. “Though I *had* sent for specialized weapons, thinking that you could use one.”

“Specialized weapons?”

“They’re here already—look.”

Vas pointed at the entrance to the field behind him. Upon seeing who was there, Xixu’s eyes widened, and Thoma grimaced. From his expression, it was easy to see that the man on horseback found the situation equally disagreeable.

Eid ignored Xixu and Thoma as he dismounted and approached Vas, presenting him with a long, black cloth bundle. “Here, what you asked for.”

“Thank you.”

Vas took the bundle and unwrapped the cloth, revealing a pair of swords—both katana. Their scabbards were lacquered black and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, giving them the appearance of ceremonial blades, at first glance.

“Hey, what?” Thoma said, sounding surprised as he examined the mother-of-pearl crests. “Both of them have the crests of the Werrilocia family *and* Pale Moon.”

“They’re from the estate’s storehouse,” Vas explained. “Family treasures that were never meant to be taken outside. It would be a significant issue if anybody

even caught sight of so much as their scabbards."

Publicly, Pale Moon, Irede's original courtesan house of old, and the Werrilocia family, who inherited the blood of an ancient royal family, were unrelated. The very existence of swords such as these would spark trouble if outsiders were to discover them. But although that demanded the utmost of care in how they were handled, Vas merely gave them a perfunctory check before holding one out to Thoma and the other to Eid.

"Very well," he said. "Please use these, you two. They were made long ago, when the head of the Werrilocias gave birth to female twins."

"Twins?" Thoma asked, accepting his. "I haven't heard that story before."

"Hold it," Eid interrupted, sounding irritated. He made no move to take his blade. "Why are you asking me to use one? I only came to deliver them."

Vas, caught between their strong personalities, showed no sign of being perturbed. "From what I know of the tale, a pair of blades was given to each of the twins, and it was the victor of their bout who would be the next head of the family," he explained. "They are, so to speak, god-slaying blades."

"As for your question," he said, turning to Eid, "*you* were the one who spurred me into coming to Irede, so consider this you working off that debt."

Xixu looked at the one-eyed man, surprised. "That was you?"

Eid averted his gaze, as good as confirming that he was the one who had sent Vas to Pale Moon the other day. Who had done so had been a question that Xixu hadn't particularly been bothered by, but now that he knew the truth, it invoked a chain of other, smaller questions within him.

The maiden's brother looked at his old acquaintance with utter exasperation. "You truly don't listen to the warnings of others, do you?" he said. "You really will die one day. That might even be today, actually, so you'd better make sure you don't."

"I told you, I only came to deliver the swords!"

"Well, you might as well put some work in, since you're here. The more of us there are, the less likely that some of us will come out of this dead. I can even

use this opportunity to off you in secret. It'll be perfect."

"I *said* I want no part in this!"

The pair of nobles ignored Eid's protests entirely as they briskly started on their preparations. Xixu found himself feeling sympathy for the man, despite the fact that he himself had been the one to cut the ex-shadeslayer's right eye out.

If he voiced such an emotion, however, it was entirely possible that the situation would devolve into bloodshed before their fight with Distira even began. This thought drove Xixu to begin his own preparations; he pressed a hand over his chest, checking that what he had secreted into his breast pocket was still there.

Eid, evidently having given up on resisting, muttered token complaints as he accepted his blade. Thoma looked over everybody present, all of the humor gone from his sharp, handsome features.

"Right," he began. "To confirm it once again, our opponent is a god with no physical body. She's the result of the woman who should have been Pale Moon's maiden severing her divinity and sealing it away thirty years ago. Given the circumstances, I went to the trouble of asking how she was sealed—evidently, she was locked away in a pond in the royal capital, with her name as the maiden used as the spell. The woman in question retired to the capital before she ever became the maiden, so only a select few individuals ever knew the name. Once they eventually passed away, the seal would have functioned for eternity, but—"

"I called her," Xixu said, bracing himself for the cold looks he would receive.

Vas looked at him, half exasperated and half incredulous, while Eid simply looked astounded. Their surprise was perhaps natural, since even Xixu himself found their current situation difficult to comprehend.

"Still, I wonder how that maiden's foresight works?" Thoma added, sounding as though he didn't care at all about what Xixu had said. "She told you the name because she saw you saying it in the future, right? Which would imply that you knew the name already, but... I wonder which came first? It's like the problem with the chicken and the egg."

“I’m not certain,” Xixu said. “In her own words, ‘the flow of a person’s history already includes the use of my foresight within it.’”

Thoma cocked his head to the side. “I can kind of understand that, if not fully. I suppose it serves as a testament to that even she is just a human, at the end of the day.”

Vas turned his gaze upward toward the chilly air. “It isn’t a matter one wishes to contemplate too deeply, is it? If everything is already determined, down to the decisions of whether the king’s maiden looks into the future or not and whether she chooses to inform others or not, then that would mean the result of our upcoming conflict is already set in stone.”

“From what she has told me, not everything is so fixed,” Xixu said. “Though there is a large, flowing course of events, the fine details are fluid.”

“Even a single thrown pebble can change the flow,” Thoma agreed.

Furthermore, events involving gods were particularly opaque. Such beings often could not be contained within the framework of human history. Perhaps that was the very reason why Irede did not involve itself within the rise and fall of the country it belonged to.

Xixu turned toward the direction of the pleasure town that had remained unchanged since the bygone age of myth. It was like a stone that had settled amidst a flowing stream; it would maintain its calm existence long after Torlonia fell to ruin.

If that was true, then that was all the more reason for him not to trouble Sari more than he already had.

Thoma drew his god-slaying sword from its black-lacquered scabbard. The blade was flawless, a bright silver reminiscent of the moon.

The man who had inherited the blood of a god laughed without fear. “By the way,” he said, “as far as I’m concerned, I think we’d still be better off just leaving this to Sari. But this guy—” He jerked his chin in Xixu’s direction, “He says he’ll do it himself if he has to, so if you’re going to blame anybody, blame him.”

Xixu turned to Vas and Eid, the second of whom was looking particularly

unwilling. “I would be grateful for your assistance,” he said, “but I cannot guarantee your survival. If you believe this to be beyond you, please, withdraw.”

Xixu had many opinions regarding the man who had been exiled from Irede, but he did not wish death upon him in the slightest. No matter what Thoma and Vas said, Eid’s choice to fight was dependent on himself alone.

The one-eyed man stared at Xixu as though he found him impossible to decipher, then abruptly shifted his gaze to irritatedly glare at the scabbard in his hand. “This is the last time I do anything like this,” he said. “I’m leaving the capital afterward.”

“Well, that’s good news for the both of us, then,” Thoma teased.

For a moment, the two men, one brimming with displeasure and the other purposefully incendiary, stared at each other in contempt. Then, just as quickly, they turned and moved away from each other, creating some distance between them on the grassy field.

Vas shrugged so that only Xixu could see. “Shall we begin, then?”

“I suppose so.”

With only the four of them here, the longer they had to deal with each other, the more likely it would be for matters to break into unnecessary conflict. Xixu drew his sword and looked around at the other three, checking if they seemed ready. When he saw nothing that he could call a problem, he looked up at the sky, where the moon wasn’t visible.

Then, he called a god’s name.

“Distira,” he said plainly. “As a sacred offering, I call you.”

It was halfway toward a gamble whether she would take notice of his words. Xixu, however, had thought that the chance that she would come was quite high. Cut loose and rejected by man—how could she not hate her own loneliness?

Even Sari instinctively disliked solitude, and she lived a life surrounded by people. For Distira, the feeling would be yet more severe.

Wide expanses of green grass swayed in the wind. From afar, the calls of birds could be heard from among the trees. The silence that had hung in the air before Xixu spoke had only just settled back over the minds of the four present, when a transparent girl appeared before them.

The girl, her silver hair melting into the air, looked down upon Xixu from a height barely out of the reach of his sword. She seemed to be trying to glare at him—but perhaps unable to endure it, her mouth soon relaxed into a smile.

“Yes?” she said. “Do you wish to apologize for what happened the other day?”

The childishness of her friendly, delighted smile bore a close resemblance to how Sari’s had looked, not too long ago. Guilt ate at Xixu even as he shook his head.

“I will apologize if you comply with my wish,” he said.

“Hmm? Well, what is it?”

“I want you to return to your seal.”

His words were the clear—a declaration of refusal. Upon hearing them, Distira’s mouth popped open vacantly.

Xixu adjusted his grip on his sword; he had expected the possibility that this would devolve into a fight the moment he spoke his piece. Through the translucent girl’s body, he could see Thoma opposite him, grimacing.

“Why?” Distira asked, voice trembling.

“I have no reason.”

If Xixu explained himself, he would be forced to mention Sari’s name. They could not risk the small chance that Distira would fly into a rage and immediately make for Pale Moon. Thoma had been against requesting her to return to her seal to begin with; he had suggested a surprise attack as soon as she appeared. Xixu, however, had insisted upon it. Even if she had been cut entirely loose, Distira was still Thoma and Sari’s mother. It would be best if they resolved this without having to kill her.

Nevertheless, Xixu also knew how naive he was being.

Distira bit down on her delicate lip. “You would refuse me too?”

“I cannot become your sacred offering.”

“Why do you refuse? Is it not mankind that needed my existence? To refuse me now...”

“Xixu.”

The voice calling his name belonged to Thoma. Sword in hand, the man took a step toward the god who had strayed from the flow. his gaze, devoid of compassion, piercing through the woman who could have been his mother. “Negotiations have broken down. We’re doing this.”

No paths were visible in the wide, grassy field.

Instead of voicing his agreement, Xixu looked up at the girl above him and silently adopted a stance with his sword.

8. Envy

Even after seeing him point his blade at her, Distira did not move; she merely stared at Xixu with hurt eyes. The time he spent looking up into them seemed long—far too long.

He saw Thoma step across the grass and swing his slender sword. Xixu's body stepped back on instinct, so as to not be in its path. The silver blade scythed through Distira's torso—and then the two men were blown away.

When Xixu came to, he sat up and exhaled a wordless grunt. Vas was standing beside him, peering down.

"Oh?" the young man said, rapier in hand. "You were alive?"

Xixu, relieved to see that he was still clutching his military sword, began rising to his feet. "Was I knocked out?" he asked.

"Not enough time has passed to be able to call it that," Vas replied. "It has only been a handful of seconds, see?"

Looking where Vas was indicating, Xixu saw Thoma, who had been blown back in the other direction, picking himself up off the grass. A short distance away, Eid was looking up, wearing a fed-up expression. That was when Xixu finally noticed that Distira was floating in the air in the center of the four, too high for them to reach.

The transparent girl's torso was without a scratch, and neither were there any tears in the sheer silver cloth wound around her body.

"Wasn't that supposed to be a god-slaying blade?" Xixu grumbled to the young man beside him as he stood.

"It *did* work," Vas replied. "She's slightly more faded than before, if my eyes don't deceive me. Though it appears that the lack of a physical body means that she cannot suffer ordinary wounds. We'll have to gradually shave away at her existence. Also, it appears that we made several miscalculations."

“Miscalculations?” Xixu repeated, keeping his gaze fixed on Distira. He almost didn’t want to know.

Vas nodded, also keeping his eyes on her. “The first is that once she ascends to where we cannot reach, we are left without any options—”

“No, we already knew that.”

“And the second is that while we considered our methods of attack, we did not pay any thought toward how we would defend ourselves from her power.”

“I don’t think we could have come up with anything even if we had.”

Perhaps Distira would have been angered by their unproductive conversation, if she had been listening, but her attention seemed to be focused solely on Thoma. As the man rose to his feet, she glared at him as though her gaze alone might kill.

“You...” she said. “You’re that man’s son. You resemble him well.”

“Good eye,” Thoma said. “Though I should say that I’m aggrieved at my father’s choice to run too.”

“Then simply cut him down. I know not from which woman’s belly you were born, but I shall let you go, if you flee now.”

Thoma’s expression did not change in the slightest—it remained his usual faint, confident smile. It was Xixu whose chest the girl’s words pierced.

Distira, who had been cut loose from her flesh before her marriage, did not know that her original self had given birth to two children. They were parent and child, and yet, they were not.

If Sari discarded her own divinity, would her separated half remain similarly alone, detached from the flow of time? The thought of her standing under the moonlight in an empty world invoked a small, quiet anger in Xixu, as well as an unbearable restlessness.

“I can’t understand...”

“Understand what?” Vas asked.

Xixu blinked, surprised. Evidently, the words that had welled up in his heart

had spilled forth. He shook his head. “I can’t understand Saridi’s father,” he said. “How he could deny half of his own wife.”

When Xixu had learned that Pale Moon’s maiden was not human, he had been surprised, yes. It had been difficult for him to come to terms with the aspect of her that was so different to her usual self. Now, however, Xixu understood beyond a doubt that she, too, was Sari. He would not want her to cut away and discard part of what made her who she was. He was unable to even imagine how her and Thoma’s father could possibly have forced the woman he had chosen himself to experience such a lengthy solitude.

Watching as anger seeped into Xixu’s grim expression, Vas sighed. “That part of you will prove fatal, one day...” he said. “Though I suppose it’s of no concern to me. More importantly, we need to do something about the floating lady over there, or Thoma is going to die.”

Abruptly, the earth shook beneath their feet. Whatever had happened, they had been unable to see. All they could discern was that Distira was pointing a shapely finger at Thoma.

“The sight of you displeases me,” she said, her clear voice resonating through the field. “Be consumed by the earth.”

The deep proclamation itself carried power. Under the grass, a vast area of ground began to fissure, spreading like the strands of a spider’s web. Thoma leapt aside, running through the grass to make distance as the earth swallowed itself up, roots and all.

Eid, who had been in the range of the fissures, ran to escape the area. “Don’t get *me* mixed up in your problems too!”

“Shut up!” Thoma shouted back. “Stay still and let yourself be swallowed!”

A white light pursued the two men as they began to run in two separate directions. Eid turned mid-run and swatted it away with his borrowed sword, causing it to break into small droplets that scattered across the grass.

It was, however, only a temporary reprieve. Xixu had seen Sari annihilate a countless number of black snakes before by manipulating scores of streaks of light at once. What Distira had attempted with Thoma was far from what a god

could truly do.

“If we don’t settle this soon, she’ll stop holding back,” Xixu said. “The moment that happens, we’ll be dead.”

“I won’t say that’s an impossibility, but the risk of that happening is lower than you might expect,” Vas corrected calmly. He lightly swept the tip of his rapier through the grass at his feet. “She and the other manifestations of her are equal in that they took root in this land after being summoned by mankind. They cannot wield much power against humans—though it is a different matter against the inhuman, of course.”

“Come to think of it, I remember Saridi saying something along those lines...”

The existence of the maidens of Irede, born through the medium of human flesh and blood, was proof of their harmony with mankind. Because of that old contract, they could not wield an excessive amount of their power against people. For them, to break that interdiction was to turn their back entirely on humanity.

Xixu’s frown eased to hear that they had a small cause for hope.

Beside him, Vas added indifferently, “Still, even if she is restricted in the use of her power, she *is* a god. The difference in our capabilities is evident. And physically speaking, we cannot reach her.”

“I have a countermeasure for that,” Xixu said.

He returned his military sword to its scabbard and retrieved a black bundle from his breast pocket. Stored within were a single leather glove for his left hand and five daggers the length of his palm. At the end of their hilts was a ring to which long lengths of steel wire were attached, connecting them at the other end to metal stakes whose purpose was being embedded into the ground.

Vas studied the unfamiliar tools dubiously. “What are those?”

“I knew she could take flight, so I asked the castle to prepare these.”

A white light flashed as it descended from the sky in a crashing wave. Thoma and Eid leapt out of the way as it fell, leaving white smoke rising from the grass in its wake.

Xixu couldn't tell if it truly resembled Sari's power or not, but it seemed clear that even receiving one such blow from Distira would result in grievous injury. He couldn't continue to stand by and watch.

Deftly, Xixu pulled on the glove and broke into a run, holding one of the daggers in his hand. A spell had been engraved into its blade to the extent of what it could bear. He took aim at Distira, and threw.

The dagger flew through the air and hit its target exactly where he'd intended.

"Ah?!" The brief, quiet exclamation of pain that Distira loosed resembled one from another time. The girl whose attention had been focused on Thoma grimaced when she noticed the dagger piercing her left calf. Though even a god-slaying sword had passed through her body, the dagger remained stuck, glowing with a faint white light. "What is this...?"

There was no time for Xixu to answer her question. He stabbed the stake into the ground, pressed down on it with his foot, and began pulling the steel wire with his left hand. Distira's small frame jerked and lowered toward the ground.

She turned, and her blue eyes caught Xixu. "How dare you!"

White light formed in her right hand—a mass of cold air, judging from appearances.

Xixu sprang to the left, still pulling on the steel wire. As Distira was dragged down, almost colliding with the ground, Thoma, who had reversed direction and come running, swiped his blade at her. However, before it touched her body, the wire that Xixu had been pulling on suddenly went slack.

"Watch out!" he shouted.

The steel wire had been cut, but by the time Xixu realized and shouted his warning, Distira had already turned and thrown herself at Thoma. From up close, she struck him with an intense blast of air cold enough to reap a life.

"Thoma!"

Given the distance between them, it was obvious that the man would not have been able to avoid the god's blow. The light, which had been aimed at his

head, seared the vision of all those present.

Xixu, keeping his left eye closed to protect his sight, grabbed his second dagger. He had been expecting the worst outcome, but when the light cleared, Thoma was still standing atop the grass. It appeared as though he had raised his blade to meet the attack, but though he had escaped alive, his right shoulder was coated in white frost, below which blood bubbled forth.

The wound was unmistakably severe, but Thoma appeared unperturbed as he cut at Distira with his sword using his left hand. The silver blade passed through her slim neck.

The girl's expression twisted into one of displeasure for a moment, but she soon returned to her original appearance, wavering like the reflection of the moon on the water's surface. A cruel smile appeared on the transparent beauty of her features.

"Is that all?" Distira asked.

She raised a slender hand toward Thoma's shoulder, which looked as though it would split apart at a touch. Xixu held his breath and threw his dagger at her back—but it would not reach in time to stop her. Yet, just as he was certain that he was too late, another blade fell upon Distira's arm from her flank.

The second of the pair god-slaying swords severed the god's left arm. As it fell, it faded from existence like a shimmering heat haze.

The man who had accomplished the feat kicked Thoma aside, his gaze still focused on Distira. "You're in the way," he said. "I want to get this over and done with already so I can leave."

"Bastard..." Thoma grumbled.

The one-eyed shadeslayer took another step forward, swinging his blade. Distira's head, however, did not turn—her gaze remained fixed on her own back as she studied the dagger embedded there. Her lost left arm returned, forming from white mist, and she used it to grasp the blade of Eid's sword as it came down at her head.

The god, who no longer even screamed, looked around at the four men with eyes of ice that brimmed with quiet fury.

“Interesting,” she said. Her blue eyes shone with more luminescence than moonlight. “Come, then. All at once. I shall be your opponent.”

The words she spoke were the verdict of a god. Unleashed alongside them was the overwhelming pressure of her being—the dignity of her existence. Though Xixu had felt a similar pressure when he had stood before the golden wolf, he still found it agonizing to remain standing, and felt deeply nauseous.

Yet, he could not allow himself to cower and shrink away. To do so would be to submit to her from his very soul. He would, as a human, forever lose the ability to stand before a god.

Thus, Xixu drew upon all of his will to take a single step forward. With his left hand, he pulled upon the steel wire.

Time, which had frozen still, once more began to move.

With an exhaled breath, Xixu drew his military sword again with his right hand. As he pulled Distira toward him, he could see that she was watching him with a degree of amazement. She released the god-slaying sword in her transparent left hand and brought it behind her back, grabbing the dagger embedded in it.

The steel wire snapped off at her touch, and she pulled the dagger out and threw it at Eid, who had closed in on her. Unable to evade it at so close a distance, it sank deep into his flesh below his collarbone, causing him to grunt in pain and fold over.

Xixu used the time to run further forward, aiming his sword at the forgotten god.

Distira smiled beautifully. “Why are you not afraid?” she asked him.

Perhaps, though, it was only in Xixu’s imagination that he heard the question. What he saw the very next moment was a god’s hand, reaching out to pluck his head from his shoulders.

There was no mercy in her. She and the other manifestations of herself were inhuman to the end. In that fraction of an instant, Xixu understood death. And no thoughts crossed his mind.

Distira's lovely countenance drew nearer. Her hand that resembled water itself brushed the hair over his forehead back.

"Be afraid," she said.

Blue eyes peered at him from a distance close enough that he and she could touch. Then, with casual ease, her gaze cast his spirit into a bottomless abyss of fear.

He stood amidst darkness. He could see nothing—nothing apart from a headless infant, standing some distance away.

The child wore red finery, and her back was turned to Xixu. She appeared to be a little girl, and she stood out in such sharp relief from the darkness that it was uncanny. Slowly, she swung her arms back and forth.

The air was uncomfortably tepid.

From somewhere far away, Xixu could hear a nursery song, sung in a poorly articulated voice. He looked around, searching for the source of the it.

"What is this place...?"

There was nothing around him but darkness.

When Xixu shifted his gaze back, he almost cried out in shock. The child in red finery was now standing before him, the stump of her neck squirming and glistening with light, as though it were a living creature of its own.

As Xixu stood there, frozen and aghast, the child's pallid right hand reached for him. The distorted voice of an adult man laughed from right behind his ear.

"Let's play."

The sinister whisper sent a shudder down Xixu's back. For some reason, he could not turn. His body refused to move. Yet, he felt without a doubt that he was being watched from behind. Somebody's breath trickled down the nape of his neck.

"Let's...play..."

The discordant nursery song had, at some point, begun to grow louder. As a

dull ringing began building in his head, Xixu found himself able to press a hand to his temple in an attempt to suppress it.

He could hear spasming laughter from behind him. The child in front of him had no head, yet he knew that she was smiling. Everything—everyone—was smiling and laughing. Only he was afraid. Xixu swallowed down a soundless breath.

Then, his feet lost purchase on the earth underneath him, as though he were sinking into the ground. When he looked down, he saw that the ground around him had become a vast expanse of entrails. Long processions of black insects crawled between the gaps of dark crimson viscera, stretching to the distant horizon.

Though Xixu wasn't sure when it began, the darkness had started to disappear, and he became able to see far into the distance. Dazed, he stared at the view of this other world's landscape.

"What...is this place?"

There was no sky. The entrails, spread as far as his eyes could see, gradually rose like walls in the distance and folded back, encasing the world, all of it leisurely undulating. Everywhere in sight, insects formed neat processions. Laughter made the folds of flesh above quiver and ooze blood.

"Let's play..."

Rough, anticipatory breaths fell upon Xixu's shoulder from behind. The headless child pulled the sleeve of her finery up and grabbed the hem of his clothing with a swollen, pallid hand.

A vivid crimson filled his vision. Insects crawled from the decapitated wound of the dead child's neck, using her arm as a bridge to begin ascending Xixu's body.

He could hear a nursery song.

Xixu closed his eyes. Slowly, he began to sink into the viscera. One by one, the bugs creeped up his neck and entered his ears. He could feel the delicate thrumming of their wings within his ear canals. Flabby, stiff fingers took his hand and entwined with his own.

Xixu couldn’t think.

He couldn’t breathe.

His own weight dragged him down toward the inhuman abyss.

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“Xixu...?”

The name she suddenly murmured was not of her own volition; it was as though the word had slipped out on its own. Sari inclined her head to the side, confused. She looked around the entryway, where she had just stepped down onto the hard packed clay, and her eyes met those of a maidservant sweeping outside.

“Miss Proprietress? Is something the matter?”

After a pause, Sari murmured, “I’m not sure...”

For a moment, it had felt as though something was off. She thought she had heard the humming of nonexistent insect wings by her ear.

Sari put a hand to her right ear and shook her head, as though trying to shake loose something that had entered it. However, the gesture brought her no certainty. Her gaze stopped on a decorative arrangement of flowers.

“Is Xixu nearby?” she asked.

“I’ll go look,” the maidservant said. She walked over to the gate, bamboo broom in hand, and poked her head out, turning it left and right to examine the path outside. “I don’t see him.”

“Is that so? I suppose it’s fine, then.”

Once again shaking her dazed head, Sari returned to the entryway. There was a visitor scheduled to arrive today before the lighting of the lantern. She couldn’t concern herself with hazy daydreams forever.

After another shake of her head, she examined the surrounding scenery, occupied only by herself and the maidservant. Her gaze alighted on the front gate, which had been rebuilt a short while ago.

Sari felt as though she had forgotten something important.

She didn’t know what it was. But although she had changed, that did not mean she had lost her memories.

It was simply that she had the feeling that she had lost something. It resembled homesickness, and while she thought perhaps it was simply her imagination, an abrupt turn of her head gave her the impression that a hole had been left open beside her.

Sari exhaled an icy breath. “Come to think of it...”

“Is something the matter, Miss Proprietress?”

“No. It just occurred to me that I still have to bear a child.”

Although she no longer needed a sacred offering to complete her unification, she still needed a maiden to succeed her. For that sake, she needed to take a guest. It was something she had completely forgotten, perhaps because the lives and dealings of humanity felt so far from her now.

Sari cocked her head and examined her inhumanly cold fingers. “I wonder what I should do...” she murmured.

She would give the man who was to be her guest quite the fright, with her body as it was now. Since she could only choose one, it would be troublesome if that one decided to run off. It would be a repeat of her mother’s situation all over again.

Sari’s grandmother had not told her much of her mother, who had borne the maiden name of Distira.

It had been Xixu’s mouth from which she had first heard the name, and it had been Thoma who had later related to her the story of her mother casting away her divinity. Sari hadn’t even been aware that such a feat was possible. It was an attestation to how much her mother had loved her father.

Though Sari genuinely admired the depth of her mother’s love, she also found it difficult to understand. She felt that it was an ironic twist of fate that she, who had been born from such a woman, had rejected humanity and unified on her own.

It made Sari wonder what the fate that awaited her would be like.

The maidservant, clutching the bamboo broom to herself, blushed faintly, coloring her cheeks slightly red. “I think you’d be able to select anybody you want, Miss Proprietress,” she said.

“The problem is that I think all of them would run away...” Sari replied.

“What about Master Xixu?”

The instant speed of the maidservant’s reply was no doubt due to what had occurred the other day. She had been present for the young man’s impassioned tirade, and evidently she had been greatly taken by his simple honesty. Though he was known as tactless throughout Irede, sometimes that sincerity of his pierced all the way through to capture a woman’s heart.

Sari, who had had the same thing happen to her, smiled wryly. “No,” she said. “It can’t be Xixu.”

She knew that since he had said that he was willing to become her sacred offering, he would also accept her current body and be willing to embrace it.

But that could not be allowed to happen. She did not want to cause his death. She had never wanted to.

Yet, in the end, it may have been her who had been driving him toward death, all this while.

As the maidservant looked at her curiously, Sari casually waved her hand at her. “Well,” she said, “I’ll figure something out.”

If push came to shove, she could simply ask Vas, her blood relative. He would most definitely hate the idea, but with how critical he had been of her mother for abandoning the Werrilocia family, Sari expected that he would yield for the sake of duty.

As for other matters, she needed to deal with Distira—who was lurking around Xixu—before long.

Sari did not understand how one could be so attached to humanity after being so thoroughly severed from it, but she could not leave a being who was the same as herself remain free without ties to anything else. She had to settle the issue so that Distira did not overlap with herself. And while killing the girl

who lacked a physical body would likely not have any effect on her mother, Sari intended to kill her regardless of any obstacles that appeared.

Sari was tempted to sigh—it seemed unlikely that problems lying before her would have straightforward solutions. “Honestly...” she muttered. “Why are there so many inhuman beings loitering around? They should all just go home.”

The god who had once been summoned to solve a problem was now herself the cause of many problems. It was entirely contradictory to the original intent. What an awful inconvenience it had to be for the current world of man.

Grumbling to herself, Sari removed her thonged sandals as she made to return inside Pale Moon, but then abruptly changed her mind and opened the cabinet to the side of the entrance. She retrieved a sheet of colorful decorative paper and began to fold it.

When finished the small, sky-blue crane, she brought it to her face and gently blew on it. As soon as she did so, the crane began glowing a faint blue.

“Go,” Sari murmured.

The crane, bestowed with a breath of ice and given life, flapped its paper wings and flew beyond the doorway and out of sight.

The technique was only a simple one that simply delivered itself to its target, but it could at least serve as a substitute for an ice bag, perhaps, if said target had a fever.

Sari turned back inside. The emotion she felt was chilled to the core and unwavering, no more realized than the illusion of a misheard whisper.

But the crane, and the crane alone, flew through the sky above Irede, headed south.

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The small pond that immersed his feet reflected a red moon.

The moon, as close to a perfect circle as was possible, did not change form upon the still surface of the water. Standing still in the pond and surrounded by night, Xixu simply stared at the moon’s reflection before him with lightless eyes.

From out of nowhere, he heard a girl’s voice.

“The other humans have already fallen. The cost of attempting to slay a god was great.”

Xixu understood the meaning of the words that were being said to him, but for some reason, they refused to register in his head. He looked down; he had already become submerged to his knees. The water didn’t feel cold. Rather, it was lukewarm—reminiscent of the bodily fluid of a person. The temperature invited sleep, and his consciousness continued to drift, on the verge of dissolving into nothingness.

Distira’s shadow surfaced from the moon on the water’s surface, rising until the upper half of its body was visible. She rested her chin in her hands, elbows settling atop the red moon, and looked up at Xixu, who was hollow.

“How do you feel?” she asked. “Though I suppose you can’t ‘feel’ anything.”

The girl’s voice merely slid across the top of Xixu’s consciousness. The question invoked nothing from within him.

Though, that was not entirely true. Just a little, he felt a sense of discomfort upon hearing her clear voice. He felt a thirst that threatened to cry out, as though he were craving a very similar, yet different voice that he once knew well.

The young man stared at Distira, unmoving. Within the world of her own making, the god breathed a faint sigh.

“People are weak.”

The red moon rippled lightly.

“They are foolish and capricious. Earnest, yet despite that, cowardly. But they are warm. And it was that warmth I sought after.”

The girl closed her eyes. As Xixu watched her he was unable to form a single thought. He was but a ghost, standing vacantly in the waters of the pond.

And those were the precise circumstances that Distira had been placed in, until now. She cast her gaze out over the oval shaped pond.

“Without any ties, I feel as though I will melt away and vanish. I feel as though I will become something I am not, like a kite cut from its string. For I have

neither the seat of Irede nor its sacred offerings to anchor me. I am always alone."

The murmured words shook Xixu's spirit, ever so slightly. They resembled a conversation he'd once had with somebody. Back then, he had thought: *I do not want her to experience loneliness.*

In a soft, hoarse voice, Xixu said, "You aren't...alone..."

She would never be alone, if that was what she wished. As long as she reached out her hand, he would always take it. Though Xixu's consciousness was dim and hazy, that was the one thread he could not let go, and so he had voiced it.

Distira's eyes widened greatly in surprise, and she peered at his face. "You are still able to speak?" she asked. "Is it because you have become accustomed to our power?"

Xixu did not understand the meaning behind her question. His gaze remained cast downward as Distira reached a hand out toward him, her graceful body manifesting forth from the reflection of the moon. A transparent palm touched Xixu's cheek. She matched his unfocused gaze with her own.

"Rather than breaking..." Distira murmured, "you should have responded to me from the beginning. You would have obtained the power of a god, then. You could have fought as much as you wished against the nature of man, so covetous that it would call upon the gods."

The girl's lonely, smiling visage indeed seemed nostalgic, somehow.

There was something he had lost. Yet it was never something he could forget. A name that Xixu wanted to call.

Distira's fingers gently touched his eyelids. As his vision slowly closed, he saw her nod slightly.

"Sleep now," she said. "Say nothing."

Despite her words, and despite that she was lulling his exhausted spirit to sleep, Distira looked as though she was waiting for him to say something. Even as she smiled, a tear spilled from the corner of her eye.

Xixu felt another ripple of unrest in his heart as he watched it fall. He had to tell “her.” That nagging feeling alone was what he relied on in order to raise his hand. The barest movement of his fingers caused an unendurable fatigue to assault him.

With his hand, he grasped the girl’s arm.

“It’s okay.”

Even if in the future, their paths diverged...

“I understand. I won’t ever deny you.”

He would affirm her way of being. He would not run away simply because she was different. He wanted her earnest efforts to move forward to be rewarded.

Xixu exhaled an exhausted sigh.

At that moment, a blue crane flew in from nowhere and alighted on his shoulder, gently nestling against him.

The breeze stirred up by the beating of the crane’s wings seemed cold enough to cut through his body. The unbearable chill forced Xixu’s consciousness back across the bridge to sanity. His once-hollow eyes widened in surprise, taking in Distira’s face. In that instant, he comprehended the situation he was in. He pulled strength into hand holding the girl’s arm and forcibly dragged her out from where her lower body was dissolved into the moon’s reflection.

In this world under Distira’s control, he did not have his military sword. Yet, in exchange, he was able to touch the girl who had no physical form.

Xixu’s left hand grasped her slender neck. If he put strength into his grip, he would likely be able to snap it, yet he did not do so. As Distira stared at him in blank amazement, he said, his voice sharp, “There’s no point in going any further.”

“What do you...?”

“I will not submit. And neither should you continue to hurt yourself.”

Though Distira had overpowered her human opponents, she had shown not a single sign of satisfaction in doing so. She had only suffered from her loneliness. Where was the meaning in continuing with such a fruitless act?

Perhaps having returned to herself, the girl freed herself from her speechlessness and glared at Xixu. “What a funny thing to say,” she said, smiling bitterly. “Are you perhaps begging for your life? To begin with, it is your fault that matters have developed as they have. What reason would a human offered to a god have to refuse?”

“It was not becoming a sacred offering that I refused.” Xixu looked sidelong at the crane perched on his shoulder. He did not know why such a thing had come here. But he did know who had sent it. Thinking of another moon, bright and cold, he continued, “Distira, are people no different from wine to you? An unchanging tool to be used for comfort, no matter who it may be?”

After a pause, Distira replied, “And what of it? What is it that you wish to say?”

“If that is what you think, then you wouldn’t be able to understand. The courtesans of Pale Moon do not change their guests. As such, the guests must respond in kind. Even if he is a sacred offering.”

Just because she was a god did not mean that anybody would suffice. Akin to how she only received a single guest as her sacred offering in her lifetime, she too should be singular for him. Otherwise, he would not be able to present her with a heart worthy of a god’s loneliness.

Xixu was keenly aware of the blue crane that reminded him of a certain girl’s eyes. Even if she had no intention of choosing him, he would wait, at the very least until she had chosen another companion. He would wait for as long as it was necessary for a child who had turned her back on something fragile to make the attempt to pick it up again.

Frowning, Xixu studied Distira. Depending on her answer, he was prepared to immediately snap her neck.

Distira’s expression, however, seemed relaxed as she asked, “Is that for her sake?”

Xixu did not answer. Yet his determined silence was the strongest affirmation of all.

The girl’s lips trembled slightly. “How can you sacrifice yourself for her after

she discarded you?”

“Because I must. If a person is to face a god eye to eye, they must do so in complete sincerity.”

“Even if they are betrayed?”

“Yes. At the very least, until they themself can be satisfied.”

If Saridi had been an ordinary person, and they had been no more than a shadeslayer and a maiden, then perhaps Xixu would have arrived at his answer much sooner. He would simply have fallen for her and made the natural choice to spend their lives together.

However, with all of the duties she bore, if he was to face her, then he himself needed to sincerely establish an appropriate degree of resolve. That was why he could not take Distira’s hand, even if that resulted in his defeat and death.

For that was what it meant to touch a god.

Distira looked at Xixu with eyes that wavered like those of a child left behind. In all likelihood, they reflected not Xixu, but another individual from the past. The god who had been betrayed and discarded, who had all this time been asleep, dropped her gaze to the red moon to which she was tied. A forlorn whisper escaped her delicate lips.

“I...”

The girl hung her head. Droplets fell upon the surface of the water. The faint ripples were all that were left—the shadows and broken remnants of a bond that should have lasted an eternity. As she watched them, Distira smiled feebly.

“I...envy you and her.”

Leaving only those words, the god’s body melted into the small pond.

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When he returned to the world, the very first thing he saw was the vast blue sky.

Next, Xixu smelled the cloying reek of blood, making him worry whether his body was still capable of moving. He began to move himself to check, starting

from his fingers, but grunted in discomfort when a sharp pain ran along his right arm. Thankfully, his left arm seemed unharmed. As he sat up and ascertained the state of himself, he saw that his right arm was twisted unnaturally from the elbow down. His back was drenched in cold sweat, but he suspected that his sense of pain was half numb or more—he still felt capable of moving. Gritting his teeth, Xixu stood up.

Not a single one of their number who had stood upon the grassy field was uninjured.

Thoma's bloody form was strewn over the grass, and it was impossible to discern whether he was alive or dead. Beside him, Eid knelt on his knees with the dagger still embedded below his collarbone, his hollow eyes focused on nothing in particular.

Vas, who was standing with his back to Xixu, still held his rapier in his right hand. However, everything below his left shoulder was stained in blood, trickles of crimson dripping onto the grass at his feet.

"Are you conscious?" Xixu asked reflexively.

Vas turned to look over his shoulder. Upon seeing the dark shadow in his eyes, Xixu was struck by the keen realization of how bad their situation truly was. But then, the young Werrilocia replied to his question as if nothing were the matter.

"I am fine, for a relative interpretation of the word. Thanks to the three of you keeping her busy over there, I was able to manage my part, somehow or other."

Vas indicated toward Distira with his rapier. The god's eyes were shut tight, and she no longer looked the part of a girl in her teenage years, floating above the grass in the form of a child younger than ten.

"This much shaving away at her should suffice," Vas said, showing Xixu the object in his right hand. "Though for a time back there, I was rather leery of our chances."

"Is that...Sari's bracelet?"

"Everie's mother's, to be precise. I made a perfunctory excuse and borrowed it from her."

The object that the young man was holding along with his rapier was a silver bracelet that Sari always wore upon her person, meant for the purpose of limiting the maiden's power. It must have been the countermeasure he had prepared for himself for the fight against Distira.

Xixu breathed a short breath, then went to pick up his military sword that had fallen some distance away. All the while, Distira showed no sign of moving.

Vas sighed and began walking toward her. "At any rate, it's time we end this and collect the other two," he said. "Though I imagine they might already be dead."

Xixu hesitated over whether to object to the ill omened remark, justified as it was, but this was no time to do so. He gripped the hilt of the sword he had retrieved and drove the pain from his thoughts.

Suddenly, Distira's blue eyes flickered open, focusing upon Vas, who was standing before her.

"You..."

"Please don't make this any more difficult," Vas said, his tone devoid of warmth. "Remaining here isn't good for you either."

Distira stared at him, a mixture of anger and fear in her wavering gaze. Then, after glancing at Xixu, she raised her small right hand.

Within it—though when it had gotten there was unclear—was a blue folded paper crane.

Not a moment later, the crane began glowing with light. Vas clicked his tongue and shot forward. He threw the bracelet he was holding and knocked the crane from the girl's hand.

But he had been a moment too slow. Light extended forth like a ripple on water, engulfing everybody present, grass field and all.

9. Ice

The light was so intense that it seemed to sear Xixu's entire body.

Once it passed, he opened his eyes to find himself and the others in a location entirely different from where they had just been. Disconcerted, he took in the view of Irede's crowded central plaza.

Distira, however, was neither upon the unused stage, nor anywhere else to be seen.

Vas was standing nearby. "It appears that she forcibly relocated us," he said, sounding irritated. "Perhaps we ended up in Irede because of the influence of that crane. I believe she should have come with us, but..."

"She fled?" Xixu posited.

"I shall go search for her." Attire still soaked in blood, Vas disappeared into the crowd.

Xixu, on the other hand, spotted Thoma and Eid on the ground some distance away and ran over, threading his way through astonished pedestrians. He placed a hand to Thoma's neck to check his pulse—the man was lying face down.

"Still alive..." Xixu murmured.

Thoma was still breathing, albeit weakly. Upon seeing a member of the Midiridos in the townsfolk that had gathered around them, Xixu entrusted the musician with his friend's care before moving over to Eid, who was not as severely wounded as Thoma—he sat up under his own power.

The one eyed man studied the dagger buried into his body with an aggrieved expression. "She showed me a rather stomach-churning hallucination," he muttered.

"I saw it too," Xixu said. "Hold still, I'll pull it out and stop the bleeding."

After taking a fabric belt offered by a passerby, Xixu pulled out the dagger in one swift movement and pressed it firmly against the wound. Though Eid's face

contorted in pain, he did not cry out. Xixu moved to prop him up after he took over the task of putting pressure on his own wound, but he pushed his hand away.

"Where is she?" Eid asked.

"I'm going to search for her after this," Xixu replied.

"Then *go*," Eid said irritatedly. Then, he added, "Pale Moon first."

The urging took Xixu by surprise, but he quickly nodded. Distira had been envious of Sari. There was every chance that she would have gone to her. Giving up on his useless right arm, he gripped his military sword in his left hand.

"I'll go on ahead. Come to Pale Moon after me later, if you can walk. You can have your wounds treated there."

The current Sari would likely be able to mend Eid's injuries. Xixu began to leave, headed into the crowd which was abuzz with activity, but abruptly turned back around. A matter that had been nagging at him formed into a question—one that, for some unknown reason, he thought he would never again have the opportunity to ask.

"Do you...know anything about Saridi's blue glass bird?"

The unrelated question seemed to surprise the one eyed man for a moment, but the emotion soon made way for a displeased frown. "So she still has that, huh?"

Eid's answer was exactly what Xixu had expected.

He had the feeling that he had run along the path to Pale Moon just the other day too.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in his right arm, Xixu, who had arrived at the front gate of the old courtesan house, ran up to a maidservant who was sprinkling water over the stone paving.

"Is Saridi here?" he asked, omitting a greeting.

"Sh-She is, but she's currently seeing to a guest, so..."

“A guest? From the Werrilocia family?”

Xixu had thought that Vas may have arrived ahead of him, but the maidservant shook her head. From her demeanor, it seemed as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, but Distira was capable of making herself invisible.

Though Xixu hesitated briefly, he decided to go through with his original intent of checking up on Sari himself. He removed his shoes in the entryway and stepped up onto the floor of the hallway.

“Is she in the flower room?” he asked. “I need to see her for a moment.”

“Huh? Um, but, your injuries...”

“It won’t take long. If Eid comes, see to his wounds, please.”

The mention of the exiled shadeslayer’s name caused the maidservant’s look of distress to intensify, but Xixu ignored it as he headed for the flower room. Though it was not yet time for the lantern to be lit, he knew from his past experience in coming to Pale Moon to request the maiden’s aid that regulars and tradesmen occasionally stopped by outside of business hours. When he reached the end of the hallway, he pushed open the doors and scanned the room through the midday sunlight filtering in from outside.

Within the flower room was an elderly gentleman who he had seen a number of times—a regular—and an unfamiliar young man.

Though the proprietress was smiling brightly, in the midst of a conversation with the two men, the expression vanished for an instant from her lovely features when she noticed Xixu enter. However, it returned as quickly as it had gone, in the form of a flawless courtesan’s mask, and she nodded toward her two conversational companions.

“If he would be willing to visit until I am with child, then there would be no problem,” Sari said.

Her words rang through the spacious flower room, a clear, beautiful sound. From the bashful smile they elicited from the young man, Xixu understood that they had been discussing Sari’s guest.

Sari, too, would one day need a child to succeed her position as the proprietress. It must have come time for her to select her guest. But although Xixu accepted this necessity, some part of him felt uncomfortable, or perhaps on edge, as he watched her.

Sari smiled at her two guests and raised her arm. Her finger, however, was pointed in Xixu's direction. The young proprietress turned toward the sudden intruder and inclined her slender neck to the side.

"Is something the matter, Xixu?" she asked. "Have you made another great discovery? Don't tell me you're injured again."

"No... It's nothing."

Sari's gaze was empty, a hollowness that she made no attempt to hide. Her eyes were not those of a courtesan's mask, but of a god, more devoid of emotion than even Distira's. Within them lay something detached—like the break she had made with humanity—and a languid weariness.

Xixu, however, was simply relieved to see that she was still herself. If she was safe, then for now, that was enough. He dipped his head toward the room's three other occupants. "I apologize for the sudden intrusion," he said. "I'll excuse myself now."

"Wait, your injuries—"

He heard Sari as she called out to stop him, but the task he was currently pursuing was something he had intentionally kept independent of her; it would be troublesome if she asked him for an explanation. In any case, meeting up with Vas and finding Distira took precedence right now.

Xixu returned through the hallway, made his excuses to the maidservant who also tried to stop him, and exited Pale Moon's front gate. Wasting no time, he headed for Irede's busier districts at a run.

Elsewhere, Sari shook her head, casting off her mild surprise at Xixu's sudden intrusion and departure.

Although the young man's confusing visit had only lasted for a handful of seconds, it had looked as though he was seriously injured. Something must

have happened again. She bowed to her two visitors, who had come to express their greetings.

“I am terribly sorry,” she apologized. “However...”

“It’s no problem at all,” the elderly gentleman assured. “Rather, we should apologize for stopping by at such an early hour. We’ll conclude for today, then. Until next time.”

The gentleman—a regular of Pale Moon—and his son, who had come to Irede after withdrawing his business from the neighboring country, both smiled affably. The son was apparently pivoting toward carrying out his trade mainly in Torlonia, and had come by to introduce himself at Pale Moon before continuing to a number of other establishments in Irede to do the same.

As the elderly gentlemen made to leave, he stopped to whisper into Sari’s ear. “I had only intended to make a little small talk, so I’m sorry if that caused a misunderstanding with the good shadeslayer,” he said. “Convey my apologies to him for me, will you?”

“Not at all,” Sari replied. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Although Sari had only been answering the elderly gentleman’s question earlier—he had asked if it was possible for a person who had returned from another country to become a maiden’s guest—she doubted that that had been the reason why Xixu had left in such haste. Some other problem must have arisen.

After seeing her two visitors off at the entryway, Sari hurriedly retrieved a sheet of white folding paper from the cabinet to the side. Choosing to prioritize speed over neatness, she folded the paper in her hands as she walked toward the front gate, forming it into a crane. When she breathed into the crane—which had a crooked beak—it flew off drunkenly into the air.

Unlike the crane she had folded earlier, she had imbued this one with sorrow and healing. It would also inform her of Xixu’s location once it reached him.

Sari followed after the crane, intent on accompanying it to its target, but she had barely made any distance from the front gate before running into a different young man. She examined her cousin, startled—he was soaked in

blood.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Did something happen?”

“Nothing of any great importance,” Vas replied.

“But it looked like Xixu was injured too.”

“The culprit fled, so he won’t come to any more harm.”

“Culprit?”

Had one of the other two gods done something? Sari’s expression turned grim—but before she could pay the matter any further thought, she suddenly felt a gentle, out-of-place tug at her senses. She was on the verge of focusing her consciousness toward discerning its source when Vas spoke, bringing her back to herself.

“For the time being, let us talk inside,” he said, indicating beyond the gate. “There is a matter I wish to discuss with you—and it is not a conversation that we can hold standing outside the front gate.”

“But Xixu’s...” Sari trailed off. “And you’re injured too.”

“I will be fine. It is more important that we talk; it could result in eliminating the problem we are currently dealing with.”

“What?”

Sari studied her cousin’s face again, confused by the lack of context he was providing, but he looked no less composed than usual.

Though she was somewhat hesitant, she knew that Vas never proposed any meaningless ideas, nor did he ever say anything unproductive—as one who bore the responsibilities of the Werrilocia family, he conducted himself capably and with purpose—so she agreed to his suggestion. Waving away the wide-eyed maidservant, she led her cousin toward the flower room, retrieving another sheet of decorative paper along the way.

“May I ask what happened?” she asked in a low voice, as she folded the paper.

Vas waited until the flower room’s doors were closed and she had seen the

crane off through an open window before replying. “We came into conflict against Distira,” he said. “That is how we were injured. Though she was narrowly able to make her escape, she is considerably weakened, so she should no longer pose a threat to you in the future.”

Several moments passed before Sari overcome her surprise. “What?” she asked. She had considered the possibility that one of the other two gods had been involved, but Vas had skipped to the conclusion so quickly that she was finding it difficult to take in the circumstances all at once. Her hand paused in the process of closing the window and she turned to look at him. “How did that happen?”

“It was the shadeslayer’s idea,” Vas explained. “I imagine he believed it to be his responsibility to bear, as he was the one who summoned her.”

“Responsibility? But...”

There was no need for Xixu to feel such a thing. The gods who were present upon this continent existed here because of events that had occurred in bygone ages, as well as because of beings such as Sari who had inherited their legacies. She had expressly distanced herself from Xixu so as to *not* drag him into such matters.

So why had he come into conflict with them while she had been unaware? As she stood there, baffled, Vas shrugged.

“I understand how you feel, but there are some matters that you will never be able to entirely prevent, no matter how much you try,” he said. “That is simply how humans are. And as long as beings who surpass humanity exist upon this land, there will forever be the possibility of conflict.”

“You say ‘forever,’ but...” Sari trailed off.

“You cannot mean to tell me that you have never considered it? The child you will bear, their child...or even *you* could one day become the next Distira. Gods, after all, do not exist for the sake of humanity. The most trivial of impetuses can cause them to become a threat to man. It is a simple fact of existence.”

“That...”

What Vas was saying was—at least in Sari’s opinion—the unmistakable truth.

Gods and humans were different. Sari was no exception, having almost become the cause for Xixu's death despite her own wishes. She could not make any guarantees regarding her own future, much less those of the generations of maidens that would succeed her.

As she maintained her silence, Vas forced a smile. "You understand, don't you?" he asked. "A problem always has an origin."

After a moment of silence, Sari replied. "Yes," she agreed—and she really did. "I know."

Vas never said anything unproductive.

The sense that something was out of place was back, prickling against the nape of her neck. She turned her gaze toward the window that the crane had flown through, looking at the sky that lay beyond.

※

Though Xixu had searched high and low through Irede for Distira, he had been unable to locate any sign of her.

He had even called her name several times, well aware of the danger that such an act carried, but the transparent girl had shown neither hide nor hair of herself. The reasonable assumption was that she was practicing caution, for obvious reasons.

Xixu wondered whether he should give up on the search and go to have his arm seen to. The clumsily folded crane that Sari had sent after him had lessened the pain, but the limb was still far from being able to wield his sword. It would be risky for him to exhaust his body any further. If nothing else, he should at least regroup with Vas.

He set off back toward the main streets, intent on checking in on Thoma on his way there, but a coincidental encounter with an old acquaintance caught him along a small laneway. Mifileu, dressed in the kimono of a teahouse and evidently out on a shopping errand, took in the bloodstains here and there throughout his clothes and put a hand over her mouth before she was able to greet him.

"Prince Kilis..." she said. "You're hurt again?"

“I’m fine,” Xixu assured. “More importantly, I’m looking for somebody, if you’ve seen him. The young Werrilocia man who you met at Pale Moon the other day.”

“I-I haven’t seen him today, I’m afraid.”

“I see.”

He would be able to discuss a number of matters if he regrouped with Vas, but Irede was not a small town. Xixu decided to head to where Thoma was first —but the next words he heard caused him to slow his pace.

Mifileu, with her hand still to her face, murmured worriedly, “Ah, speaking of which, he’s injured, isn’t he? I do hope that he doesn’t push himself.”

“Mmm,” Xixu agreed. Then, a slight feeling of inconsistency pricked at him. It did not seem overly important, but he turned back to Mifileu regardless. “Wait. You know he is injured?”

She had not seen him today, so what could she be talking about?

Mifileu nodded readily. “Yes. When he was kind enough to show me the letter from my great aunt, I unintentionally glimpsed into his luggage and saw that he had damaged clothes that appeared as though he had suffered a sword wound. It smelled like blood too, so...”

“I wasn’t aware that he had been injured...” Xixu murmured.

Vas had shown no indication of being hurt before their confrontation against Distira, but perhaps he had his own personal set of circumstances he was dealing with.

Still, that only caused the inconsistency Xixu was feeling to grow. Before he was able to collect his thoughts, a single question slipped from his mouth.

“What manner of clothes?”

Xixu wasn’t sure if there was a point to his question. However, in the nightmare that Distira had spun for him, he vaguely recalled that he had heard her say, “The other humans have fallen.”

Yet when he had awoken, Vas had been unaffected. What did that mean?

Mifileu blinked, studying Xixu curiously. The answer she gave struck him like an unforeseen blow.

“It was a black mantle, I believe. The type that covers the entire body... Is something the matter?”

The sense of dismay that overcame Xixu was so profound that he was unable to express it in words.

※

Sari looked at the hand that was being proffered to her. She felt as though she wanted to sigh, yet the feeling was ambiguous, and she was unsure whether it was truly there. She looked up at the young man who shared her blood.

“Vas.”

“You understand, don’t you, Everie?”

There was a trace of cynicism in his smile. His eyes had become the same shade of gold as sunlight. He who was now in a domain beyond humanity spoke gently, but firmly, as though what he was urging her to do was the natural course of things.

“Come. It is time for us to return to where we must be.”

There was no need to ask where that was. She already knew.

※

Xixu had discovered the source of what was bothering him; hearing Mifileu mention a sword wound in Vas’s clothes had stirred the depths of his own memories.

The black-clothed man who had ambushed him that night—the second puppet after Nerei—had not shown himself again. In the back of his mind, Xixu had been wary of the matter ever since.

“Is something wrong, Prince Kilis?”

Xixu had stopped completely in place, and Mifileu was peering at him inquisitively. The sound of her voice brought him back to himself, and he looked

up, the color draining from his face at the realization of how grim the circumstances truly were.

After a moment's hesitation, he asked, "If you come across Eid—a shadeslayer with one eye wearing a kimono—tell him to be wary of Vas."

"Huh? Um, certainly. I'll remember to."

"I'm returning to Pale Moon."

Holding the two cranes perched upon his shoulder in place to prevent them from falling, Xixu turned and set off at a run without waiting for Mifileu's reply. His mind raced with questions, but most he paid no conscious thought to—he had no means of answering them currently. Foremost among them, though, was a single, recurring source of intense impatience: *since when*? As he retraced his way back to Pale Moon, he trawled through the past several months of his memory.

When had Vas changed—fallen under the god's influence?

It had to have been since he had disguised himself and assault Xixu, at the very latest. In which case, Xixu already had the answer.

"It had to have been..."

When they had confronted the golden wolf together, Vas had protected Xixu and fallen prey to its jaws. Though he had not suffered any external injuries, he had nevertheless been bedridden for a considerable amount of time afterward. Perhaps that had been when his existence had been encroached upon, piece by piece. It must have been done quite discreetly, if Sari hadn't noticed—discretion that had also tempered Vas's outward demeanor as well.

Xixu inwardly cursed himself for not noticing—though his frustration at the reality that Vas had been taken burned far more painfully. With how events had played out, it would not be wrong to say that he had sacrificed himself for Xixu. If Xixu had been the one who had been bitten back then, their current positions would likely be reversed.

"Before anything else, I need to talk to Sari..."

He needed to know if it was possible to return Vas to his old self, and what

countermeasures they would have to develop. Xixu's expression darkened at the thought of the future beyond that. With Nerei, he had killed him because restoring the man to his original self had been impossible. But if that was also true of Vas, what choice would he make?

Xixu increased the pace at which he ran, as though trying to escape his own question.

There was not a single cloud in the sky as it crept toward evening, the light of day fading to become a deep, tranquil twilight blue.

※

As Sari looked into a pair of golden eyes, she thought perhaps the reason why she had not noticed the change in her cousin was because she herself had unknowingly wished not to.

There should have been a more than reasonable chance that she would have been the first to suspect it. Yet, she had not, perhaps because some part of her unconsciously turned a blind eye.

Sari exhaled a cold breath, long and thin. "I'm surprised," she said. "And...also disheartened. To think that I so easily handed a member of my family over to you."

"Oh? You speak as though I have become an entirely different person."

"Haven't you?" There was hope in her eyes as she watched him, faint as it was, but Sari was quick to cast it aside, shaking her head lightly.

Vas smiled ruefully. "Regardless, you understood my point, yes? Given how poorly matters concluded last time, this time, I adjusted my efforts to support your own intentions as much as I was able."

"Are you speaking of Distira?"

"As well as other matters. The information I provided you was never lacking, was it?"

"No. It wasn't."

He had supplied her with more than ample information on Tesed Zaras. This entire time, he had meticulously been pulling the strings, as though anticipating

Sari's every thought. And even now, she still did not know the method or means with which he had done it.

Here, at this moment in time, she was nothing but foolish.

Sari smiled faintly. She only ever realized what she had lost after it was too late to get it back. That was always, *always* how it was.

"Did you influence the other humans too?" she asked.

"No. It was unnecessary, and I did not wish to anger you, after all."

"Anger? Me?"

That emotion had long since worn away for her. She no longer knew how her previous self would have reacted at a time such as this.

Sari smiled vaguely, but the expression quickly vanished. The one she faced was not someone she needed to put on an affectation for. With him—just like when she was alone—she could simply be idle. She found herself surprised at how comfortable it felt.



She brought a hand up to her neatly arranged silver hair and pulled out her ornate hairpin with pure silk embellishments. As she removed the adornment she wore in order to play the part of a person, she felt her breaths become shallower, and she brushed back the hair that had fallen onto her cheek.

“So, what now?” she asked. “You say you wish to support my intentions, so you must also know of the reason why I cannot leave this place.”

“The snake sleeping beneath the earth? I have something in mind for that, of course. It is why I shaved away at Distira’s power.”

The young man glanced at his blood soaked left shoulder. Although the wound appeared serious, mending it would be a trifle for him as he was now. Perhaps, under his clothes, it was already entirely healed.

“The power that she lost seeped into the earth,” Vas explained dispassionately, as though he were his usual self. “It should be able to suppress the snake for some time, and with how weakened she is, she will fade away before long. Once she does, the vestiges of her existence should counterbalance the snake for several centuries.”

“Several centuries? And what of afterward?”

“Perhaps the snake will gradually return. Perhaps it will remain gone for eternity. But as long as humanity exists, there will always be opportunities for entities such as the snake to be born.”

“As long as humanity exists...?” Sari frowned, unaware of the meaning behind the words.

The young man smiled coldly and pointed a finger downward—not at the ground, but to what lay far beneath. “Know this,” he said. “Shades, by nature, exist because humanity does. The desires and emotions held by man are too great to be contained within their vessels, so they seep into the air and eventually become shades. The snake is the result of a god that once dwelled upon this land being gnawed away at by countless shades over years and years. Human desire devours the very gods, Everie.”

Long ago, when the continent had been under the rule of a single ancient nation, there had lived a titanic snake in the rocky mountains to the north. One

day, it had awoken from its deep slumber and had attempted to devour the sun, shining radiant in the sky.

According to the legend, the snake's scales had been blue. However, the snakes that had appeared before Sari had been as black as shadow. She had simply attributed that difference to the fact that the snake had been slain once, long ago by her ancestor god.

Sari studied the young man before her, somewhat surprised—it was the first she was hearing of the origins behind the snake. "So you say that shades are human desire, and the snake was eaten away by them?" she asked. "Is that true?"

"It is. As you know, though you and those of your line inherit existence, you do not inherit knowledge. As you are now, however, you should be able *know*, if you hone your consciousness. That the snake is the consequence of the god of this land being devoured by human desire. And mankind did not stop there—through the snake, they attempted to devour "me." Though of course...you are the one who was devoured, in truth."

The snake that had attempted the devour the sun had been slain by the summoned god of the moon, and ever since, she has lived among mankind through her descendants. For the sun who remained beyond the realm of the world, it was not unreasonable to see that as her being "devoured."

Sari smiled listlessly. "So because I was devoured by human desire, you seek to bring me back?"

"Is there a need for you to accompany mankind any longer? Just as gods bring harm to humans with trifling ease, the bottomless desire of man hungers after us. I, at least, believe there is no meaning in your continued fruitless coexistence. If anything, it is I who needs you. The lack of your existence leaves me restless beyond compare."

You understand, don't you? asked his golden eyes.

Sari said nothing. She closed her blue eyes and maintained her silence.

Gods who killed humans, and humans who devoured gods. Like greedy

snakes, they each tried to swallow up the other. This entanglement—seemingly nothing but fruitless—had continued without end since ancient times.

For the daughters birthed by the god were the god herself too, her blood unweakened through the ages.

The air in the flower room was devoid of temperature, incompatible with the human world. The tranquility within was that of a god's chamber, and the young man's voice resounded twice, layering over itself.

"If there is something you wish to say, Everie, then I am open to hearing it."

His manner of speech was no different to his prior self. Sari's consciousness had been on the verge of becoming a hollow void, but she pulled it back, tiltiled her head slightly to study the young man.

"Why did you attack Xixu?" she asked.

"A brief flight of curiosity," he answered. "I wished to gauge how skilled he was."

He shrugged embarrassedly, but nothing in his eyes indicated that he thought he'd done anything wrong; he truly had been merely curious. Hearing his answer sparked indignation within Sari, but the emotion was far away—so far that it had frozen through before she could reach it.

She had the strong suspicion that, having failed to raise her voice in anger here and now, it was already too late for her.

Sari gently pulled her icy fingers into a fist, examining her self who had failed herself as though from the position of a spectator. "Vas..." she said. "Are you still in there? Have you remained yourself, even though you've changed?"

Or was something inhuman simply acting the part of him?

The young man laughed cheerily. "I wonder. Which one do you think it is? If I *am* your cousin, will you agree to return?"

Sari gave no reply.

"Or perhaps it is the opposite? It appears that you had a strong dislike of "me," after all."

The words pricked at Sari like thorns, but the bright expression on the young man's face lacked any hostility.

Sari returned his smile. "At times such as these, Vas would always narrow his left eye at me."

It was a habit of his that she'd long since grown used to seeing. Sari closed her eyes, remembering the stern expression fondly.

"Ah, is that so?" the young man said, in a jesting tone. "Do excuse me. I should have inherited all of his memories as a whole, but it appears there are still inconsistencies. Humans are quite complex, aren't they?"

"Yes..."

Humans were complex. Even she, who had been born and raised amongst them, had not been able make her way through their lives with ease.

Sari held a hand to her eyelids, which were heating up. They were the one part of her frozen body that still possessed warmth—the last of herself that still retained emotion. Were it to spill from her eyes and away, she would have not a drop of warmth left.

So she held back her tears and raised her head, looking straight at the family member she'd lost with pupils tinged with blue luminescence.

Vas had been taken in, absorbed. But was he asleep, or had he dissipated into nothing?

In either case, it was too late for her to apologize. All she could do was be beside him, a sister who was not human to a brother who was the same.

"I'll return," Sari said. "With you."

She offered her hand, and he took it respectfully. His fingers, like hers, held not a trace of warmth.

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The very first thing Xixu felt when he reached the front gate of Pale Moon was a quiet sense of intimidation that stabbed into his skin.

His breath stopped briefly; he'd experienced this before, on several occasions.

It was the pressure weighed upon you when you stood before an inhuman presence.

It was possible that the cause was Sari alone, but Xixu was not so optimistic. He tucked the two paper cranes into his breast pocket, careful not to let them fall, and drew his military sword with his left hand as he stepped through the gate and along the paving stones.

There was nobody around, not even a maidservant. The time to light the lantern would be upon them soon, yet the entryway remained still and quiet.

As Xixu entered the manor, he hesitated over whether to remove his shoes, but the air leaking from the flower room made him decide to keep them on. He kept his footsteps silent as he proceeded; in the unlikely chance that this amounted to nothing, he would clean the floor later.

With every step, the surrounding temperature lowered. The chill that caressed his legs felt as though it could have been blown in from an ice-capped mountain peak.

Little by little, Xixu stepped into the domain of the gods.

At least, that was the fantasy that flashed across his thoughts. He suspected that it wasn't altogether incorrect, however, and closed his mouth—it felt as if even the breath he exhaled was tarnishing this place.

Nevertheless, he could not stop. He pushed onward—drawing upon all of his strength to make each singular step—and finally reached the door at the end of the hall. Upon seeing that it was coated with frost, Xixu's thoughts almost jumped to the worst case scenario.

"No..." he murmured. "I suppose not."

The chill being so intense was a sign that Sari was still alive, and that alone discounted the worst. To begin with, even if Vas truly had been taken over, his objective would be to take her back with him, not to harm her.

Xixu told himself this as he put a hand on the door. It made a grating sound as it opened to reveal the flower room.

Immediately, he flinched, bringing his left hand—still holding his sword—to

cover his face from the flood of icy air.

When Xixu lowered his hand, he was struck speechless.

It was as though he stood in a stone chamber.

The illusion was borne from the fact that the flower room retained almost no resemblance to its former self—the floor and ceiling had been iced over, and silence blanketed the room. It had already become a place where no human should be.

The atmosphere was so sharp that it threatened to cut one's skin simply for being present, yet that also conferred it a peaceful clarity. A realization struck Xixu: here, he was a foreign substance, one that was unable to understand proper courtesy.

The young man standing in the center of the spacious room noticed him and smiled wryly. "You're quite the inopportune fellow, aren't you?" he said. "Or perhaps it is the opposite. You have come in time to say your farewells, after all."

Vas indicated toward the girl standing opposite to him with his eyes. Her back was turned to Xixu, and her loose silver hair had a faint glow, as though it were the moonlight itself.

Xixu took it all in, accepted it, and steeled his resolve.

There was no time to waver. He returned his sword to its scabbard and held his left hand out to her as he stepped forward, no hesitance in his stride.

"Saridi. I've come for you."

She felt distant. That was only natural, though. She and him were different existences.

Xixu knew this. He had accepted it. That was why he welcomed her—just as the man who had come to know the first god once had.

Yet even still, Xixu could not help but feel that something was terribly wrong.

Sari turned only her head to look back at him. Xixu's thoughts stilled; the soft

light in her blue eyes was as ephemeral as moonbeams.

“You have?” she said, unsmiling. “It’s fine though, now.”

Frost traced her red lips. She had rejected the act of breathing—put it to sleep—and no emotion could be seen within her. Her beauty was that of the moon itself, and Xixu could find nothing more to say. One look at her faintly luminescent eyes, and he understood. She already knew about Vas’s transformation, and knowing, she had chosen her path.

The young man standing before her pointed his left hand behind himself. The frozen air began to slowly warp, and Xixu could hardly believe his eyes as a large, dark void formed into being.

The young man who had become a god tugged on Sari”s hand. “Shall we be off, then?” he asked. “I would ask if there is anything that you have forgotten...but there is no point, really. Even our physical bodies will not follow us to where we are going.”

“Wait!” Xixu called out. “Saridi!”

He moved to dash forward, but then she turned and looked at him—a single, unclouded glance—and he stopped in his tracks. Her features, so delicate that they elicited a sigh from those who looked upon them, held not a drop of emotion as her lips parted to speak.

“There’s no point, anymore,” she said. “I don’t know how to go back.”

“You don’t have to go back,” Xixu replied. “You can stay just as you are.”

And he would not mind if she did. This was what she had chosen. And she was still herself—that had not changed. So there was no need for her to force herself.

Empty eyes fixed upon Xixu. Sari’s reply was direct, and heavy with wordless time.

“Even still, Xixu... You understand, don’t you?”

Xixu knew what she meant, even though she had not said it aloud. He swallowed down the bitterness that had built up in the back of his throat, preventing it from forming into words. It fell down into the recesses of his

innards, melting away and becoming instead words of assent.

“Yes...” he said. “I do.”

When had it begun?

Likely when she had lost her warmth. She had appeared distant, somehow, and uneasy, and yet despite all that, as though she would accept whatever came her way.

As the act of living had become difficult for her, the reflection cast by her beauty had smiled— the gentle smile of a proprietress. Yet all the while, she had tired of acting the part of a person.

Although she still stood tall with dignity, she had grown far too distant from mankind.

She was tired of being human. Only he, a person not of Irede, understood this.

He would not force expectations on her. No matter how much others sought for her to bear her responsibilities undaunted, he alone would safeguard her freedom. That was the decision he’d made.

And so Xixu agreed. Upon hearing his assent, the edges of Sari’s lips quirked up happily, ever so slightly.

“Thank you, Xixu. I’m sorry.”

She exhaled her final breath and turned away, letting Vas take her by the hand and lead her toward the void.

But as XIxuXixu stood there, restless and unable to settle down, a hand suddenly clapped onto his shoulder from behind.

“What’s going on?” Eid, his kimono stained all over with blood, stepped up beside him as he spoke.

Xixu was unsure if the man was here because of the message he’d passed on through Mifileu, or otherwise, but he answered, “I think Vas...has been consumed by the golden wolf. Saridi has become a god in entirety. She’s chosen

to leave the world of man.”

Xixu knew much of what he was saying was likely mere conjecture on his part, but it was all he could say. Distira, the snake, her changed cousin—Sari had undoubtedly taken it all into consideration already, and this was the conclusion she had reached.

She had considered it, accepted it, and made her decision. And it was that which had stopped Xixu.

He could not ask her to remain by his side, if it meant that she had to suffer an unbearable weariness to do so.

Xixu was certain that Eid would be astounded by him, wondering why he wasn’t trying to stop her, but he was surprised when he simply replied, “Got it.”

The man stepped toward Sari’s back, limping slightly because of his wounds.

In the same moment she noticed him and turned, Vas drew his sword. Of the two blades affixed to his left and right hip, it was the one that had remained in its scabbard until now, undrawn: not his usual rapier, but a katana with a straight temper line. A golden light that Xixu recognized ran along the length of the well-honed blade.

“I wouldn’t get any closer if I were you,” Vas said lightly. “It’s dangerous. You could be dragged into it.”

The blade warning off Eid’s approach was directed below his collarbone, the same spot where he had already suffered a grave injury, yet he acted as though it didn’t even exist as he glared at Sari.

She looked at him with eyes that resembled glass. For one second, it seemed as though time had stopped. Then, the man’s voice sounded throughout the frozen room.

“Don’t let your true nature get the better of you, Sari.”

Sari had said that her brother had given her the blue glass bird. But Xixu knew the truth. The one who had given it to her after she had given up on it, unable to be honest with herself, had been the childhood friend who had seen her.

They, who had lived in Irede—the town that belonged god—side-by-side, yet upon different paths, had seen more of each other than even they knew. That was why Eid knew without having to ask. When she wanted something, he knew, and when she remained silent, unable to ask for help, he knew too.

Sari tilted her head to the side, appearing slightly troubled. “Eid,” she said. “This *is* me.”

“And that’s supposed to mean that you wanted this to happen?” Eid asked. “No. Don’t let this town—don’t let *yourself*—tie you down. Live how *you* want to.”

The man took a step forward. The tip of the blade being directed at him hovered just over his heart, pressing into his bloodsoaked kimono. Vas gave no indication that he would withdraw it; he did not move a single eyebrow. Sari turned her hollow eyes toward Eid.

“It’s dangerous, Eid.”

“If that’s what you think, then get back here. Don’t make this more of a hassle than you already have.”

“I can’t go back. I don’t know how.”

Despite her dispassionate tone, she looked as though she was troubled, just a little. The girl who had lost her way of behaving like a human looked up at Eid with otherworldly eyes.

The chill in the air evoked disconnection. He stared back at her eyes that glowed with moonlight, the open void behind her clear within his vision.

He did not sigh, nor did he speak irritated words. His gaze was fixed upon nothing but a single young woman.

“Sari...” Eid said to the god clad in silver. “This is the last time I clean up after one of your messes.”

Then, without a moment of hesitation, he stepped forward, reached out with his arms, and pulled her slender frame into an embrace.

Likely the only individual present not taken by surprise by the scene was Eid himself. Xixu's hand had frozen where he'd raised it in an attempt to stop the man, driven by a momentary premonition, and Vas's expression had likewise stiffened in shock.

Within Eid's arms, Sari's eyes had flown open wide. Blood ran along the blade of a straight tempered sword and dripped onto her white kimono.

Although the blade had run through his chest and out his back, Eid's expression showed not the slightest hint of change. His quiet voice fell down upon Sari from above.

"All the men around you are inattentive fools."

Eid sighed deeply. Frost ran along the hands he had placed around her fragile back. Sari's lips began to tremble.

"So whenever you want something..." he continued. "Make sure you say it out loud. Don't force yourself to do something as pitiful as holding it in and crying because of it."

The man leaned in and laid a kiss upon her lustrous silver hair. Then, he released his embrace.

A small gap opened between them, and even Xixu was able to see the ceaseless stream of blood caused by the golden blade.



Sari's gaze was pulled in by the ever growing patch of crimson on Eid's kimono, but his trembling hand lifted it up. His firm fingers brushed her cheek, as though he were wiping mud from a child's face. An unbearable homesickness overflowed from his eye as he looked upon her.

"Sari..."

It was a voice calling for what had been lost. The warmth that he had offered flowed forth, soaking into her.

There was nothing more.

Leaving only a long, hoarse exhalation behind, Eid's body crumpled to the ground.

Sari looked down at the pool of blood spreading across the thin layer of ice, and at the man's eye which would never open again. Emotion rippled in her own blue eyes, opened as wide as they were able.

She pushed her trembling hands into her own hair, and stood frozen as she let loose a tiny whimper.

"Ah..."

The next instant, a broken scream echoed throughout god's chamber.

※

"Did nobody want to play with you?" asked a familiar, brusque voice from above her.

Sari, who had been playing with stones at Pale Moon's front gate, looked up. Her eyes sparkled when she saw the boy infamous in Irede for being an unmanageable hellion, in his too-short kimono with scrapes all over his arms and legs. She almost asked him to play with her then and there, but then hurriedly shook her head.

"No," she said. "I don't even want to play."

"Then what are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm cleaning away the pebbles. Otherwise the guests might trip."

One day, she would become this courtesan house's proprietress. Though she

was not yet even ten, she needed to carry herself with the proper bearing. Only insofar as that was the case was she allowed to have her way. Sari had come to understand this from an early age, by watching the adults around her.

As such, she could not throw a tantrum like an ordinary child and beg to go play.

Eid gave the girl who had put on the prim airs of a courtesan—in her own childlike way—an exasperated look. “Idiot,” he said. “One of the maidservants will do that.”

“*I* can do it too.”

“Fine, but now you’re taking a break. We’re going fishing.”

“Fishing?!”

Sari leapt up, excited by the prospect of a game she’d never tried before, but she was quick to turn back to the manor, caught by indecision. What would her grandmother say?

Eid paid no mind to her concerns, however, and grabbed her tiny hand.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said. “I need someone to carry the fish we catch. Help me out.”

“I’m helping?”

“We’ll be back before the lantern lighting. *If* you don’t drag your feet, that is.”

The boy set off at once, pulled her along by the hand, and Sari scampered forward to keep up by his side. In no time at all, Pale Moon’s gate grew further and further away.

Eid’s hand was warm. For a long time, that was something she had taken for granted.

※

More than half of Sari’s scream resounded in the form of a voiceless wave of power. In quick succession, the ice layering the floor and thick frost coating the walls cracked and shattered.

Her power also erased the open void behind her, whereupon Vas finally broke

free from his shock, his expression changing as he reached a hand out toward Sari and the hysteria that had taken her.

Yet before the hand could make contact, he jerked it back, narrowly avoiding the dagger that Xixu had thrown. Xixu had left no time between his next action, however, and his military sword was already moving into a sweeping stroke aimed at Vas.

Golden eyes glanced at the blade as their owner prepared to leap back—and then both men were blown away by a wave of power from their flank.

Xixu was violently thrown onto the cracked floor by the window that faced the courtyard, but he ignored the agony that assaulted his entire body and stood back up. In the center of the room, he saw Sari clinging to Eid's body.

"Why?!" she screamed. "*Why?!* You...You *idiot*!"

She gripped his shoulders and shook him forcefully, but Eid's eye did not open. Tears streamed from Sari's eyes, trickling down her blood stained cheeks.

"This wasn't what I wanted! Eid!"

She shook Eid's body insistently, like a child, wracked with sobs that could not form into words.

Not the slightest trace of her former coldheartedness remained. Her resistance in the face of unyielding reality was nothing but pitiable and heartrending.

Xixu could find nothing to say; he was unsure of whether he should even approach her. Then, from behind him, he heard a weary voice.

"Good grief. I suppose that means I've been defeated... Well, in deference to his sacrifice, I shall leave her in your care for now."

"Wait!" Xixu turned, but there was already nobody there. All that he was met with was a voice laden with cynicism.

"Until we meet again."

Leaving only that ominous parting remark, the inhuman presence vanished.

Xixu examined his surroundings, expression still grim, but heard the voice no

more.

When he looked to the center of the room, he saw Sari with her face buried in Eid's shoulder, her sobs reaching Xixu's ears.

"Don't go..." she whispered feebly, begging despite knowing full well it was futile. She sounded like a lost child. "You can't..."

Sari's face was streaked with blood and tears. Her slender fingers trembled as they maintained their grip on Eid's shoulder.

Her pleas were too wretched to be an attempt to have her way. By the time she had spoken them, it had been too late.

As if in response to a wish that could not be fulfilled, a pale blue ball of light, small enough to be cupped in two hands, slowly emerged from the man's body, coming to a stop before Sari's eyes as though to assert its existence. It almost resembled the light of a firefly.

Sari raised her head and stared at it. Then, in a voice so quiet it almost was there at all, she asked, "Eid?"

The pale ball of light flickered intensely.

Sari's eyes, wet with tears, opened wide, and she reached out to the small, fragile ball of light, bringing it into her hands as though soaking it in. She stared at it for a while, and then—ever so gently—pulled it into an embrace and quietly closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Eid..."

Her jaw was clenched tight, rigid with regret that could not be wiped away. Light no longer tinged her silver hair. The tears that trickled down her pale cheeks formed into droplets as they fell, silently melting away into the warm blood on the ground.

※

At sunset, the shadows cast by the thick bamboo grove onto the narrow path equaled the shadows of the night. No matter what time of day it was, the path was cloaked in the hush of silence.

Xixu, on one of his patrols, walked the path that led to Pale Moon alone,

recalling the words his wounded friend had spoken to him when he had stopped by to visit.

After he had told Thoma of everything that had occurred, the man had said, *"It would have been impossible for me."* Just as Xixu had been unable to act out of consideration for Sari's own will, Thoma could not oppose the decisions of the god. Even if he had been there, the outcome would not have changed.

Though that was some consolation, in a roundabout way, Xixu was not willing to forgive himself so easily. Vas and Eid, who had both been safe alongside him at the outset of their task, had been lost far too easily. Xixu could not help but wonder if there had been more that he could have done, even though he knew that he could not have chosen another way, simply because of who he was.

Sari, too, was struggling amidst her regret.

When the bamboo grove ended, Xixu turned onto a side path before Pale Moon's gate came into view, walking parallel against the copse of trees that encircled the manor toward the back entrance. Upon opening the small iron gate and stepping into Pale Moon's grounds, he saw Sari standing in the back garden—which was hidden from view from the manor itself—amidst the thriving grass, and approached her.

She wore a white kimono, and she had let her silver hair down. When she noticed Xixu, she smiled.

"Welcome, Xixu."

"Mmm."

He did not ask what she had been doing. Dozens of folded paper cranes lay at her feet, unable to fly no matter how many she made. She had likely only folded them for something to do.

Only a single, blue bird, small and made of glass, perched upon Sari's shoulder.

In the end, Xixu had not told her who had truly given it to her. He had the feeling that she already knew.

Sari extended a slender finger, and the glass bird flew over, alighting on it. She

smiled as she beheld its faint blue glow. Anguish and affection mixed within her voice as she whispered, “You can go, now.”

The bird cocked its head slightly and studied her, the gesture laden with the weight of fostered time. Sari wrapped her hand around its small body.

“Go,” she said. “I’ll be okay. And...thank you.”

The bird’s head drooped slightly at her insistence. The pale blue ball of light that emerged from its back slowly circled Sari’s head, once, then began to ascend into the evening sky.

As she looked up, watching it go, she declared, “Go, and let your journey take you to a good mother. To your life, I bestow my blessing and protection, both unending.”

The spell became power, which pursued the distant light. God’s words encircled the ball of light when they reached it, as though to shield it from harm, and together, they faded into the twilight, headed south.

“Be happy,” Sari whispered, when the light had gone from sight.

Then, she closed her eyes and wept.

Regret had seized Xixu in its clutches, and he struggled within the interval of what he could and could not do. Even so, he knew that did not mean that he was not resolute.

Even if he had not been able to choose death in order to keep her from leaving, he knew he could give his life to protect her.

Yet, if it was at all within his power, he did not want to give her any more cause for sorrow.

“Saridi.”

Xixu waited for her to wipe away her tears and raise her head before holding his right hand out for her.

Sari gave him a slight smile, then placed her pale hand in his, and the pair began to walk through the twilit garden. Her hand, trembling slightly, felt terribly fragile. In her other hand, she held the glass bird.

“Xixu,” she whispered. “You have to live, okay?”

“If that is what you wish.”

“It always will be...” Sari said rebukingly. She laughed, a quiet, choked sound. “And it always was.”

Her hand was small and warm in his grip. Xixu simply nodded silently, and led her along.

At some point unknown, the moon had waned. It hung there, suspended in the sky, divested of its shape.

10. Ties

When all was over and the days had returned to something that resembled normalcy, Xixu, who had stopped by Pale Moon to visit, was taken by Sari not to the proprietress's room, but the flower room.

As it had not yet come time for the lantern to be lit, nobody else was around. They sat at opposite ends of a round table, examining each other's faces.

Perhaps the reason why Xixu did not feel uncomfortable or apprehensive about this was because a defined equilibrium had been established between himself and her, who were so different from each other.

Xixu matched the beautiful young woman's gaze, and she grinned broadly at him. Yet, he saw within her smile the flicker of a shadow.

Xixu spoke first. "I'm sorry for all of the trouble I caused," he apologized.

"Not at all. Thank you, Xixu." Sari paused for a moment. "And, I'm sorry."

Xixu could no longer see the embarrassed young woman before him as a young girl, like he had when they had first met. She was a courtesan with a graceful smile. A maiden with a level head. And finally, a lonely god. Her eyes, from which so many tears had been shed, wavered.

Yet, she no longer wept. For there was no blue bird on her shoulder anymore.

Xixu picked up the cup of tea which she had set out just for him. The leaf was fragrant and of excellent quality, but being honest, he had no great desire to drink it at the moment.

Even so, she had brewed it for him, so he would drink it before it cooled.

Xixu took a sip, then continued, "I've done a lot of thinking, after what happened."

"Mm-hmm."

"About Irede, and you. I had thought that, no matter what, I would respect the decisions that you made for yourself."

Xixu was not someone who lived according to Irede and its way. He did not believe forcing his own values upon it would be a good thing. And neither did he want to impose his own wishes upon Sari if he could help it.

That was why he had not stopped her. He had known that she had made the best choice for herself, and knowing that, he had been unable to ask her to endure her suffering and stay.

Yet ultimately, the one to overturn everything and return Sari to the world of mankind had been the man who had refused to yield his own emotions until the end.

Sari gave Xixu a strained smile, as though she had read his thoughts.

“Nobody can say what was truly for the best,” she said. “Though if I had left, I think it would have prevented anyone from coming to more harm, at least. As for the snake...nothing would have happened, for a few hundred years. And after that, it could have simply vanished.”

“Assuming you weren’t lied to,” Xixu said.

“I don’t think he was lying. My self at the time knew he wasn’t. It’s because I’m here that the snake stays too, trying to devour me.”

Human desire itself desired to devour the gods. As Sari spoke of the tale she’d been told, Xixu quietly listened, and accepted it. He could understand why human desire sought to devour the gods, even though their power could easily kill them without meaning to.

Xixu gazed steadily at the young woman sitting opposite him. She had lustrous silver hair and a delicate, pale face. Her appearance, reminiscent of a peerless work of art, was pure and bright, and even under her kimono, her lively figure drew a man’s attention.

Perhaps such fascination had influenced how she and those of her line had come to be called holy courtesans. Women who were devoured by humans at night in their bedchambers—of the god and her sacred offerings, which of the two was truly the offering? Such was the allure these women held, that they inverted the truth.

Whether she wished for it or not, there would always be humans drawn in by

her existence. And to deny that that was “desire” was something that Xixu was unable to do.

What was the best choice he could have made? It did not matter, really—there was no changing what had been done. Xixu adjusted his grip on the handle of his cup.

“Saridi,” he said.

She hummed to indicate that she was listening.

“I still wish to value your will. I don’t want to make you force yourself beyond your means for the sake of something else.”

That held even more true if that something was Xixu’s own emotions.

“But,” he continued, “if you desires and your will happen to clash, then neither do I wish to ignore the former... Even if you are unable to express them aloud.”

If she could not say what she wanted out loud, then that was fine. He would not tell her to do so. All he had to do was discern her desires himself. Even if he could not be as adept at it as a certain other man, he could at least try.

Sari, however, smiled and shook her head. “Don’t push yourself, Xixu,” she said.

After a pause, he replied, “I’m not.”

“It’s fine. You’re bad at that kind of thing. It was the same with Fi, wasn’t it?”

Xixu said nothing.

“So, it’s fine. I’ll say what I want out loud, myself.”

Sari’s blue eyes, clear and earnest, pierced directly into Xixu. They were a courtesan’s eyes, possessed of graceful strength. As the young man faced her, he felt a warmth in his throat, similar to thirst.

“You will?” he asked.

“Mmhmm. So you should too, Xixu. I want to know what you want.”

“I...don’t really want to say.”

“That’s unfair!”

Sari laughed pleasantly and held her left hand out over the table. Recognizing what she wanted him to do, Xixu took it, and she happily entwined her fingers in his. The question she asked next was as firm as her grip.

“Then, if I become like that again and I want to leave...will you stop me?”

“No. I won’t.”

Back then, she had truly wished to go. Though it was not her wish now, it had been the wish of her complete, divine self. Yet, to Xixu, both were “Saridi.” He would not draw a line between them, and he would not repeat the mistake her father had made.

If, one day, after this loss she had experienced, she made the same choice again—if that was truly what she desired—then Xixu doubted he would stop her. Even if that meant betraying his own emotions.

Upon hearing his answer, Sari laughed, her expression softening like a blooming flower.

“That’s what I love about you.”

The softly spoken words stirred within Xixu both warmth and a sense of dizziness.

Sari stood without a sound and moved to his side, looking at him with delighted, yet somehow somber eyes. Her hand—neither of them had released their hold—squeezed his.

“I love this town,” Sari said. “I want to live here.”

“Mmm.”

“I love you too. But if being with me will cause your death, then I’d rather you go far, far away.”

“I won’t die. Not until we’re forced into a situation where only one of us can live.”

“When that time comes, you should put yourself first.”

“We’ll...talk it out, whenever it happens.”

“That’s not fair, Xixu.”

The young woman who was a god closed her eyes. She smiled, her lips like flower petals tinged with sorrow.

Xixu held her small, warm hand. He did not know what lay ahead, what he would need to protect her from. Yet, now, he knew what the emotion burning in the back of throat was.

Afterword

Hello, this is Kuji Furumiya. Thank you for purchasing *A Pale Moon Reverie: Volume 2*, the second installation of a tale of marriage between two worlds, set in a fictional world that blends both Japanese and Western fantasy!

In this volume, Xixu manages to make it to a year since he was first suddenly appointed to his post in Irede. Though one would imagine that to be enough time to grow used to the character of the town, he's the only one who thinks he actually has—he still stands out quite conspicuously. On the other hand, Sari has grown older by a year and become an adult, and their relationship—which had been rather lacking in progress—is beginning to develop accordingly, little by little. Also, the external pressure on them is pretty intense. Physically, that is.

Since all the characters are the type to stick heavily to their own ways, the direction of the story differed greatly from the end of Volume 1. Still, that was simply the result of the characters and their respective decisions, with the exception of our two protagonists.

This story was originally one "tale" per "volume," with five tales marking the end. The DRE Novels publication includes two tales per volume, so that works out to three volumes in total. That means, so to speak, that this volume is the middle of a traditional "beginning-middle-climax" structure, as well as a deeper dive into the town of myth. I would be delighted if you enjoyed it as much as the previous volume.

Now, my thanks.

My sincerest gratitude to my editor, who received my manuscript packed to the brim with lines and words without complaint. I'm sorry for nonchalantly pretending that "yes, this is totally normal." I'm sorry for asking if it was possible to add on a bonus story that was fifty thousand characters long. In the next life, I'll do my best to live a more compact life. Thank you for your continued support.

As with the previous volume, thank you to Teruko Arai-sensei for depicting the setting so gorgeously! The cover has a different vibe to the first in an

absolutely wonderful way! Thanks to you, this ethereal story was given depth to ground it. I am truly filled with gratitude.

Finally, thank you, the reader, for always supporting me! I've only come this far because of your support! Thank you for helping *A Pale Moon Reverie* win the Light Novel News Online monthly award, for all the word of mouth online reviews, and everything else! I'll do my best to take this all the way to the end!

This is a story of the current generation of god and her sacred offering, woven in a town created for her, akin to her jewelry box. I would be overjoyed if you would stay with it until the end.

Until we meet again, in some other time, in some other place.

Thank you very much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra Chapter: Blessing

“You used to cry so much as a child, you know.”

It was not the first time he had heard that from his mother. The boy turned to look at her—she was sitting at the edge of the sunken hearth, mending something with a needle and thread.

“Enough with the old stories, mother,” he grumbled.

“All right, all right.”

The boy had been born and raised in a small fishing town in the south of the country. His father had gone fishing not long after his mother had become pregnant with him, and had never returned, lost at sea. For fifteen years, he and his mother had lived to support one another.

Sitting upon the old tatami mats, the boy tended to his tools. As a child of the town, his work took place atop a fishing boat, but it was in the mountains where he was at his best. There was a range of them to the north of the town, home to deer, boars, and other animals, and he would occasionally go hunting for pelts and meat to sell at the market. It was a profitable venture, and he had confidence in his own intuition and luck.

“Are you going into the mountains tomorrow?” the boy’s mother asked.

“Yeah. I told you there was a big one that I was after, right? The pitch black one.”

Not too long ago, near the foot of the mountains, he had spotted a massive deer. Though he had only seen it through the trees, he had been able to tell that it was twice the size of an ordinary deer, with pitch black fur. The sight had struck him as bizarre, at first, but he knew that its fur would fetch a high price if he managed to hunt it down.

His mother, however, frowned worriedly. “Are you sure it isn’t a shade, though?” she asked. “It sounds dangerous.”

“I’ll be fine,” the boy said. “Even *if* it’s a shade, I won’t lose.”

Not all people could see the shadows which took the forms of animals and warped human hearts, but the boy was one of them. He had, so to speak, the makings of a shadeslayer.

In a small town such as his, however, not enough shades manifested for a shadeslayer to make a living, and neither did the boy have any intention of leaving his mother for another town. She was a kindhearted woman who had foregone her own meals and sleep in order to raise him. Whenever he had cried, she had spent hours carrying him, walking the paths around the outskirts of town. She had worked her hands until they bled without any complaint, and spent all the time she had outside of that by her child's side.

She was always gentle, always smiling, and considered her time with her child to be her own happiness. She was clumsy with people, not at all introspective, and a loving person...yet until he had been born, she had not been blessed with a kind family. Her parents had treated her terribly, as though she were a hindrance, and she and her husband—who had been far removed from her in age—had never truly understood each other until the end. Her life had been one of misfortune, as though the vast well of love she had been born with had lacked a place to go, and so had idly spun in circles.

That was the kind of woman who "he" had picked as his mother. For he had not been able to leave her be.

As the boy sharpened his dagger, he smiled.

"Well..." his mother said. "You've always been blessed with good luck, so I think you'll be fine."

He looked up at the sound of her voice. Already, he was unable to remember what he had just been thinking. It was a phenomenon that occurred to him often.

"The others in town say you're cherished by a god," his mother continued. "You don't get sick when everybody else does, and the waters are only rough on the days you oversleep."

"Like I care about that," the boy retorted. "It's not like I've ever seen a god before. I doubt they even exi—"

All of a sudden, the face of a girl he should not have known flashed across his mind, proud and beautiful in every way, like the pale white moon.

The boy exhaled and shook the light dizziness from his head. Ever since he'd been a child, he'd had visions, from time to time, of a town he'd never seen and people he did not know. They had faded as he'd grown older, though, and as of late, he hardly remembered them.

His mother held up the coat she had finished mending. It was hers, and considerably old. The boy secretly planned to buy her a new one after he sold his next catch. They were not well off by any means, but neither were they poor enough to want for food. The more he had grown, the better their family's finances had become. One day, he was going to buy her a small house with a garden.

"Come to think of it," his mother said, "a traveler came into town yesterday, asking for information about anything inhuman or supernatural. He said he would pay. Strange, don't you think?"

"Supernatural?" the boy repeated.

What was that supposed to mean? The black deer flashed across his mind—but if it *wasn't* an otherworldly creature, his prey could be snatched away by a complete stranger. As he mulled over it in silence, his mother looked at him in askance.

"Why not tell him about the deer?" she asked.

"No. I'm not doing that," he replied.

"But if it really is a monster of some sort..."

His mother's uneasy words were interrupted by a knock on the door from outside. She jumped slightly, startled, but the boy stood up calmly and went to open it. But while he had assumed that the visitor was one of their neighbors, he was met with the sight of a young man standing there whom he did not know.

The black haired young man wore traveling attire and a military sword at his hip. When the boy looked up at his orderly features, his mouth opened involuntarily.

“Why are *you* he—”

The boy clamped his mouth shut when he saw the man’s eyes widen. The words had rushed out as though they had a mind of their own; he was unaware of their meaning. He wasn’t even sure what he had been trying to say.

Yet for some reason, for a single moment, he’d had the intense feeling that he’d seen the man’s face before. He had thought that there could be no possibility that the man could be here, in a place such as this. He had felt that he should have been further north, in a certain town he could not name.

The boy frowned, feeling restless due to the haziness of his own thoughts.

The young man had been using the time to study him closely. Then, suddenly, his eyes softened.

“I see...” he said. “So this is where you were.”

“What do you want?” the boy asked curtly.

The black haired young man didn’t appear to mind his abrupt words at all. “As a matter of fact, due to certain circumstances, I’m on a journey searching for inhuman and supernatural beings,” he said, extremely seriously. “I heard that something had been spotted in the mountains, and that when it came to the mountains around here, you were the best person to ask.”

The boy reflexively clicked his tongue. Somebody else must have seen the black deer and spoken of it to the traveler, seeking the promised reward.

Even so, the boy had no obligation to play along. He waved a hand at the man in a curt gesture. “Don’t know a thing about it,” he said. “Try somewhere else.”

“I see. My apologies.”

The boy frowned at how simply the man backed down. If this was how he did everything, surely he must have been tricked and lied to countless times in other towns over the course of his journey? He almost wanted to scold him, but they were complete strangers, and not close enough for him to do so.

The door was still open, and the traveler stared fixedly at him. When he saw the boy’s tunic, which bore the obvious marks of his mother’s careful needlework, he smiled, ever so slightly.

“Sorry for the sudden intrusion,” the man said. “Please...live a happy life.”

Then, he bowed silently and left. The boy stared after his back as he went, dumbfounded. Those were not the words one said when parting with a stranger they had met for the first time. He could not make head nor tail of them. He’d known serious people before, but this was simply ridiculous.

Despite himself, the boy ground his teeth and chased after the man in traveler’s attire. Irritated, yet not entirely sure why, he punched him lightly in the back.

When the young man turned, surprised, the boy said, “There’s been a black deer twice the size of a normal one wandering the foot of the mountains recently. *But*, it’s *my* prey. If I can kill it without harming its pelt, it’ll sell for a lot.”

After a momentary pause, the traveler replied, “I see.”

“However...if it’s only a monster in the shape of a deer, I can’t sell it. Which is why I’m telling this to you. That’s all there is to it.”

The young man appeared to understand the implication: that if it was a normal deer, he was to back off. “I understand,” he said, bowing again. “Thank you.”

As he left, the boy stared after his back, a bitter look on his face. He had no memory of the man, and this was the first time they had met. Yet, when he had heard his earlier parting words, he had felt as though there was something he needed to say.

There had been no reason for the man to tell him to “live a happy life.” That was not quite right, but the boy could not remember what he most wished to say. It was why he had spoken of the deer, when he had not meant to.

“Make...her happy.”

The words spilled from the boy naturally, bringing a sense of satisfaction. Yes, those had been the words.

As he stood there, digesting the remnants of his self that was not him, his mother spoke up worriedly from behind.

“What’s wrong? Is everything okay?”

The boy turned slowly. He looked out over the landscape, where the smell of the sea was thick, then at his mother, who loved him.

What dwelled within his heart was not a suffocating sense of homesickness, but a simple, gentle warmth. It was something he had always wanted yet never known, and now, it was in his hand.

The boy put away the memories that he did not remember, and returned home. He smiled at the mother who he had chosen, standing worriedly in the entryway.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

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The next morning, there was a huge deer left in front of the boy’s home, already drained of blood. Its body was not covered in the black fur that he thought he had seen, but a glossy, tawny brown.

The boy snorted, amused by the uprightness of the man whose name he did not know.