

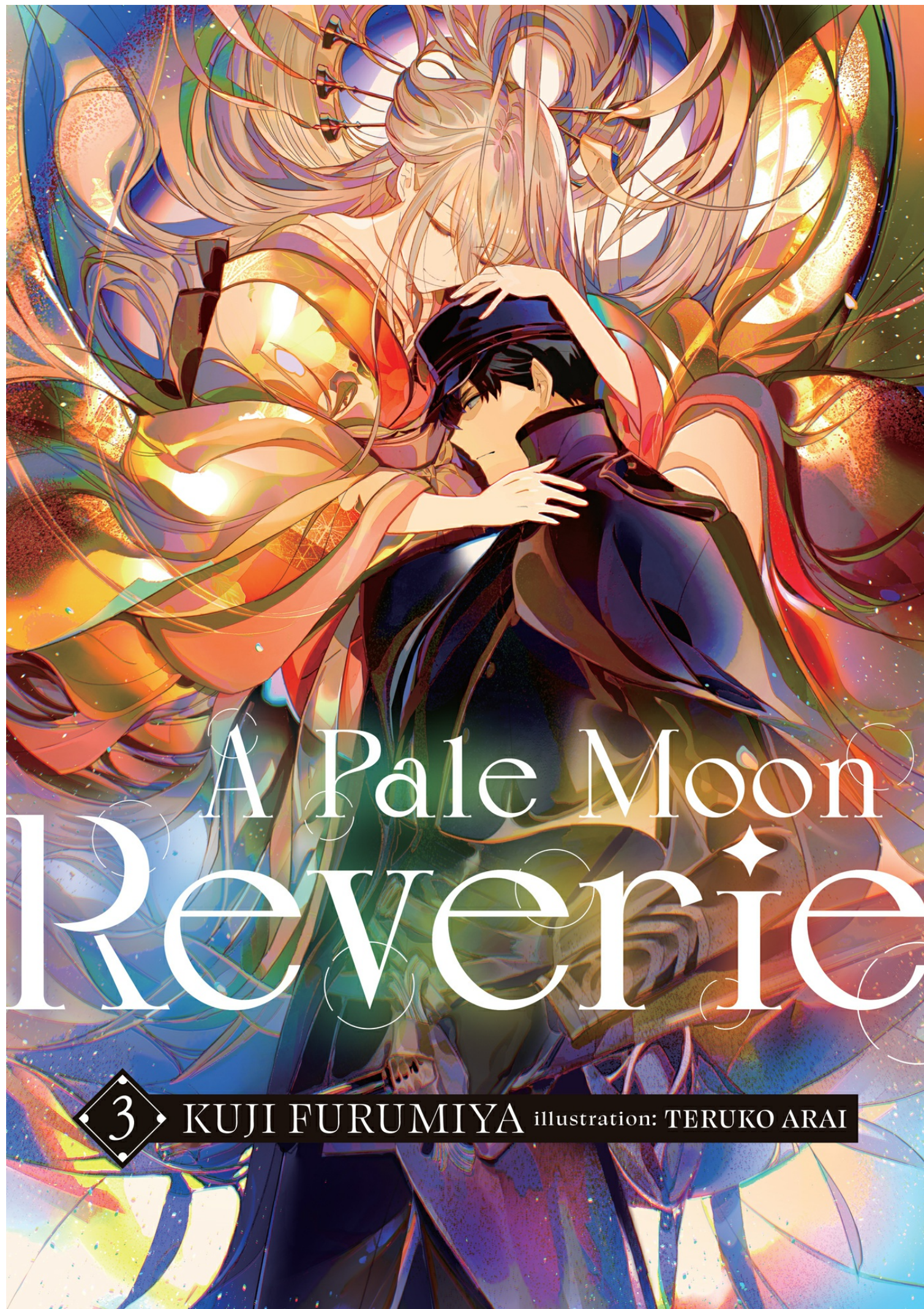


A Pale Moon Reverie

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KUJI FURUMIYA

illustration: TERUKO ARAI



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Fifth Tale

1. Moonlight

Long ago, a god was summoned to this continent.

She—the god of the moon, and the younger sister to the sun deity—answered the call of the king, her purpose to slay the snake who would swallow the sun.

For this deed she demanded a threefold price: fine wine, music, and the touch of a human to warm her.

As long as humanity provided her with these three sacred offerings, her existence, inherited through blood, would remain in the world of man. She would love them, and live among them.

The name of the town in which she resides is Irede—the oldest pleasure town on the continent.

Even now, it is a town of myth, proudly steeped in the vestiges of its ancient history.



A map is a thing easily redrawn.

Time and again, this has been proven over the course of human history. Nations and people fight one another due to their interests, their beliefs, or simply for the sake of their own survival. Borders are changed, the names of countries are changed, and so, too, are the lives of those weaving their meandering course through time.

If there were ever a person or group who sought to bend this change to their own will, then they would surely be committing a grave sin. For how dare they presume themselves to be a god?

“Honestly,” the young king of Torlonia grumbled. He sat upon the throne, resting his chin in his hands. “Even the real gods have no wish to meddle in human affairs so much.”

Having experienced a number of major disturbances recently, the continent was in the greatest period of unrest it had seen in the past several decades.

This unrest could be attributed to the radical changes occurring inside of the principal countries in Torlonia's vicinity. Hostile sentiment toward other nations had begun to burgeon within their borders for unprecedented reasons, resulting in a newfound antagonism and self-righteousness that shocked even their own citizens.

Fortunately, Torlonia had managed to avoid these odd changes. Though it would be more accurate to say the kingdom had nipped them in the bud when it had noticed the signs.

At one time, a species of white flower that fanned a person's desires had seized the aristocracy and wealthy merchants of the royal capital in its clutches, but the intervention of a certain beautiful god had stamped it out before it could become an epidemic. Later on, she had even eradicated the field where these flowers had been cultivated, located in the neighboring country.

Though the very existence of a being capable of carrying out such a feat with ease was terrifying, it was not the king's wish for her to stabilize Torlonia's neighbors. No, what he wanted was far more personal—though no less important.

"Belvi," the king asked the blind maiden waiting beside him. "Do you think my little brother will be able to protect her?"

Thus was the command the king had issued his half brother and vassal: "Go to Irede, the town of myth, as a shadeslayer, and guard its mistress."

This duty was, in turn, related to his younger brother's safety as well. The current incarnation of Irede's god had taken a liking to his little brother's sincere heart and lack of social aptitude. The question of whether he would become her consort—of which she would only take one her entire life—was a matter between them, and thus yet unclear. Still, the king had faith that she would alter his younger brother's prophesied fate: that he would die protecting a woman.

The maiden, who could see the future, knew of her liege's hope. She smiled dryly. "I cannot say for certain," she said. "The fates of the gods, traced through

time, are beyond human grasp.”

“I would’ve preferred you to say something more encouraging, even if it were a lie.”

“My humble apologies.”

She bowed solemnly, and the king could not bring himself to say anything more. It had been his unreasonable request to prevent his younger brother’s prophesied death. Belsevina was assisting him with that, but there was nothing she could do about what was beyond her control.

In fact, the situation was rather difficult, as other deities had been making appearances to hinder the god of Irede. The king’s statement that gods did not wish to meddle in human affairs was true, though from the gods’ perspective, humanity was simply of such little significance that it was not worthy of their concern. The god of Irede, who loved them and lived in their town, was the exception.

“All we can do is settle our human disputes in our human ways,” the king mused. “We may have caught a whiff of who’s directing the pieces, but their ill-natured moves leave a bad taste in my mouth.”

“I imagine that, from their point of view, the ocean between us makes them feel rather detached from the fires they’re inducing.”

“How callous. I’d love to capture the individuals working behind the scenes alive, but I suppose that would lead to all-out war. Perhaps it would be better to have them killed while feigning ignorance.”

The blind maiden remained silent beside her king and his cruel grin. Such cool calculation and decisiveness were at the true core of his nature, along with his ever-present smile.

He was king simply by a coincidence of birth. This was why he sought knowledge, made use of people, and dedicated his efforts to the well-being of his nation. He had no desires or ambitions beyond that. Thus, he did not wish to antagonize the country across the sea. If he could brush off the sparks they ignited and they made no other future attempts, he was content to let sleeping dogs lie.

It was more important to him that his brother—also his sole blood relative—found happiness. His younger sibling, born to a different mother, had grown up preserving his innocence in the face of the world of man. He was someone capable of doing whatever he believed was right and fighting selflessly for the sake of others. It never ceased to amaze the king how his brother had become such an honest man, despite them sharing the same blood.

“Whatever the case, though I’m sure he’ll face his own setbacks, I’ll pray that his path meets a good end.” As the king’s smile turned wry, his eyes filled with affection for his brother.

The maiden maintained her silence, choosing simply to bow her head.



A delicate tune could be heard in the distance.

The sound of strings and flutes added color to the night townscape, blending with the bustle of the crowds even as their notes reached softly into even the darkest of alleyways.

However, the man who ran along one of the streets where the moonlight did not reach seemed almost as if he were in a different world from the music. The sash of his garment was on the verge of unraveling, but he ignored it as he made his escape. Perhaps because of his well-padded build, his lungs were already heaving for oxygen they could not find. When he reached the shadow of a small storehouse, he crouched down, half collapsing.

The man wrapped his arms around his knees, making himself small. Just a little more, and he would be fine.

If he could gain distance on his pursuer, he’d be able to run somewhere that had people he could ask for help. His lack of familiarity with the town had led him farther and farther into the unpopulated areas, but he didn’t think his circumstances were beyond help just yet. After all, this wasn’t a battlefield where several countries clashed, but a pleasure town that had remained the same over the ages.

“I’ll be fine...”

The words just slipped out, as though he were trying to convince himself.

Panicking, the man pressed his hand to his mouth, but even when straining his ears, he couldn't hear anyone else nearby. Only the faint sounds of stringed instruments.

Then, just as he was about to breathe a sigh of relief, a naked blade appeared before his eyes, having descended from above without a sound. It stopped precisely at the tip of his nose.

"Lord Tadnus of Zanioara?" asked a muffled voice from within the darkness.

The frank words were the speaker's way of seeking confirmation so he could avoid killing the wrong person. As much as the man wished to remain optimistic, even he could recognize that. His eyes darted around as he desperately sought some excuse to explain his way out of this.

The sword inched almost close enough to touch when he did not answer.

"If you do not deny it—"

"Wait."

The voice of the woman calling for restraint rang clear, like a bell. Though the man dared not move, his eyes searched for her. The unseen assassin must have moved to do the same, for the sword pulled back slightly, and the man resumed breathing.

The woman stood at the end of the narrow alley. When had she arrived? The moonlight did not reach this place, but there was a dim radiance to her form, as though it held a light of its own.

She wore a white kimono and had silver hair that was neatly arranged, with a touch of crimson rouge upon her features. Her beauty seemed ethereal, as though she were the essence of the town given human form.

The woman's blue eyes glared at the man and the assassin. "Please refrain from any uncouth behavior in this town. It is not the place for you to shed blood over your outside conflicts."

The woman showed no hesitation in the face of the assassin, but her words sent a chill through the cowering man's heart. He knew there was no chance they would dissuade his would-be killer. She appeared to be a courtesan from

her attire, and it was more likely that she would be silenced alongside him to prevent her being a witness.

Yet, even when the blade was directed at her, the woman showed no sign of fear. She simply raised her arm and pointed at the assassin with a pale fingertip.

“Leave this town, and tell this to your employer. Outside disputes have no place in Irede.”

A spray of light appeared to fly from her slender finger. The assassin, who had started toward the woman, stumbled. In the slight opening that was created, a newcomer appeared from the darkness.

A young man now stood before the pale woman as though to protect her, a drawn military sword held loosely in his right hand. His casual bearing indicated he was confident in his ability to cut the assassin down without even taking a stance.

The handsome young man glanced at the assassin and the still-cowering man. “Should you retire from here without making a fuss, so shall we. However, if it is your intent to bare your blade against the maiden, I will show you no mercy.” The cold edge to his voice was much like a blade that reflected moonlight.

The black-clad assassin studied the man and woman carefully for several seconds, then abruptly turned and vanished into the night. Once his presence was completely gone, the man returned his sword to his scabbard.

“I would suggest that you return to your residence with haste,” the kimono-clad courtesan said to the crouching man. “The next attempt may not end so fortunately for you.”

“W-Wait! I’ll pay whatever price you want! Be my bodygua—!”

“That won’t be happening,” the woman said matter-of-factly, turning away. “He’s *my* shadeslayer.”

Once they had gone some distance from the dismayed man, the young man at her side made a pained face. “Saridi. Saying it like that will give people the wrong idea.”

“Hmm?” The woman—Irede’s mistress, a courtesan, a maiden, and a god—

placed a hand to her cheek and cocked her head. “I don’t recall saying anything wrong.” She seemed to genuinely not know what he was talking about.

Xixu just sighed.

The war that had dragged in several of the continent’s principal countries had already reached the half-year mark. Though its circumstances had ebbed and flowed, at no point had it shown any sign of abating.

Owing to the skillful leadership of the king, Torlonia had managed to maintain its position one step back from the maelstrom of conflict, but there was a limit to how much could be done. The aftershocks of the war had even reached Irede in various ways, with stores running out of stock of luxury goods and disputes breaking out on a more frequent basis.

“The distance means that none of the fighting should reach Irede, but I suppose the flow of commerce was never going to continue unscathed.” Sari, sitting before a table bearing a tea set, breathed a small sigh.

The slice of moon visible from the gazebo was as narrow as a blade. Here in Pale Moon’s back garden, a distance away from the guest rooms, was Xixu’s new usual place to be instead of the proprietress’s room, which he had used to frequent. Perhaps it was because of his insistence on settling the bill in full, which had caused a fuss and troubled the maidservants.

At first, Xixu felt resigned when he’d stopped being shown inside the mansion, assuming that he’d taken his impoliteness too far. However, that apparently wasn’t the reason for the change in location. According to Sari, the proprietress, it was simply that the gazebo would allow them privacy and wouldn’t require entering his name into the customer record register. She’d also said that a room in the annex would have worked, but then it would have been difficult to drink tea. Since the annex contained Sari’s private rooms, it would have been discourteous for Xixu to request entry. Instead, he’d accepted her reasoning, remorseful over his past actions.

Today, Xixu was at Pale Moon because Sari had invited him for tea after a work-related request for assistance. He wore his usual contemplative frown as he picked up his teacup.

“The war doesn’t seem to be going well,” he commented. “Though I’ve heard that His Majesty is searching for trustworthy contacts in other countries and establishing channels of cooperation.”

“Other countries? You mean apart from the hostile ones?”

“No, I mean the hostile ones.”

“Huh?” The maiden’s eyes widened.

“As you’re already aware, this war is wreathed in suspicious activity,” Xixu added. “There are a number of influential people involved who are well positioned in the royal courts of various countries, including Tesed Zaras.”

“Ah. Are influences of that sort why other nations have all been experiencing such marked changes in nature, by any chance?”

“It’s likely. They say that white flower was one of the means used to achieve that result.”

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, Torlonia’s neighbors had each undergone drastic changes. In one, the pursuit of pleasure became paramount and the sharing of hardship was celebrated. In another, violence became a societal norm and weapons were pushed into the hands of everyone, even children. A third had become stridently authoritarian, with any dissenters to the new order cracked down upon with no mercy. Though these changes had been sudden, they had swept over the continent like a potent epidemic, undermining the nations in which they occurred.

The changes were also artificial, induced by influential individuals with methods such as flowers that gnawed away at human hearts. Xixu had heard this from his liege after Sari had destroyed a field of those white flowers in a neighboring country. Though he was relieved that Torlonia had been spared from the changes, he also felt guilt. This was a human problem, one that normally shouldn’t have necessitated her stepping in to intervene.

“According to His Majesty, the Country of the Open Sea is involved,” Xixu explained. “He believes they’re sending their pawns to this continent to manipulate the nations here in accordance with their designs.”

“The Country of the Open Sea?” Sari cocked her head. To her, the nation on

the other side of the ocean might as well have been a different world, distant and of no relevance to her life. It took several months just to get there by ship. What could it be after, making plays on the continent?

Xixu read the uncertainty in her expression and sighed. "It's unknown what their purpose is. We've looked into it, but much remains unclear. Apparently, even foresight and far-sight don't work."

"Is that simply a problem of distance? Or is there a being of power obstructing the way, like me?"

"We don't know. The former would be preferable, but we can't discount the possibility of the latter. There are reports that a highly influential person from the Country of the Open Sea has crossed over and is pulling the strings, but the king's maiden cannot see them."

Sari groaned. "I hope they didn't bring anything inhuman with them."

"Apparently, there isn't much in the way of inhuman beings across the sea. There used to be in the past, but they were exterminated as human influence grew."

"The people over there were capable of that? They must be rather militant."

Sari's own eyes housed a belligerent gleam. Though she was fundamentally open-minded and kind toward humans, she'd always been more than a little competitive.

Xixu sensed that the topic needed changing, so he dragged it back on track. "Regardless, that's the situation. The upper echelons of each nation are clearly being incited. Though there are also people working to combat the changes to their own countries."

"Oh, and those are the ones His Majesty is contacting?"

"Yes. It's gradually improving the situation, but it won't be enough to reverse the momentum."

"It sounds like His Majesty has it rather rough..."

Xixu saw the king as his liege more than he saw him as his half brother, but even accounting for that bias, he knew the king was a shrewd man.

Additionally, he had a maiden at his side with astounding power at her disposal. It was how he was managing to navigate the adverse circumstances—which were no less difficult despite his advantages.

Sari observed her own pale fingers. “I wish I could help somehow,” she grumbled.

“We can’t trouble you to go so far. It’s already bad enough that the sparks from the fire have reached Irede.”

“I feel just as much guilt as you do. I’m basically keeping you here, aren’t I?”

“You’re of more importance, and I’m useless when it comes to information warfare anyway,” Xixu admitted honestly.

Sari laughed, a pleasant ringing sound. It reminded Xixu of the first time he’d met her, but compared to the girl of back then, the woman of now was far more entrancing. It was as though she were a flower that had caught the moonlight, to which his eyes strayed the moment he relaxed his guard.

Even now, Xixu found himself distracted by her smile. But when he noticed she was staring at him, he grew flustered.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was rude of me.”

“Huh? What was?”

“No... It’s nothing.”

Evidently, she hadn’t found any fault with his gaze. Having dug his own grave, Xixu drank the remains of his tea. It did nothing to hide the awkwardness he was feeling.

“Xixu, has the maiden of foresight ever told you about yourself?” Sari asked frankly.

“Not in particular.”

“I figured as much. She *did* help trick you into coming to Irede and all.”

“There are politer ways to phrase that...”

She wasn’t wrong, however. Xixu had come to Irede over a year ago under the king’s command to observe the town, but apparently his liege had already

known at that point that he would become a candidate to be Sari's sacred offering and consort. It irritated Xixu that he hadn't been told anything, but on the whole, he was glad he had been sent to Irede.

If not for the mission given to him by the king, he likely never would have visited the town in his life. Then, he never would have met Sari, ever earnest, proud, and undaunted in the face of her duties. Xixu had seen her suffering, her loneliness, her affection. He knew them well.

And knowing them, he had fallen in love with her.

When she smiled in delight, he, too, was happy. He wanted to watch her experience joy from a place by her side. Above all, he wished for her life to be one of blessings and happiness. Asking anything more would be too presumptuous.

Feigning calm, Xixu raised his empty teacup to his lips. "I have no complaints about having come to Irede," he said. "Assisting you is my duty. Not because His Majesty commanded me to, but because it's something I want and decided for myself."

"Why are you speaking so fast?"

Xixu paused. "Ah. Sorry."

He had been trying to forestall her from sulking and accusing him of only staying because the king had ordered him to, but evidently all his sudden justifications had done were catch her by surprise. Xixu couldn't help but feel as though he were running in circles, but he resigned himself to it. Slipping up and making himself feel awkward was just the usual fare at this point.

Of course, when he had become aware of his feelings for Sari, the running in circles had intensified twofold. He felt a duty to support her now that she had lost her cousin and childhood friend, but wondered whether all he was doing was taking advantage of her while she was mourning. He wanted to be sincere and tell her how he felt, but given how busy she was with internal and external affairs, he was worried that he'd only be adding to her mental burdens.

Sari's brother, Thoma, had teased Xixu about the possibility of Sari choosing someone else, but he doubted that would happen. However, he did sometimes

feel as though she wouldn't choose anybody at all. He had no strong basis for this. It was just that she had now fully settled into her role as Pale Moon's proprietress, but showed no interest in looking for her guest. Rather, she simply appeared to be calmly waiting for something. Perhaps the two other gods she was in conflict with.

One was, same as Sari, the god of the moon. Called Distira, she was the divinity that Sari's mother had cut loose. She lacked a physical body, and sought to usurp Sari to fulfill her desire for her own place to belong.

The other was the god of the sun, the moon god's older brother. He had come to take his younger sister away from humanity, whose lives she had entwined her existence with, and back to the heavens. To this end, he had taken over the body of Sari's cousin, supplanting his individuality with his own.

These two gods were currently in hiding, but they would one day appear before Sari again. However, even if his opponent was a god, Xixu would not allow her to be hurt. He would protect her with his life—it was for this purpose he was in Irede.

Xixu placed his empty cup back on the table, then noticed that Sari was watching him. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"No, I'm just happy. Thank you for staying in Irede."

"You're welcome."

"Incidentally, Xixu, what do you think about shutting yourself away somewhere with only men for a decade or so? I'm sure it'll be good for you."

"That is completely at odds with what you just said." Was she asking him to leave Irede and return to the army?

Before Xixu could become seriously worried, Sari hurriedly waved her hand. "No, no, that's not it." She took a sheet of decorative paper from under her cup. "You know how foresight takes into account the person's own actions?"

"So I've heard, yes."

It was said that even if one strove to avoid the tragic future that had been prophesied for them, that effort could simply end up being the cause for that

future anyway. A person's fate was but a single large stream that included their struggles. The revelation that the general framework of the future was set in stone hadn't quite struck Xixu in a way that felt real yet, but then again, the ability of foresight was a rare one—especially if it was the kind possessed by the king's maiden, which never erred.

But even with the eyes of unerring foresight, although the shape of the future was already determined, the details were fluid. As such, all Xixu could do was dedicate all of his effort into each step forward he took. In other words, nothing different to what he usually did.

Sari smiled. "Then it follows that humans cannot change their fates. But I think I might be able to. You know, not being human and all."

With practiced hands, Sari folded the paper into a crane and gently blew on it. The small bird rose into the air unsteadily, looking as though the effort was taking all it had, and eventually alighted on Xixu's head.

He looked up only with his eyes, careful not to make the bird fall. "Have you recovered your power?" he asked.

"It comes and goes in waves," Sari replied. "When it works, it works. It depends on the waxing and waning of the moon too, of course."

"I understand how you feel, but don't overdo your practice. It's not good for you."

"Mm-kay."

Sari was the current incarnation of the god who had been summoned to the world of man long ago, whose existence had continued through the lineage she'd created by entwining herself with humans. However, Sari had not yet received all of her sacred offerings. Lacking the offering of human touch, her self was unstable, and she was liable to lose her ability to act human. The only reason she was able to limit this issue were the ingrained habits she possessed from being raised among people. Still, if she strayed too close to her inherent nature, her thoughts and actions would become distant from humanity and her emotions would fade away.

The last time that had happened to her, a man who she'd known since she

was a child had given his life to restore her emotions. If Xixu could help it, he would not let Sari experience such sacrifice again. Her divine power could not be contained by the world of man—he could not give her cause to use it. That was why he fought.

However, it was also true that Sari was not the type who was content to merely sit back and allow herself to be protected.

“The sun god and I are what you would call ‘constants of creation.’”

“‘Constants of creation’?”

“Gods who exist regardless of the world in which people live. There were bits and pieces of records in the Werrilocia storehouse remaining from the time the first god was summoned. In the past, beings such as inhuman entities or gods were divided into three categories. Constants of creation, who exist in the distant heavens, gods of man, who exist alongside humanity, and essences of the earth, who govern the realm of the dead. It is only the constants of creation who do not involve themselves in human affairs, hence why we have no inherent connection to the world and are not influenced by humanity, unlike gods of man such as the snake.”

A distant sacred existence. If Sari were to be described as such, Xixu could only agree.

Sari snapped her pale fingers, creating a spray of light. “Yet, my first incarnation sought to be influenced by humanity of her own will. She demanded a price from them and received it. Why did she do it?”

“I couldn’t begin to imagine.”

The thoughts of an ancient god were beyond Xixu’s comprehension. He could never even puzzle out what *Sari* was thinking.

However, it seemed that her question had mostly been directed at herself. She looked at Xixu and giggled. “I don’t know if this was the case for my first incarnation, but at the very least, I know / want to be with people.”

Just like the gods of Irede before her had chosen to live with and among people.

Xixu took the statement as a modest declaration of her will. Sari had chosen the side of humanity. In which case, he needed to answer her.

Sari rubbed her pale fingers together, looking concerned, then partially rose to her feet with graceful ease. She reached out to take the crane on Xixu's head.

Xixu took her hand half out of pure reflex. Watching her movements, he had been struck with the worry that she would suddenly vanish somewhere.

Yet, to his surprise, her hand was not as cold as ice, but an ordinary body temperature. As Sari stared at him blankly, eyes wide, Xixu once again tasted the familiar flavor of awkwardness.

"Sorry. I thought you might have been cold."

"I... Thank you."

Her soft fingers seemed to melt into his hand. Though Xixu wished to hold them tighter, he kept himself in check, releasing his grip.

"Thank you for the tea," he said, briskly rising to his feet. "I'm going to return to my patrol."

Sari smiled. "Take the crane with you."

"All right."

Xixu retrieved the paper crane from his head, gently folding it and placing it into his breast pocket. It contained Sari's power, and would inform her if anything amiss happened to him.

As Xixu excused himself through the back gate, he looked up at the night sky. The moon's existence was ever constant, unconnected to the lives of men. Its pale light shone upon the ancient town, bright and impartial.



Three bottles, small enough to hold in one's palm.

With great care and effort, that was the amount he had managed to secure.

As he knelt with his head bowed, Tesed Zaras patiently waited for his master to finish inspecting the bottles on the table. Any further failure from him would not be forgiven.

Tesed Zaras had already failed twice. First, when he had been unsuccessful in manipulating the aristocracy of Torlonia's royal capital and usurping the royal court. Then again, when he had lost the flower field entrusted to him by his master to cultivate.

Both failures were grave enough for his life to be forfeit. Yet his master had permitted him to live. He knew he was on thin ice, but that also meant this was an opportunity to restore himself to his position in his master's good graces.

And the potential for that opportunity lay within the contents of the bottles.

His young master held a bottle up, examining it. Then, he suddenly blew out a long breath. "Cold blood? Fascinating."

At the genuine curiosity in his master's voice, Tesed Zaras almost let himself go slack with relief. But he could not let his guard down yet.

"I collected it from a pool of blood near the flower field on the night it was destroyed," he explained. "After carefully extracting the dirt and grit, I was able to secure those three bottles' worth. Though it is as cold as ice, its smell suggests that it is indeed blood. In small amounts, it is a potent drug, with body-strengthening effects as the dose is increased."

As if to prove Tesed Zaras's words, the hawk resting on a perch by the wall flapped its wings. The bird had originally belonged to one of his subordinates, but after it had been fed the cold blood as an experiment, it had seen enough improvement in intelligence and physical ability that it was now capable of performing assassination missions on its own.

"Fascinating. Have you tested it on a person?"

"I believed it best to await your judgment, Your Highness."

"You have my permission. Take one bottle to use at your discretion."

"As you will, Your Highness."

Tesed Zaras had created a faint glimmer of hope. Still, he could not rest assured just yet. Hereon, he would be walking a tightrope with no room to make a single misstep.

Though he considered it proper for him to die for his master, he did not wish

to die without being of use. It was a matter of pride.

“Have you determined what kind of blood this is?” his master asked, rolling a bottle on his palm.

Tesed Zaras raised his head slightly; he had anticipated this question. “I directed the hawk to search for it. I believe the source lies in a town in the north of Torlonia called Irede.”

A moment of silence. “Irede, you say?” The pleasure town of myth. The town built to repay a god. When his master heard the name, he began to laugh. “I see, I see! So that’s how it is.”

“Do you have an idea of what it is, Your Highness?”

His master had only just arrived on the continent. Had he already discovered a lead? Or had he had a grasp on the circumstances here the whole time, despite being far across the sea? As Tesed Zaras cowered in fear of the unknown, his master cheerfully spread his arms wide.

“A little while ago, a mysterious letter was delivered to a different safe house. The sender knew who I was, while I didn’t even know how they sent it. Preposterous, isn’t it? And just what do you think was written in that letter?”

Tesed Zaras paled and remained silent. His master had arrived in absolute secrecy. But even if someone *had* discovered that an important individual from the Country of the Open Sea had come, they should not have had any means of knowing who he was or his whereabouts. If they had truly been exposed, it would be a disaster.

Yet, if such a letter had come, what could be written on it? His master’s answer was beyond Tesed Zaras’s wildest expectations.

“It said: ‘In Irede, an inhuman woman lives in secret. Her true identity is that of an ancient god.’”

“But that’s—”

It was ludicrous. Gods did not actually exist.

True, this continent still had any number of countries and cities where old traditions and beliefs remained. But none of them had any significant influence.

The presence of inhuman beings was tenuous enough that humans could exterminate them entirely, should they wish to. At any moment.

Back across the sea, there had once existed inhuman races capable of human speech. They no longer existed, having met their ends either by devouring humans and drawing their ire or being hunted to extinction. But gods? What a joke.

Nevertheless, Tesed Zaras could not laugh—not while he did not know his master’s intentions.

Seeing that he had swallowed his words, his master continued, sounding delighted. “A god, of all things,” he murmured. “Such arrogance. I wish to see what kind of woman she is.”

In the face of his master’s ill-natured curiosity, Tesed Zaras held his tongue.

At heart, his master had a penchant for the immoral. That was why he had manipulated and perverted several nations of this continent from the shadows. His initial objective had been to create several weak vassal states and use them to economically and militaristically strengthen his homeland, but along the way, he had decided to induce large-scale unrest and conflict. Tesed Zaras knew this was because his master had a liking for seeing people flounder, but secretly worried that the habit would only invite misfortune down the line.

Ignorant of his vassal’s worries, his master laughed. “If she truly is inhuman, it would mean she’s a rare species. I’ll keep her as a pet. Depart for Irede and find her for me.”

“As you will, Your Highness.”

Tesed Zaras could not object to his master’s orders. But he would have gone to Irede regardless, to secure the owner of the cold blood. And while the veracity of the mysterious letter was questionable, if there truly was an inhuman woman in Irede, then *she* could very well be the owner. Keeping his head bowed, he began to consider which of his subordinates he would bring with him.

They had already finished with the stage of manipulating people and events from the shadows. Hereon, he, too, would join the front line and work for the

sake of his master.

All the while knowing that it amounted to diving headfirst into the unpredictable chaos that his master had created.

2. Change of Color

Although the war had also dragged Torlonia into its folds, perhaps because of the king's skillful leadership, matters had not degenerated enough for Irede—which was situated far within the kingdom's borders—to be forced to shut its gates. The gates placed at three sides of the town had been closed to all but merchants and guests with letters of recommendation several times in the past when the countries Irede had belonged to had met their ends, but today they remained open in all of their vermilion-lacquered majesty. Each gate was stationed with a small contingent of militiamen who questioned armed visitors on their affiliations and the purposes of their visit, however, and certain establishments in town had taken to refusing first-time customers.

This last did not apply to Pale Moon, the oldest courtesan house in town. In the first place, the women there chose their guests, so matters were simply business as usual. Another factor was that Pale Moon was a symbol of Irede: it could not bend so easily. The sight of its unchanging presence was a balm of reassurance for the townspeople.

Today, Sari was following her usual routine of lighting the lantern as the sun began to set, performing the action with practiced ease. Satisfied that the floating half-moon design was proudly on display, she turned back toward the interior of the mansion.

"Open the flower room, please," she directed a maidservant who had finished wiping down the floor.

"Yes, Miss Proprietress."

Although Sari had always opened the flower room herself after lighting the lantern, guests had recently been coming as soon as Pale Moon was open for business. The number of customers had increased by a full fifth or so, which was a marked difference to her first days after inheriting the title of proprietress, when some days they'd received no customers at all. Perhaps they had finally recognized her as the proprietress. All in all, it was a change she was

grateful for.

Nevertheless, an increase in customers did not mean that the courtesans had become any more industrious. As always, after the lantern was lit, they slowly gathered in the flower room and selected their guests according to their own whims. That number had not increased, so in practice, the only change was that there had been a higher number of customers leaving disappointed.

When she saw one such man immediately pass through the gate, Sari put on a smile. “Welcome,” she greeted.

The young man scratched the back of his head, looking sheepish. “Good evening. I guess I still haven’t learned my lesson.”

The young man was a merchant from the capital who had come to Pale Moon in hopes of establishing a business relationship and had apparently fallen for one of the courtesans at first sight. However, the woman in question had not a shred of interest in him, and gave him the cold shoulder each time he visited. If the number of visits alone were enough to qualify a customer as a regular, then he surely would have been one by now.

Sari bowed. “Please wait within the flower room. Everyone will be there shortly.”

“Actually, I’m not alone today. I brought a friend of mine.” The man turned and called out to someone beyond the gate.

Established customers bringing new ones along with them was an everyday occurrence across Irede. Sari smiled, recalling the day her older brother had shown up dragging Xixu along behind him.

The young man that stepped out of the gate’s shadow was tall. He had curly blond hair and pale blue eyes, and his finely chiseled countenance placed him in the latter half of his twenties. It was rare that someone with such features was seen in Irede.

Dressed in western clothing of a deep green, the young man had a presence that seemed to announce itself. Upon seeing Sari, he stopped in place, eyes widening.

The merchant beckoned to him. “Don’t just stand there—come over. I’ll

introduce you to the proprietress.”

“Right...”

Despite his distracted reply, there was no hesitation in the young man’s stride as he stepped up to Sari.

“Thank you for coming,” she said softly, bowing low. “I bid you welcome to Pale Moon, the house in the north.”

“The house in the north... I heard there were holy courtesans here?”

“Not quite, I’m afraid. Though it *is* true we are of a lineage that has been unbroken since the time of the founders of this town. Please, come. I shall show you to where the courtesans are.”

Sari turned without making a sound. However, quickly noticing that he was not following, she turned back. The young blond man stood still, his eyes fixated on her. His merchant friend tapped him on the shoulder anxiously.

“What’s wrong? Let’s go.”

“You aren’t a courtesan yourself?”

Sari smiled in reply. It was a question she received frequently. “I am the proprietress,” she said. “My circumstances are different. However, I *am* also a courtesan, and am also able to take a guest.”

“Oh? I didn’t know that.”

The surprised reply had come from the young merchant. Ordinarily, Sari did not mention that she was also a courtesan unless asked. Customers did not come to Pale Moon because they wished to hear her introduce herself.

The young man who’d asked the question stared at Sari. She felt a prickling heat from his gaze that she found uncomfortable. On the surface, however, she maintained her smile.

“Having said that, I will only take a single guest in my lifetime. Then, I will give birth to the next proprietress.”

“Is that how it is? Wow...”

The story of Pale Moon’s proprietress was common knowledge in Irede, but

to an outsider, it must have seemed fascinating. Sari gave the impressed young merchant a smile, then turned back again toward the entryway. However, she was stopped by the blond man's voice.

"Have you decided on your guest already?"

"I have not."

This was not such a rare occurrence. After Sari had turned seventeen, customers had come by sporadically seeking to purchase her company.

Once, the only one who had asked that of her had been the man who had been her childhood friend. Now, though, it seemed she passed as a full-fledged courtesan in the eyes of the men who walked Irede.

The blond man's gaze harbored that same hope. Sari answered it with a faint smile. "Trouble tends to befall those who would become my guest," she continued. "It has made it rather difficult to decide."

"Trouble?"

"Yes. Perhaps if their life or the price of my company were the only payment necessary, the matter would be simpler to resolve. However, in my case, I must receive both."

Sari's smile adopted an edge of regal beauty. The weight of inheriting a mythic bloodline, opaque as it was to outsiders who did not comprehend it, overwhelmed the space they were in like the presence of a large-petaled flower. The young merchant's breath caught in his throat.

For Sari to receive both meant that the man consecrated to the god needed the resolve to give both. He who would become her guest was not a human she chose to become an offering, but an offering she chose from among humans.

Seeing that the pair of customers had fallen silent, she turned for the final time, leading them to the entryway.

"Although... I feel like things have been much harder for me, compared to my predecessors," Sari grumbled under her breath.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, she couldn't figure out how things had come to this. Was it simply bad luck?

Sari led the two men to the flower room, then moved to other work. The young blond left that day without being chosen, but he visited Pale Moon again the very next day.

“I didn’t get your name, you see,” the young man said with a friendly smile.

Sari replied with a small one of her own, then stepped down onto the clay floor of the entryway and looked up at him. “Then I must beg pardon for my ill-mannered mistake,” she said. “My name is Sari, of Pale Moon.”

“Sari.” The young man chewed on the name, as though tasting it.

Sari nodded. “There are no other courtesans in Irede of that name, so it is easily recognizable as my own and that of the proprietress of Pale Moon.”

“I’m called Vendt.”

“I look forward to your continued patronage, Master Vendt.”

Sari gave him a coquettish smile, which seemed to make him happy. The way he wore his emotions on his sleeve made him look like a child to her, even though she was the younger one.

Repressing a dry quirk of her lips, Sari indicated farther down the hallway with her hand. “Please allow me to take you to the flower room. I shall brew you some tea.”

“I’ll pass on the tea. I’d like to buy you.”

“My sincerest apologies, but as I informed you yesterday, my circumstances differ from the other courtesans.”

Now then, how to decline his advances?

Sari had expected this of him, given yesterday and how he’d come back so soon, but he was so direct that she was actually a little envious. And direct men tended to be stubborn—as the proprietress, she would have to put careful thought into how she acted around him.

She turned to face him. “Thank you for your words. I am honored.”

“Then...”

“However, Pale Moon is the inheritor of Irede. The house in the north. I’m sure you’re already aware of the meaning that carries.”

“I heard yesterday. The women here choose their guests.”

“Yes.”

At this point, customers familiar with Irede would have recognized that she had refused them. Unfortunately, it seemed that would not work on Vendt. Taking a leaf out of his book, Sari decided to be direct.

“I have no intention of selecting you as my guest.”

Vendt considered that for several moments. “Is it because I’m a newcomer?”

“That isn’t the only reason. If I may only take a single guest in my lifetime, then I must give the decision careful consideration.”

As a matter of fact, it was all but decided already who would become her guest.

Although everybody had vaguely clued in on this to some degree, matters between her and him had stopped one step short. Perhaps it was because of the current international instability, or perhaps it was because of the two other gods who lay in waiting.

Whatever the case, it was definite that Sari had no inclination to choose another man. Even if she would have to let the one in her thoughts leave her side to secure his safety, her feelings for him would not change.

Sari was confident she could bury her heart under a fake smile all her life, if that was what it took.

She wore one such smile now. Vendt studied her pensively, an intensity in his gaze. Sari faced it without shrinking back. Her slender form harbored years beyond her physical age. She was the embodiment of the town of Irede.

Vendt maintained his gaze for some time, but perhaps realizing that her smile would not falter, he abruptly grinned. “All right,” he said. “Then I’ll come by again.”

“Please make use of the flower room next time.” Sari bowed deeply and waited for the sound of his footsteps to fade before looking back up.

The next visitor she received was not a customer, but a shadeslayer.

Currently, Irede had four shadeslayers on active duty, all of which were men, and all of which were rather...individualistic.

The oldest of them, Ironblade, was a taciturn and upright man who often slipped naturally into the role of their representative. Whenever a problem reared its head, it was often he who went around to the major businesses to inform them.

After greeting the man, who had come shortly after the lantern lighting, Sari was taken aback by the message he had for her.

“What? What do you mean?” she asked. “Was it a shade?”

“No, it seems unlikely. Their physical ability was beyond a human’s, but their eyes weren’t red. Speaking of which, there were multiple opponents. Danai was injured. Badly.”

Sari paled. Danai was another of Irede’s shadeslayers.

According to Ironblade, the incident was related to a dispute originating outside of town; apparently, the frequency of such skirmishes had been increasing recently. A group of assassins had tailed a member of the aristocracy of another country who had come to Irede in secret. At the time of their attack, the shadeslayers, who had coincidentally been present, had stepped in to intervene. As a result, the town was in uproar.

Sari’s delicate eyebrows drew together in concern. “Will he be okay?”

“He’ll live. But he might not be able to work as a shadeslayer again, even after he heals.”

“That’s awful...”

“The other two shadeslayers are pursuing the assassins who ran.”

“Then I—”

“You should remain here, Maiden. That’s what I came to tell you.” Ironblade nodded gravely, as if to reinforce his words, then turned to leave. Then, perhaps considerate of her gaze upon him, he gently added, “If it looks as

though things will get bad, I'll order the rookie to fall back. You're not yet with child, so we cannot lose your guest and future husband."

"Um, I keep trying to say this, but I think you have the wrong idea..."

She hadn't even shared a bed with Xixu yet, much less conceived his child. Still, her half-hearted attempt to correct Ironblade's misunderstanding—which was firmly rooted at this point—wouldn't make much of a difference to the circumstances at hand.

She couldn't lose Xixu. Yet he was not the kind of person who would agree to being kept away from danger, as though he were a fragile object.

Sari only gave the matter half a second of thought. Her mouth was already opening to speak.

"I'll go too."

"Maiden. It is not shades we face tonight."

"Even so. This matter pertains to Irede."

As the mistress of the town, she could not overlook those who had incited turmoil within it. She would not be kept out of the loop.

Sari looked up at the half moon hanging from Pale Moon's gate. "Don't worry. I'll go."

She would brook no objections from anyone or anything.

The woman who was a god left her manor and stepped onto the stage.

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If Xixu had to decide whether he had good timing or bad timing, he would say he was more prone toward the latter. That being said, he was unsure which category tonight's events fell under.

With his naked military sword in hand, Xixu ran through the night alleyways, keeping his eyes and ears peeled. He was facing five opponents—he'd counted them earlier.

The black-clad assassins had disappeared into the night, but not long ago they had been just off a main street in a laneway that ran along one of the town's

canals. A passing shadeslayer—Danai—and a group of militiamen had spotted them surrounding a nobleman and intervened, resulting in a fight.

Xixu had been called in as backup, but by the time he'd come running, it had already devolved into a bloodbath. Pools of blood had covered the laneway by the canal. Fallen militiamen had lain within them, unmoving—alive or dead, it had been impossible to tell.

And there, atop their bodies and the blood, had stood the five assassins. Different physiques, all clad in black with nothing revealed apart from their eyes. Eyes that were not red.

Their weapons had been peculiar: large claws, a pair of curved swords—all unconventional choices. And although the assassins had been surrounded by a dozen or more militiamen, they'd shown no signs of apprehension. The nobleman who'd been their original target, meanwhile, had been sitting on the ground behind the militia, trembling violently.

After taking it all in at a glance, Xixu had pushed through the militiamen to stand in front, which was when Ironblade and Tagi had arrived. The commotion must have reached the main street too, as curious onlookers had begun to appear. Seeing them gather had apparently convinced the assassins to flee.

The assassins had leaped over the militiamen's heads with ease, using the roofs to make their escape. Their unnatural physical ability and animallike movements resembled shades, and yet shades they were not.

They had an alien presence. As Xixu ran after them, he was struck by the feeling that he had encountered something similar before.

The assassins had split into two groups. Xixu had pursued one while Tagi had pursued the other one, and Ironblade had left to inform others of the incident. Their enemy was abnormal; they had to catch them before they caused any more harm.

The assassins' trail led Xixu through the dark back alleys of town. It was in one such alleyway, empty of people, where he stopped. He looked around.

From afar, Xixu could hear the notes of stringed instruments. There were no

other sounds. The only person present he could sense was himself. He stilled his breath and watched the shadows at his feet, created by the stark light of the moon.

Xixu relaxed, easing all unnecessary tension out of his body and erasing his presence. He melded into the darkness.

This was a town of the night. *Her* town. He had nothing to fear from the dark.

It took roughly twenty seconds of waiting.

Without any warning, a blade thrust out of the darkness from behind, aimed at his neck. Xixu avoided it with a single step to the right. He turned, using the movement to make a sweeping cut.

The black-clad figure hanging upside down from the roof of a nearby row house reacted immediately, catching his swing on the blade of a shortsword. The force of it sent them flying, and they crashed into a stack of full storage tubs along the edge of the empty alleyway.

The sound was jarring amidst the silence, yet there was no sign that anybody would be coming out of the row houses. At this time of evening, most of the residents of this area would be working at their businesses on the main streets.

In the span of a breath, Xixu closed in on the black-clad figure amidst the storage tubs, who was attempting to stand. His sword cut through the air without a sound.

There was a clash of metal on metal—his swing had been stopped midway by the intervention of a second black-clad figure. Xixu, wishing he could click his tongue, twisted his sword, deftly extricating it from the long claws that had tried to ensnare it.

It was two against one. Or perhaps three against one, as the combat experience that had seeped into the bones of Xixu's body was telling him that a third assailant was nearby.

Since there had been five assassins and they'd split off into groups of two and three, Xixu judged he must have gotten the latter. That meant Tagi was dealing with the remaining pair.

Xixu's thoughts had only strayed for a moment, but he dragged them back to the present situation as he parried a swipe of the assassin's claws to the left. The point of a sword was thrust at him immediately afterward, and he leaped back to gain distance.

The black-clad figure with the shortsword was tall and thin, while the one with the claws had a smaller build. Xixu eased into a stance, glaring at them.

"Name yourselves."

Irede was neutral ground. When it came to external disputes, it did not favor either side. However, the assassins had killed members of the militia. That could not go overlooked. By the same token, Xixu's instincts had judged that these five assassins could not be allowed to roam free.

Xixu held his blade at the ready, senses on alert for any sign of the third assassin. He would lose a protracted fight—he needed to incapacitate one of his opponents with his next strike.

The agile claw-wielder would likely take the lead in the next exchange. Xixu kept his breathing steady to avoid creating any unnecessary openings.

The moon's light spilled onto the earth.

There was no warning. The claw-wielder kicked lightly off the ground and began running horizontally along the wall of row houses. The other assassin matched pace, closing in across the ground.

They were approaching from two different angles, but Xixu did not falter, stepping forward himself. He swept the honed edge of his blade at the claw-wielder on the wall.

With a barely audible grunt of exertion, the claw-wielder bent backward, crashing to the ground and holding their face. Had Xixu grazed their nose? He didn't have the time to care right now.

Xixu swiftly pulled his sword back, only managing to parry the shortsword thrust that had been aimed at his stomach by a thin margin. Following through with the movement, he drove his sword deep into the thin black-clad figure's neck. There was a feeling of blunted resistance and a spray of blood.

Suddenly, there was another presence behind Xixu. He'd expected as much, though, and he leaped over the crumpling body of the shortsword-wielder. With a body now in the way, he turned to face his new assailant and froze in mute shock.

The third black-clad figure, a sword-wielder, had been seized from behind the back of the head in a casual clawlike grip by a pale hand.

The owner of the hand, a woman clad in a white kimono, floated slightly above the ground. A cold mantle was settled over the beauty of her features. Her blue eyes held all the warmth of ice as they observed the black-clad assassin.

"That will be quite enough playing around." The voice was that of the town's mistress, dignified and cold.

Instinctively, Xixu called her name. "Saridi."

"Xixu. What is this creature?"

"I was wondering the same."

Evidently, she, too, had recognized that the assassins were no ordinary humans. Sari scrutinized the black-clad figure in her grip. "Something feels strange about them. It's almost as if—"

The stilled air of the scene suddenly came alive again. His eyes still on Sari, Xixu slashed downward at the fallen assassin who'd tried to grab his legs, then dashed toward the third assassin in her grip, who was attempting to turn toward her.

Despite being held by a god, the assassin was still trying to resist, as though they were a poorly crafted marionette. Sari frowned slightly.

Before the assassin's sword could reach her, however, Xixu cut them down. He grabbed the assassin's left shoulder and tore them away from Sari, tossing them behind him and pulling her close.

When he turned, he saw that the one he'd tossed and the claw-wielder—who'd stood up—were staring at him intensely.

Xixu's eyes widened slightly when he saw the latter. His earlier slash had cut

away the cloth concealing their identity, revealing the features of a little girl.

She had a small, pale face, reminiscent of a doll's. Her icy blue eyes felt familiar to Xixu, and he instinctively knew why.

Words spilled from his mouth. "Saridi, she's like..."

He heard Sari's breath catch behind him. By then, she had already left his side, advancing forward. The god's gaze was fixated on the two approaching black-clad figures. The air began to cool, swirling and eddying like a vortex.

"You...absolute...*fools!*"

The furious exclamation became a wave of power that slammed violently into the two assassins. The sword-wielder fell, blood spraying from their exposed eyes. The girl was thrown farther down the alleyway.

Sari went after her, cold gathered around her pale, outstretched hand. Her small foot soundlessly kicked against the air, and she closed the distance of a dozen paces in a single skip. She swung her right hand toward the girl, who was trying to run.

But Xixu, who had chased after Sari, caught it. He pulled her body back.

"Xixu?!"

Ignoring the reproach in her voice, Xixu brought his sword in front of her. The blue light that had come abruptly flying out of the darkness crashed into it, scattering. As Sari stared at it, startled, the air seemed to shake with mocking amusement.

A transparent girl appeared from the darkness. Her slender body was wrapped in silver cloth—she wore nothing else. She looked at them and released a quiet laugh.

Xixu murmured her name. "Distira..."

The girl closed her eyes as if in agreement. Then, without saying a word, she vanished.

Silence returned to the night.

The claw-wielding girl had disappeared. All that was left in the alleyway were the corpses of the other two assassins.

Xixu looked down at the woman in his arms. “Saridi. Are you hurt?”

“No. Are you?”

“I’m fine.”

They nodded to one another, then breathed a simultaneous sigh. Realizing that Sari’s hair was on the verge of disarray, Xixu began combing it with his hand.

Before anyone else could come, he asked, “Do you know what those black-clad figures were?”

“I can’t say for sure, but...”

Sari shook her head and turned to one of the assassin’s corpses—the one that had died after bleeding from the eyes. The bleeding hadn’t stopped. The corpse lay in a slowly growing pool of blood, eyes wide open. Xixu watched it carefully, not letting his guard down.

Sari scowled at it. “They likely took some of my blood, to end up like that.”

“Blood?”

“Other body fluids would work too, I think. But...I wonder when they collected it.”

Her delicate fingers gripped Xixu’s sleeve. That was when he finally noticed that he was still holding her in his arms. He let go, making a careful effort to keep his expression unchanged.

Yet, Sari, whose own expression was clouded, didn’t let go of his sleeve until the others caught up to them.



She gasped for breath as she ran. More than a few times, she glanced back, but it seemed like they weren’t pursuing her.

The male shadeslayer and the mysterious woman. The latter especially was terrifying. Something that she didn’t understand. Something that should not be

touched.

The black-clad girl reached an empty dwelling that they had been using as one of their safe houses and crawled into a battered tea cabinet, hiding. She brought her knees to her chest and caught her breath.

She'd managed to escape. Next: meet up with her colleagues. If she still had them.

The two she'd been with earlier were likely a lost cause. They hadn't been acquaintances or anything of the sort, just a gathering of people with nowhere else to go. But having someone—anyone—was better than being by herself. She'd known she would be used and thrown away, but she didn't want to be alone in this town with that terrifying *thing*.

The girl buried her face in her knees. The words she'd always swallowed down spilled forth—words she'd been unable to say until now.

"I don't want to die..."

The girl exhaled deeply, then lifted her head—there was a transparent hand before her eyes.

She squeaked and reflexively backed away, but the cabinet's backboard was right behind her. The pale hand ignored her plight and reached out to touch her forehead. An arm pushed through the cabinet, then a slender body, then a beautiful face.

The eerie transparent girl resembled the terrifying woman from earlier, in some way. She saw that the girl had frozen, and smiled.

"Your body is perfect. Ruled by our blood. That will make it easier to use."

The girl didn't understand, but she somehow gathered up the inconceivable effort to shake her head. She didn't want to suffer any more horrors. She knew she had ingested that cold blood. She couldn't change what she'd done in the past. But even so.

"Don't come any closer..." the girl uttered weakly.

The transparent hand ignored her plea, sinking deeper into her forehead. The girl gasped—it felt like ice water had been dumped onto her. As her

consciousness faded, a new voice joined the neglected tatami-mat room.

“Just when I thought you’d scraped together enough of your existence to act, I find you prowling about for a vessel. But I suppose decency would have been too much to expect, coming from you.”

“So, you’re already here. How awfully unpleasant.” Releasing the shivering girl, Distira turned.

Standing there was a young man with cynical eyes, holding a rapier that shone the color of gold.

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Apparently, the other two assassins had indeed fought Tagi. Fortunately, Ironblade’s timely arrival meant it hadn’t devolved into anything ugly, but they had managed to get away, bringing the number of escapees to three including the claw-wielding girl.

Once all of the fuss had been taken care of, it was deep into the night. Sari returned to her own room in the annex and breathed a sigh.

“I feel...tired.”

“That’s more than understandable. You should get some rest soon.”

“Mm-kay.”

Sari nodded and looked up at Xixu. As expected, he looked exceedingly uncomfortable. This was far from the first time he’d been in her personal room, but apparently her inviting him in was still enough to put his nerves on edge.

Sari pouted a little as she pulled out her ornate hairpin. “You *know* we can’t talk about these matters where others could hear.”

“That’s true...”

And neither could she let him into the proprietress’s room. Although Xixu was honest and diligent, he had a habit of saying the most unexpected things, when push came to shove. She could not be as careless as she had been as a child. In her mind, her private room was less problematic than a guest room.

Sari stood before her dresser, fixing her undone hair. “Sit wherever you like.

I'll brew some tea."

"It's fine; you don't have to go to the trouble. Just do whatever you find most comfortable."

"Then can I change?"

"That's a little *too* comfortable."

Sari's private room hadn't been furnished under the assumption that others would be entering, so it lacked a partitioning screen for changing clothes. She tilted her head at Xixu's blunt remark. "What if I said I'd like to take a bath first?"

"Feel free to... Just make sure you're fully dressed before you come out."

"Shall we take one together? I'll wash your back."

"No."

The flat reply, delivered as though he'd bitten down on a particularly bitter-tasting insect, was more or less what she'd expected. Sari laughed and pulled out the dresser's stool, offering it to Xixu. She herself sat on the bed.

"About the assassins earlier," she began. "I think I'm right. They took some of my blood."

"What do you mean by 'took'?"

"They either drank it or injected it directly into their veins. Even among a body's fluids, blood has a special power. Though of course it can vary, depending."

When Sari had received the warning from Ironblade and gone into town, she'd felt a prickling unease that had grown stronger as she'd approached her enemies. The feeling had intensified when she'd come face-to-face with the assassins, and it had turned into certainty when Xixu had remarked upon one's resemblance to her.

The cast of the claw-wielding girl's face had not resembled Sari's in any notable way. It was simply that the young man who was so close to her had intuitively sensed the similarity of the nature lying beneath.

The girl was a human who had consumed part of a god, and made it her own.

The insolence of having her existence stolen away made Sari's lips twist in displeasure. "What do you think she was?" she asked. "Distira's flunky?"

"The claw-wielding girl? I don't think so. She seemed surprised to see her."

"Huh?"

So had Distira simply been covering for the assassin because she might become an enemy of Sari's? Sari frowned.

Opposite her, Xixu looked as though he'd realized something. "Ah. So that's it."

"Yes?"

"When you fought Distira in the neighboring country, you were heavily injured, remember?"

"Hmm? Oh!"

Sari dredged up the faded memory. Indeed, when they had fought, Sari had spilled a great amount of blood. "But I'm sure I burned the stained kimono and bedsheets."

"There was a pool of blood where you got hurt. Someone must have noticed the flashes of light from the battle and gone to check. Or do you recall any other times you might have spilled blood?"

"Hmm. I do that regularly, but I always make sure to dispose of it," Sari explained distractedly, her thoughts still adrift. "Nobody should have been able to get their hands on it."

After a beat, Xixu seemed to realize what she was talking about. His gaze dropped. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Sari replied absently. Why was he apologizing? "If it's the blood from my fight with Distira, then we can narrow down the culprits."

"You mean Tesed Zaras."

Their fight had taken place in Tesed Zaras's private land, where the only building nearby was his mansion. If he had taken notice and gone to investigate,

then it must have been him or one of his subordinates who'd collected the blood.

Tesed Zaras was an exceedingly bothersome opponent. Sari brought her delicate fingers to her chin. "How much blood did I spill, back then?"

"A small puddle's worth or so."

"I wonder how much it would take to induce the amount of change we saw in the assassins."

"It's hard to say. Since there were five of them, we can assume the maximum answer is a fifth of what you spilled."

Sari nodded at the logical answer. Xixu was correct, but they also didn't know how many more of those assassins were out there. To Sari's eyes, they were like poorly crafted clay dolls, their existence profaning both her as the god and their very own humanity.

As Sari brooded, Xixu spoke soothingly. "It might be unpleasant, but if that blood was the source then the amount they have is limited. If we take out the remaining assassins on our hands, then the matter will be settled."

"That's likely, yes. But..."

"The key will be keeping our opponents ignorant of your existence. If it was Tesed Zaras who used your blood, it means he noticed its strange properties and supplied it to others. They'll be searching for the blood's source."

"Oh, right. They'll want to replenish what they used."

It wasn't certain that Tesed Zaras was the mastermind just yet, but if he was, this was a critical time of upheaval for him. He would want to have as many powerful pawns as he could get his hands on. Sari pictured her blood being extracted to the very last drop and, unable to help herself, snickered.

Xixu frowned. "This is no joke, Saridi. It would be nice if our earlier assailants were only in Irede by coincidence, but we can't rule out the possibility that they weren't. Then there's also the matter of Distira. We should be cautious."

"Ugh. Another defensive battle..."

It was exhausting, always being on the lookout for enemies who could attack

at any time or place. Sari would rather have gone on the offensive.

However, she could not do so because of her position as the proprietress of Pale Moon. Perhaps she would have been able to if her circumstances had been more like they were in the past, when she'd had power to spare, but now it came and went in waves. She could hardly even keep a grip on her sense of self.

Sari forced herself not to bury her head in her arms in frustration, instead pressing her hands to her cheeks. Cold air mixed with the breaths she exhaled.

Perhaps noticing the tiny frost crystals drifting to the ground, Xixu stood from his stool. Yet, his outstretched hand stopped just before it touched her.

Sari looked up and saw that he had gone still, an uncomfortable expression on his face. She took his hand herself.

"It's all right. I'm still okay."

"You shouldn't overthink it. Just be cautious of your own surroundings—the rest of us will handle everything else."

"It's Irede's problem. And Irede is mine."

"Even so, Saridi."

The way he spoke her name sparked warmth in the core of her soul. Only he could place so much power into her maiden name. He likely wasn't even aware of how effective it was.

Sari let herself savor the aftershocks of the jolt. The warmth had spread to her fingers, and, wanting to keep it there, she tightened her grip on his hand. He squeezed in return—though he was holding himself back—and the same relief and unease she was so familiar with swirled in her heart.

Sari swallowed the mix of emotions and smiled. "Okay. I'll be careful."

"I'll send a report to the capital. They might know something."

"Mmm."

Xixu must have judged that to be the end of their conversation. He gently withdrew his hand from her slackened grip.

Sari found herself irrationally irritated, feeling the strong urge to grab his

hand and stop it from leaving, but that would only trouble him. She lowered her arm, telling herself that she wasn't a child anymore.

Xixu headed for the door, making to leave. She leaped up and hurried after him.

"You're leaving already?"

"We don't know how many more of those assassins managed to slip into town. I'll do a quick patrol, then return to the boarding house. You should rest, and soon. You still have your proprietress work to see to."

"I know, but..."

She was worried that he would go somewhere beyond where she could see—so worried that she was beside herself. The prospect of letting him go seemed terrifying. What if she lost him, just as abruptly as she'd lost the others so precious to her?

Xixu looked at the woman who'd grabbed his sleeve, eyes widening. Her blue eyes, tinged with a faint luminescence, looked back. Others would have shrunk from her gaze, but he accepted it with no hesitation. From it, he could sense her unease.

"Saridi?"

"Don't do anything rash, Xixu. Take care of yourself."

"I know."

"If anything happened to you, I'd go on a rampage. With all of my power."

Xixu found himself at a loss as to how he should respond.

If she did such a thing, it might mean the destruction of Irede. He wrestled over how to chide her for a moment, but knew she hadn't been serious. She was simply tormented by the vague fear that she would lose him, as though he were a family member departing for war. Afraid of the transience of human beings.

What should he say, at times such as these?

He could promise not to do anything to endanger his own life, but he could

not tell what circumstances the future would bring. Making a promise he could not keep would be unfair to her.

Xixu thought back to his friends from his time in the capital, and what they had done at times like these. He remembered several examples, but none quite matched his situation. In general, all he ever did was try to learn from the examples of his predecessors and act after placing his own spin on them, but the people around him always threw up their hands, saying he'd missed the mark.

He thought silently for a while, before eventually settling on being direct. "All right. I'll take it to heart."

"Mmm."

"Don't worry so much. Just having you with me is more reassuring than you know."

That was the simple truth. He had the protection of Irede's god. That privilege came with fearsome power.

Yet, it would not be right of him to take advantage of that. Xixu was simply happy that Sari was concerned for him. Though he also felt guilt at being the cause of her unease, and could not convey his feelings because of his position...that was how he honestly felt.

His words had been a fragment of that emotion revealing itself. Sari looked surprised for a moment, but she quickly dropped her gaze, blushing. Perhaps she was embarrassed that she'd been worrying like a lost child. He saw her small pearl-colored teeth bite down lightly on her rouge-painted lip.

Once she'd pulled herself together—though she was still faintly red—Sari looked back up. "Come back tomorrow. I'll have some enchanted bells ready for you."

"Bells?"

"Remember when we searched for shades by scattering *konpeito*? It'll be like that, using the people who ingested my blood as a catalyst to find them. Just locating them shouldn't use too much power."

“Ah, I see.”

She had used the *konpeito* when they had been pursuing a shade in the form of a baby, but evidently the technique could locate things other than shades. Xixu thought back to what she’d done back then.

“I just have to place the bells at different locations?”

“Mm-hmm. Birds would eat the *konpeito* if we used it again, and I can make it so the bells ring by themselves. That’ll make it easier for someone other than me to tell they’re reacting.”

“Then I’ll come by for them tomorrow, around the lantern lighting. Is that okay?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Sari’s expression eased in relief, and she smiled. Perhaps her unease had been alleviated a little.

Xixu found himself captivated by the clarity of her gaze, in which a slight anxiousness still remained. He almost let his emotions spill forth, only managing to force the words back down just in time.

It was already clear to him how he felt about her. However, he hesitated to let her know. If he were to die in the near future, wouldn’t his feelings only cause her unnecessary pain? That thought had been with him ever since he’d seen her grieving over the others she’d lost.

Yet Xixu also knew that was only the weakness of his own heart. He did not want to be the cause of her sorrow.

When he had been selecting a gift for Sari’s seventeenth birthday, Vas had told him not to concern himself with the maintenance methods and such of the precious stones he’d been considering, because Sari could handle anything. His current predicament was similar.

Sari had come to terms with her loss and stood proud in spite of it. Her emotions were for her to handle, no one else. Whether it was pain or happiness, it would be conceited of him to think he could control it in her place.

So the truth was, he knew what he should do: tell her how he felt, honestly

and sincerely.

If she considered that to have worth, she would accept it. If not, then he didn't mind. As long as she could look back one day and recall that she'd once known a man like him, he would be happy.

Still. There were rules of etiquette when it came to conveying one's emotions.

Xixu studied Sari intently. "I'll have to ask a witness..."

"Huh? What? You want me to be a witness?"

"No, we're the ones they'll be witnessing."

"Are you going to duel me? I don't think I could beat you in a duel, Xixu."

"No, that's not..." He was beginning to get a bad feeling. The intuition he'd refined since coming to Irede told Xixu he'd only be digging deeper into his own grave by continuing this conversation. He stood up. "I should leave. Sorry for taking up your time."

"That's okay. Thank you for escorting me home. I'll see you tomorrow."

Xixu smiled as she waved him off, then departed the annex. Pale Moon had closed its doors for the day, and a quiet calm had settled over god's manor. As he left through the iron back gate, he turned back to look up at the annex, where the proprietress's bedroom lay.

"Do I not need a witness after all...?"

His grumbling received no answer. Frowning at his own uncertainty, the young man returned to his own bed, choosing to travel by the paths lit by the moonlight.

3. Love

In the cold stone chamber, there was a single woman.

This was god's chamber, and there was nobody else.

Sari looked down at her own nakedness—at the soft female body that had been crafted in the likeness of a human being and made for the purpose of touching a human hand. Wanting to feel warmth in her fingers, she had taken the form of a person, and invited her offering to her bed.

Suddenly, Sari raised her head.

No. That isn't right.

It had been her progenitor, the ancient god, who had created a human body in her desire to be tied to humanity. Not Sari herself. This was the body she'd been born with. The body given to her by her mother, who had cast off her divinity, and her human father.

This loneliness was a primordial thing that haunted her existence, not a thing of her own. What she felt was more a vague sense of unease.

Sari closed her eyes and raised a slender arm. She extended her fingers, so cold they were much like ice, out toward nothing.

There was a chill within her hand. What should she grasp, with her hand that could so easily kill a human?

No answer came to her.

At the edge of her senses, she could feel the innumerable footsteps of the women who had borne the same existence as her, imprinted into the stone chamber.



Altogether, there were sixty-two of the small enchanted bells. After bundling them into a peach-colored wrapping cloth, Sari left them on the shelf by the entryway, checking the clock there as she did so.

It was almost time to light the lantern. However, as she stepped down onto the clay floor of the doorway to begin getting ready, she saw a familiar young man beyond the manor's gate and smiled. She bowed, lit the lantern, then walked over, her stride flowing and graceful.

Vendt, who had been smiling happily at her approach, reached a hand out toward her, his blond hair swaying and refusing to meld with the twilight. His large palm brushed lightly against her left cheek.

"I came by again."

"We are sincerely grateful for your patronage."

"My question is the same as yesterday."

"My answer is the same as yesterday."

Hearing her immediate dismissal, Vendt pouted, his face resembling that of a petulant boy's. Sari's lips quirked—he really did wear his heart on his sleeve. It was endearing. When he saw that her expression had relaxed, Vendt smiled too.

Sari gestured toward the manor behind her. "If you don't mind, I shall escort you to the flower room. Perhaps there will be a courtesan who takes a liking to you. There will also be tea prepared for you."

"What about you?"

"I must remain out front and welcome the other guests."

"I can't stay with you?"

"No," Sari said unequivocally, still smiling. It wasn't to be unkind. It was simply that a large man loitering in a courtesan house's entryway was not exactly pleasant for the other customers.

Vendt's mouth twisted in dissatisfaction. He had likely had a good upbringing—though his expressions changed with the wind, there was a certain refinement at their core that remained constant.

Sari took a step back from him. "If you would like to come in, I shall show you the way."

“And if I wouldn’t?”

“Then I imagine your time would be going to waste.”

Vendt showed no sign of having heeded her warning. But just as Sari was about to resign herself to a drawn-out battle, she saw the person she’d been waiting for appear farther down the path. Immediately, she fought to keep her expression controlled.

Xixu looked like he’d noticed her at the same time. He caught her glance, recognizing it as belonging to her as the proprietress, and nodded. His pace slowed, so as to not interrupt her conversation with a customer.

Vendt brought his large hand up to Sari’s cheek again. “How do I get you to pick me, Sari? Is it a matter of time?”

“No.”

Perhaps everybody asked themselves the same question, at least once in their lives. What did it mean to choose somebody?

Sari thought back on her life, the ordinary and the extraordinary, all of it so different from anyone else’s. “I don’t know what love is,” she said.

It was a mystery to her that she had not solved. She felt as though the emotion within her was different from the stories she heard from all the other girls. There was a resemblance, yes, but also not. She closed her eyes, so as to not see Xixu.

“If a man were to turn his affection to me, devote his time to me, and give his heart—his life—to me... That still does not mean I would choose him.”

No matter how much love she was given, no matter how much time they spent alongside one another, it did not mean she would reciprocate with her love. Even if he gave her his life. For all of it would be but offerings given to her, irrelevant to the freedom of her own emotions. Once, a certain man had told her that she should be free.

“All that matters is that I am drawn to him. To his strength and his weakness. His sincerity and his obstinance. I do not want anything of his. I simply think that the sight of him standing there is beautiful. I wish to face him, for him to

feel my touch. And I wish to feel his. That...is all there is to it.”

Sari did not know if this shapeless emotion of hers was called love. She was simply happy when he took her hand. She wished to feel his warmth. She did not want him to burn in a way that would break him, but for him to remain unchanged and sincere. *That* was what Sari had chosen.

She opened her eyes and looked up at the man standing before her. Vendt looked unhappy. His gaze suggested he hadn’t understood.

“It sounds like you’re saying you’d only fall in love at first sight,” he said.

“Perhaps.”

“So you believe in fate?” There was a hint of sarcasm in the question.

Sari smiled, clear and unclouded. “Not in the slightest.”

It was a smile belonging to a god, arrogant and uncaring to hide it.

Vendt seemed to want to say more, but in the end, he turned away, saying only that he would come again. When he noticed Xixu standing a slight distance away, his eyes widened slightly. For a moment, it appeared as though he was going to say something to the young man dressed in the uniform of the militia, but his expression turned bitter and he left.

Xixu finally came over to Sari when he had gone out of sight. “I should have come before the lantern lighting,” he said. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Come in, the bells are ready.”

Studying Xixu’s expression, Sari saw that he was wearing his usual discomfort, but also that there was a hint of irritation mixed in. Perhaps it was because he’d seen her exchange with Vendt. But since she had been with a guest, he had remained silent, considerate of her position.

His adherence to his principles made Sari happy. She suddenly felt like throwing herself at Xixu’s left arm, like she had when she’d been a child. Instead, she controlled her stride to keep from skipping, walking with the young man through Pale Moon’s gate.

As they stepped across the paving stones leading to the entrance, Xixu

murmured, "Have you been getting more guests who want you, recently?"

"Yes. Definitely more than before."

"That man earlier..." Xixu cut himself off, hesitant. But when Sari pulled his sleeve, urging him to continue, he sighed. "I only saw him briefly...but he reminded me of him."

"Him'? Who?" Did she know anyone that resembled Vendt?

Xixu's eyebrows raised slightly. His eyes remained on Sari, seemingly surprised that she was even asking.

She stopped walking. Was that concern for her in his gaze? Then, it came to her. She stared at him, amazed.

"You don't mean Eid, do you?"

"I... I do."

"They're nothing alike."

If Eid and Vendt had anything in common, it would be their hair and height. She couldn't see anything else, though. As she cocked her head, Xixu's gaze seemed to be pressing her to tell the truth. The gap in their understanding made Sari frown instead.

"No, I mean it," she said. "How are they alike? The guest you saw earlier gives me the impression that he had a good upbringing, but he's the sheltered type. Like he doesn't know how the world works."

Eid had been the complete opposite. There was nothing tying them together.

Yet, Xixu didn't seem to think he was wrong. His reply was unhesitant. "There's an air to him that's similar. Especially to how Eid felt when he was still a shadestayer of Irede."

"An air? Similar to the old Eid?"

"Like how he's so direct about wanting you. It reminded me of him, a little."

Sari thought back. If she were to judge based on his words alone, then certainly, perhaps Vendt was similar to Eid. Especially in the way he'd asked her to her face why she wouldn't choose him.

However, even if the things he said were similar, even if he wore the same friendly smile, he was still *different*.

With Eid, when he had looked at her, he had also been looking at himself. And although he'd pushed everything away, as though disdainful of the world, he'd smiled as if he hadn't a scratch on him.

People were far more dissimilar to one another than they thought they were.

On an instinctual level, Sari was perhaps the one who knew this better than anyone else. She turned her wandering gaze back to Xixu.

"You're wrong, Xixu. He's not like Eid at all."

"I...see."

"Even if they were alike, they're different people. So they're *different*. No matter how much they might have in common, in my eyes, they cannot be the same."

Words, expressions—none of them meant anything if they did not belong to their own single, individual owner. Even if two people were so alike that they could be mistaken for twins, to Sari, they were distinct.

So there was nothing to consider here. Currently, "he" was likely already asleep in the womb of the mother he had chosen.

Remorse flashed in Xixu's direct gaze. "I'm sorry. I was mistaken."

"It's fine. I pushed you to say it. The apology is mine."

They resumed walking at the same time. The paving stones were almost at an end. The lit lantern, suspended in the twilight, looked like a flower that bloomed at night. A single flower that beckoned people to sleep. Lanterns just like it hung from storefronts all across Irede.

Sari observed it, smiling. She pressed her hands to her temples, reining in her thoughts, which had at some point begun to drift. It was because she lived among humanity, she told herself.

Beside her, she heard Xixu exhale. "Saridi."

"Yes?"

“May I touch you?”

“As much as you like.”

That was his natural right. Sari looked up at the young man next to her.

Yet, it seemed that her immediate reply had carried Xixu’s thoughts in a different direction. When Sari saw him frowning, trying to determine how to correct himself, she reached her own hands out. Stepping in front of him, she brought him into an embrace, burying her face into his chest and pulling him in tighter.

This warmth was what she had chosen.

To have him was her wish. Yet she was also considering leaving his side to prevent his death. Though it was her place to receive him as an offering, she prayed only for his safety, even if it meant letting him go.

Perhaps this emotion was her version of love, so different from a human’s.

Xixu remained silent for a while, seemingly unsure of what to do as Sari embraced him. Finally, he stroked her hair, his touch reserved. Gently, his hands circled around her, resting on her back.

As they held each other, the warmth they shared made her want to tell him everything. Instead, she put more strength into her embrace.

Xixu’s voice was right beside her. “Saridi.”

“Mmm.”

“Will you marry me?”

A beat. “I honestly didn’t see that coming.”

“Sorry.”

There was a commotion deep in her chest. A heat that should have been unknown shuddered, as though its identity had been revealed.

Why was he like this? Why did he always say the most unexpected things at the most unexpected moments?

Sari realized that her fingers were trembling. Carefully, ever so carefully, she relaxed her arms and looked up.

Xixu's expression was incredibly sincere. His eyes refused to stray from her. She found herself unable to speak in the face of his unswerving gaze and hurriedly tightened her embrace again.

She had known that he cared deeply for her. Yet it had never even occurred to her that he'd propose. Sari had thought he'd stay silent forever until she herself moved. After all, when she'd been a child, he'd told her to spend as much time as she wished thinking over it. She had thought he'd hold to that, ever patient and unbending. Yet he must have been afraid too, over whether he might have to leave her and return to the capital after enough years had passed. He lived a life of honesty; it would not be strange if he had to go far away, one day.

She had thought that she'd made her peace with that. She had thought that she hadn't made her peace with it either.

As Sari's thoughts spun in circles, Xixu stepped in closer.

Her face was hot. Her body didn't feel like her own. She felt like she'd lose her shape and melt. With no idea what kind of expression she should make, Sari simply put all her strength into her arms.

Even then, Xixu was undaunted. He stroked her hair for a while, but then pulled his hand away, seemingly having noticed something. He pointed into the manor's entryway.

"Saridi, are those the bells you were talking about?"

After a few moments, she said, "Huh? O-Oh." She released her arms and looked to where he was indicating. "Yes, but... What?"

The bells, which should have been safely tucked into the wrapping cloth and on the shelf, had spilled across the floor, some even falling down the step onto the recessed entryway. They gleamed dully, catching the red light from the hanging lantern. The sight seemed almost bizarre, and Sari dashed over.

There was nobody in the entryway; the maidservant must have gone to open the flower room. The wrapping cloth that should have held the bells had come undone and was half dangling from the shelf.

Sari picked up a bell. "But how did...? I could've sworn I wrapped them

properly.”

“Maybe you left it on the edge?”

“No. But even if I did, a simple fall shouldn’t have caused it to come fully undone...”

The bells which had rolled the furthest had reached the edge of the entryway floor. Although they were round, they shouldn’t have scattered *that* far. They would have had to bounce quite energetically to do that.

Sari tried to recall if she’d heard the bells or not while she’d been by the gate, but it was a fair distance from the entryway, so she discarded the thought. She scanned their surroundings, wary.

“Someone like those assassins might have been nearby,” she said.

“From yesterday?” Xixu’s entire demeanor changed. He placed a hand on the military sword at his waist and stared intensely down the hallway.

Sari bent down and began gathering the bells. She nodded. “These bells should react whenever some of my blood is nearby, myself being the exception. I made it so that they’d shake violently and make noise. The fact they’re all scattered about like this probably means they all reacted and spilled out...”

“I’ll check inside. May I enter?”

“Okay. Please.”

Xixu nodded at Sari’s immediate reply, but it was he who hesitated before the entryway. No doubt he couldn’t decide whether to keep his shoes on or not. She opened the shoe cabinet and placed a pair in front of him.

“Here, wear these.”

“Since when did you have...?”

“Once I realized that you were always running in with your shoes on, I got these ready.”

To Sari, it didn’t actually matter if he went in with shoes on or spilled blood everywhere—she could just clean it up afterward. But she knew that he was the type to let it weigh on his mind even if she said it was fine, so she had prepared

a pair of indoor shoes in advance for times such as these.

As Xixu changed into the shoes and tightened the laces, he murmured, "This feels...strange."

"Is the size wrong?"

"No, it's perfect."

His time at the military academy must have familiarized him with preparing himself quickly. In the blink of an eye, his long laces were tied and he was striding down the hallway to the flower room. Sari followed after him, taking small, quick steps.

Yet, no matter where they went within Pale Moon's grounds, there was no sign of any of the assassins they had encountered yesterday.

In the end, their search had reached an unsatisfying conclusion, but with a courtesan house still to run, Sari couldn't get too caught up on it.

She returned to the entrance and accepted the bells from the maidservant who had gathered them. She'd asked all the maidservants if they'd noticed anything suspicious, but nobody had. Still, Sari had a bad feeling that she couldn't place her finger on, and it made her frown as she saw Xixu to the front gate.

"I wonder what happened..."

"Will you put a boundary up around the manor?"

"Mmm, no, that wouldn't work. It's *my* blood. But I should have noticed it if it was nearby, just like yesterday. Why didn't I?"

The previous evening, she'd had a feeling that something was off which grew as she'd gotten closer to the source. Yet today, nothing was pulling at her at all. Sari went over the enchantment she'd applied to the bells.

Xixu, who'd been walking a pace in front of her, stopped, causing her to stop too. They'd already come back outside the gate, Sari realized. Darkness had come, and only a scattered string of indistinct lights revealed the path ahead.

Sari handed Xixu the wrapped bundle and turned to gaze in the direction of

the town's center. "Are you going to go patrol now?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll place the bells while I search for our targets. There are at least three of them still out there."

"Be careful. If anything happens, put in a call for my help."

"I will."

Though their parting words were no different from their usual fare, their eyes suddenly met in a way neither knew how to answer. A question hung in the air: should they continue from earlier, or leave the matter be? It seemed equally as appealing to ignore it than to drop all pretense and speak freely.

However, Sari quickly came to a conclusion. It was her who had been proposed to, so it was on her to broach the subject. She summoned up something resembling courage to bolster her. She reached out, grasping Xixu's sleeve, and her voice came out imploring.

"I-I want you to make me a promise first."

"A promise?" Xixu repeated.

Sari nodded. If she was going to make that leap, she wanted to rid herself of the unease gnawing away at her. Even if that vow was a stopgap thing that only offered temporary relief, she wanted it. She set her gaze on Xixu, pleading.

"You can't die. You *can't*."

A brief moment of silence. Then, "Humans have finite lifespans..."

"That's not what I mean!"

She wasn't unreasonable enough to demand him to extend his lifespan. In the first place, her own would be no longer or shorter than any ordinary human's, barring extenuating circumstances. Instead, she would ensure the continuation of her existence by giving birth to the maiden of the next generation.

So if he was saying that he would spend his life beside hers, she wanted him to protect himself first, before anything else.

Sari put more strength into her fingers, gripping his cuff tighter. "You can't die for my sake," she said. "That's all you have to promise, so..."

The maiden with the ability of foresight had said that Xixu would die protecting a woman. Sari didn't care who it was, as long as it wasn't her. So long as she wasn't the cause of his death, she could stay by him and protect him. No matter the foe, she would sweep them aside.

If she could believe in that, then she was willing to surrender all of herself to him, in this very moment.

As Sari waited for his answer to her entreaty, Xixu spent several seconds deep in thought, his expression revealing the weight of his contemplation. Then, he opened his mouth. His voice was clear, deep, and pleasant to listen to.

"I can't make that promise. I don't know if I can keep it."

Sari was silent.

The night was still. They were too far to hear the sounds of music. Here, if nobody spoke, all that remained was a heavy, pressing weight in the air.

Sari looked at her fingers. They were shaking, just like earlier, but not for the same reason.

Part of her had expected this. But had that part been the god, or the human? Whatever the case, she was mad. She'd known this would happen, but that had not weakened the severity of the blow. It was just too much.

Sari let go of Xixu's sleeve, dropping her arm and curling her fingers into a fist. Her gaze dropped to the ground.

Xixu peered at her, looking concerned. "Saridi?"

"You...*idiot*." Her voice seemed to crawl across the ground.

Xixu winced slightly. "Wait. If you'll let me explain myself; protecting you is the reason I'm he—"

"Shut up! Idiot!"

"Saridi."

"I *love* that part of you...but you're still an idiot! Ugh, whatever, I've had enough! See if I care!"



If they'd been anywhere other than in front of Pale Moon's gate, her impassioned shouting would have attracted attention.

However, there were no other establishments around the house in the north. Sari smacked Xixu's outstretched hand away with a fist and ran inside the gate. When she'd returned to the manor's entrance, she brought her fingers to her eyes, wiping away the tears.

The maidservant in the entryway jumped slightly in surprise. "M-Miss Proprietress. Is something the matter?"

"No. I'll be in the flower room today. If Xixu comes by, *don't* let him in."

"H-Huh?" The maidservant sounded confused. "Um, oka—"

Sari didn't wait for her to finish. Gritting her teeth, she went inside.

She knew she was being petty. But in this moment, she couldn't control the emotions she was feeling. It felt like they were going to burn her up from the inside.

Xixu had invoked Sari's ire many times before, but even he realized that this time was different. After he'd broken free of his dumbfounded stupor, he'd followed after her to the entryway, only to be astonished when the maidservant refused him entry. He glanced at the cloth-wrapped bundle under his arm.

"Should I...take that as a no?"

"Take what as a no? Did you come to request the maiden's assistance? Actually, what are you doing just standing there? You're in the way."

Xixu had recognized that someone was approaching by the sound of footsteps on the paving stones, but he turned upon hearing his friend's voice and saw Thoma passing by the hanging lantern.

"I asked Saridi to marry me," he replied, thoughts still in a jumble.

"Oh? And you didn't even drag a witness along! Now that's progress! I'm proud of you!" Thoma smacked Xixu on both shoulders several times, looking relieved.

Earlier in the day, Xixu had actually gone to ask his advice. But when he'd asked if it was better to ask one of his own acquaintances or a person of Irede to be a witness for his marriage proposal, the look Thoma had given him had been one of utter disbelief.

"What? What the hell are you talking about? A witness? Why would you need one of those?"

Xixu had thought that, since Sari was the town's god, princess, and a noblewoman in the capital, he would need to arrange a witness for his marriage proposal, inform her of the date and time of his arrival in advance, and hold a small seated discussion regarding the matter, but evidently that was not how it was done in Irede. Thoma's answer—*"Just ask her!"*—had seemed unreliable, so Xixu had planned to go around town asking people how Irede handled such things.

In spite of that, perhaps because he'd been unable to control his impatience and jealousy, he'd impulsively proposed on the spot.

Among the men in Sari's life, Xixu was confident that—with the exception of her brother—he knew the most about her. He understood her character and her true nature well. He had both the resolve and fortitude to spend his life at her side.

Yet the guests who called on Pale Moon gave no thought to such things. They fell in love with her through casual, genuine curiosity. Without knowing anything, they wished for her to be theirs.

Xixu knew that the tinge of frustration he felt at that was a product of his own selfish ego. He *knew*, yet bearing witness to one such instance with his own eyes had been enough for him to succumb to his impatience.

He, too, wished to be one of the choices she could select from.

That was the thought that had driven him to propose to her without any prior preparation. He felt as though his suspicions had been confirmed—such an emotional proposal was nothing but impolite and careless. Xixu held back a heavy sigh.

Thoma was grinning like a cat that had gotten the cream. "So, what'd she

say?”

“She said, ‘see if I care.’”

“You... What did you *do*...?” The sheer disappointment in Thoma’s question seemed to have been dredged up from the bottom of his heart.

Shouldn’t I be the most dejected one here? Xixu thought. Then again, he had been half prepared for Sari to turn him down, so he was able to make the conscious effort to remain calm.

“I knew not having a witness was a bad—” he began.

“I *guarantee* you that wasn’t the problem,” Thoma interrupted.

Xixu thought his friend had been a little too quick to refute him, but it was true that Sari was quite tolerant. She wouldn’t have forbidden him from entering the manor just because he’d been a little impolite. The problem must have been something more fundamental than that.

He hadn’t wanted to say he’d “purchase” her like the other guests had, and neither had he wanted to push to be her sacred offering. That had left him with the option of making a marriage proposal, but perhaps for her, who was still waiting to receive her single guest, it wasn’t about marriage. It was possible she’d thought he’d gotten the wrong idea. The more Xixu thought about it, the more cause he found to regret his actions.

Thoma had been observing Xixu with a dumbfounded expression on his face, but he pulled himself together and slapped him on the shoulder. “Well, I guess in a way, this is just business as usual,” he said. “You know how stubborn she can be. Don’t let it get you down—just keep at it.”

The proprietress’s brother stepped past Xixu and disappeared inside the manor, welcomed by the maidservant. The young man who’d been barred from entering saw him off, ruminating on his words.

“‘Business as usual.’ Is it really...?”

This certainly wouldn’t make for the first time Sari had fallen into an ill temper while he had no idea what he’d done wrong. He supposed his only choice was to wait until she’d calmed down to come back and apologize.

Xixu exhaled a sigh, then departed Pale Moon for his patrol, his feet heavy.

In a corner of the manor's entryway, now empty of people, a single small bell that had been overlooked shone the color of dull silver.

4. Verdict

“Stir conflict in this town and drive her into a corner,” the woman whispered. “That is all you must do.”

The naked provocation in her voice drew the man’s gaze. He examined her searchingly.

The only movement in the guesthouse’s room was the flickering fire of the lantern, set upon the tatami-mat floor. Then, the woman, adorned with beautifully arranged silver hair and a deep crimson kimono, brought her hand up to touch the man’s arm. He watched her steadily, with a great deal of annoyance and just a touch of interest.

“What do you mean by ‘drive her into a corner’?” he asked. “After all the effort that went into making those soldiers, I lost half of them in one night.”

The soldiers had been given cold blood, providing them with strength beyond any ordinary human’s. He’d sent them to assassinate a nuisance of a man, but the majority of their number had apparently fallen in battle to the town’s shadeslayers. It was aggravating, given the limited amount of blood in his possession. Even the reports that the soldiers he’d sent to other towns were successful did not appease him. He’d made a mistake in his command; he was sure of it.

Yet, as he’d stewed in his irritation, the woman had surprised him with her presence.

“Continue with your current methods,” she whispered to him. “What concern of yours is it if your soldiers die? Have them kill in this town and be killed. It is enough that you create chaos. Eventually, she will make her appearance.”

“She...”

If he could find the bearer of cold blood, it would make up for his lost soldiers and more. If he pulled out now, on the other hand, all he would have achieved was loss. His original objectives had been this continent’s major powers; this

small town of myth had been no more than a curiosity to play with in his spare time. A number of powerful figures from other nations had fled here under assumed identities, so he had come on a lighthearted leisure trip to hunt them while enjoying the sights of a foreign pleasure town. That was all there was to it.

But if he could acquire the inhuman woman, then all the better.

The man chuckled and grasped the woman by her chin. Where had she learned of him, and how? She had simply come to his room with no prior warning.

“And who are you to tell me such things?” he asked. “How do I know you aren’t the bearer of cold blood yourself?”

“Me?”

The woman showed him a thin, polished fingernail, then drew it across her own palm. The blood that oozed forth was red. She held it out for him to touch, which he did, despite his visible distaste, finding that it was of a normal temperature.

The woman curled her fingers, holding the wound, and laughed bewitchingly. “I am one who resides upon this land. Nothing more than a mere human.” She smiled and her silver eyelashes fluttered. “That is why I have fallen so madly for the moon, in all its noble majesty.”

Her eyes, which caught the light of the lantern’s fire, glittered the same color as her kimono.



Xixu had placed Sari’s enchanted bells all around town, choosing places that would ensure they would avoid notice, and wouldn’t roll away.

However, even after several days had passed, he was unable to catch even a hint of the assassins’ trail. He ran to where he heard reports of people hearing the sound of bells, but never found anybody. As for the militia, they had been doing a thorough search of the town’s vacant houses, turning up traces of occupancy and fresh bloodstains, but not the culprits themselves.

That day, while he was on patrol, Xixu's path crossed with that of his fellow shadeslayer Tagi, who called out to him. It was dusk, nearing the time of lantern lighting, and the pair strode down a main street while paying careful attention to their surroundings. Xixu tried to keep an ear pricked for the bells, but recognized that the effort was likely futile—it would be nigh impossible to hear them over the tumult of the crowd and sounds of music.

Tagi, who didn't so much wear his midnight-blue kimono as allow it to be messily draped on him, released a great yawn. "It's nice that we haven't had any shades recently," he said. "Though, the trade-off seems to be a new visitor dying every now and then. But that's what those fat cats get for sending the common soldiery to the battlefield, then coming here to play. Pathetic."

Xixu refrained from replying.

Tagi's scorn was harsh, but the issue he was talking about had become a relative headache for Irede. Spies and assassins infiltrating the town during wartime was merely business as usual, but it was resulting in a few too many corpses this time around. The number of assassinated influential figures itself was low, but their guards were being slaughtered on a constant basis.

It was one thing if they were attacked in a back alley, and entirely another when it happened inside a courtesan house. It was proving a significant nuisance.

Tagi, who usually holed up in whichever courtesan house had caught his eye and never came out, swept his gaze across the river of people walking to and fro like a bird of prey. "Still, cutting through a person has a more satisfying feel to it than slaying a shade," he said. "All the more if they don't spend all their time hiding in the shadows."

"If our enemies came at us in broad daylight, facing them would be no different than stepping onto a battlefield."

"Now doesn't that sound fun?"

Xixu considered Tagi as the other man laughed irreverently. He could never tell what the shadeslayer was thinking. He'd seen him speak to Sari with cynicism and sarcasm a number of times, but she never seemed to mind. Perhaps it was because, to her, it was only natural that Irede's shadeslayers had

their individual peculiarities.

Xixu, who had decided to accompany Tagi for no particular reason, frowned. He was worried.

The moon was waxing, that was for certain. But it was still too early for shades to stop manifesting. In point of fact, they should have been present and stronger than usual, given the amount of bloodshed and deaths the town had seen recently. That they weren't seemed to suggest that, just like last time, some manner of power was keeping them suppressed.

Xixu's gaze wandered over the crowds, searching for a man he'd once known who had been painted over by a god. But his eyes settled on someone else.

"That man..."

He'd only seen him once before, but he was certain. It was the man who'd wished to purchase Sari at Pale Moon.

Vendt, dressed fashionably in clothing of a western cut, walked casually through the crowd, his gaze running along the latticed windows of the courtesan houses he passed. Xixu watched the style of his gait and the way he moved his body around others, unconsciously gauging the man's ability. Vendt seemed like someone who knew how to fight, but Xixu estimated he would be the victor of the two.

He came to his senses when Tagi laughed scornfully beside him, as though he'd read Xixu's mind. "Dislike him, do you?" he asked.

"No, I..."

"The young miss's rejection must've been pretty harsh."

Xixu had no response. How had Tagi learned about that? Yet, as he brooded over his own actions from the other day, he realized that Tagi was talking about Vendt. The other shadeslayer laughed as he followed the man through the crowd from three buildings' worth of distance away.

"He has a preference for silver hair," Tagi noted. "His eyes are passing right over the other courtesans."

Xixu didn't reply. He'd experienced a sudden wave of irritation. He forced it

down, though. He wanted to say something—to spit it out—but it wouldn't take form. Perhaps it was better if he left it formless. Better for the general peace.

Tagi, however, seemed to have no such reservations. "Oh, the young miss has silver hair too. Maybe he's searching for someone similar."

"Nobody is like Saridi."

"Maybe that's true, for you. Ah, but I suppose I was mistaken. I understand he purchased a number of silver-haired courtesans *before* he visited Pale Moon."

"What?" That was news to Xixu, but Tagi was a regular in the courtesan houses. It didn't seem like a lie, and there'd be no point to it if it was one. Xixu felt his irritation grow thicker, coagulating. His next words came out in a mutter that did nothing to hide his revulsion. "So you're saying he wanted to compare her to the other courtesans?"

Tagi smiled cynically. "Now, now. You can't force your values on the guests."

"Saridi can only take a single guest."

"That doesn't mean her guest must also restrict himself to one woman. If she finds that disagreeable, all she needs to do is not pick such men."

Xixu held his silence; Tagi was right. It was not his place to judge others. The matter was between Sari and whoever she chose, and them alone.

Yet, the man who would purchase her company was no mere guest. He would be a sacred offering, consecrated to the mistress of this town. And since that was the case, then just like the other two offerings, should he not exist wholeheartedly for the god, even if it was only for while he remained in Irede?

Xixu frowned as he watched the man beyond the crowd. Red lantern light illuminated his side profile, revealing a mild expression that nonetheless seemed...listless, somehow.

The grim look in Xixu's eyes drew Tagi's attention. "Irede's been a terrible influence on you, hasn't it?" he said teasingly. "You're not even of one of the three sacred houses. The young miss is just a courtesan, you know."

Several moments passed before Xixu responded. "I know."

Saridi herself enforced that truth most of all, devoting herself to the role. It

was the people around her—perhaps even Xixu too—who treated her otherwise. He wondered if his out-of-place marriage proposal had been influenced by what Vas had said to him, all that time ago. He would likely be lying if he said it hadn't.

Yet Xixu was almost certain that, out of everyone in Irede, it was he who wished to respect her will the most. He could not allow himself to intrude upon her domain simply because of how he personally felt about her.

As he reasoned with himself, Tagi said, matter-of-factly, "If you want to interfere that badly, just purchase the young miss yourself already. That'd solve everything, no?"

"She already turned me down."

"Seriously?" Tagi's eyes widened—it was rare that anything caught him by surprise. He studied Xixu's face. "What? Wait, genuinely? How did that happen?"

"I proposed to her and made her mad. She banned me from entering Pale Moon." The idea of revealing what had happened didn't appeal to Xixu, but he knew trying to cover it up would only result in trouble down the line.

For a moment, there was no response from the other shadeslayer, only a bitter taste in his mouth. Then, uproarious, unreserved laughter from beside him. Xixu redoubled his efforts to maintain his calm, even as the man convulsing with mirth beside him turned the heads of passersby.

Xixu ignored the strangers' stares. Then, something occurred to him. "I'm banned from entering, but I don't think that applies to work calls," he corrected. "Nothing has happened that has required me to ask for her assistance yet, however."

"That's just common sense," Tagi replied. "Still, I see the young miss is being as foolish as ever. At the end of the day, she's just a stubborn little kid who never learns."

"It's not Saridi's fault."

"Then you two can keep this up forever, for all I care."

They lapsed into silence. Tagi absentmindedly skimmed his gaze across the lines of lanterns hanging from the storefront eaves. The atmosphere of Irede was a unique thing, belonging to no country more than another, possessing no national identity. The quiet sound of his voice mixed in among it.

“Though, I imagine you being the way you are is why the young miss could never replace you.”

Xixu wasn't sure how to interpret that. If Tagi had meant it in the sense that she saw him as an amusing individual from the royal capital, then he wouldn't be wrong, but Xixu doubted that was the case.

Ultimately, he wouldn't know what he'd done wrong unless he asked Sari herself. He'd have to create an opportunity to see her that she wouldn't find a nuisance.

Vendt, still up ahead, didn't appear to have noticed the conversation happening between the pair behind him. He simply took in his surroundings with a smile on his face, as though he were a pleasure district regular. Xixu, noticing that the man was looking up at the courtesan house to his right, followed his line of sight. Perhaps the man was observing a courtesan?

However, no one was there. But just as Xixu realized this, the building erupted with a woman's scream and several angry bellows.

As passersby froze, their shock evident on their expressions, Tagi immediately broke into a run. He rushed into the courtesan house, sword in hand. Xixu, whose start had been slightly slower, looked back at the people on the street as he followed after Tagi.

Vendt was nowhere to be seen among the gathering crowd. Unable to dedicate any more time to looking for him, Xixu crossed the building's threshold and went inside.

The disturbance appeared to have occurred on the second floor. Leaving his shoes on, Xixu bounded up the glossy staircase. Beyond a short hallway lay a sliding screen that had been thrown open, the sound of swords colliding coming from the room beyond. It had to be Tagi, locked in combat.

Then, Xixu noticed a soft ringing noise mixed in among the constant sound of

clashing steel. The clean sound was muffled, as though a curtain had been thrown over it, but for some reason it reached his ears without being hindered. He recognized it for what it was immediately.

“A bell!”

Even as the words left his mouth, he was drawing his sword and stepping into the spacious tatami room.

The first thing he saw was a blood splatter that reached the ceiling. The corpses of two men—bodyguards, by their appearance—lay crumpled on the floor. A middle-aged man cowered in the corner of the room, using a courtesan as a shield.

Tagi stood with his back to them, smiling at three uninvited guests. “To treat this town like your playground... I’m almost impressed by your nerve.” His voice was low and threatening, but his opponents did not flinch.

There were three assassins, each with a different type of bladed weapon. One was an emaciated man with a poor complexion. Another was a boy in a kimono. And the third was a young woman of small stature.

They were not clad in black, but common pedestrian attire. Yet their expressions were placid, masklike, without a hint of emotion peeking through.

That was when Xixu noticed what the woman, who wielded a *wakizashi*—a kind of shortsword—was holding in her left hand: one of Sari’s enchanted bells. It gleamed a dull silver, and was unmistakable. Even now it seemed to want to leap free from the bloody grip of the woman’s fingers.

She opened her mouth. “Is the bearer of cold blood among you?”

“What?” Tagi asked.

The other shadeslayer was clearly confused, but Xixu understood the meaning of the question immediately. As he advanced forward, blade in hand, he realized that his thoughts had cooled in an instant. “You asking that question means I have several of my own to ask you.”

Their appearances differed from the assassins from the other day, but these three were likely their kin. He had to capture them and force them to reveal

who the mastermind was.

Xixu adopted a sword stance, and the woman readied her own blade in a one-handed grip. Her narrowed black eyes seemed to hold more will—or something close to it—in them than the black-clad assassins.

If his opponents had been ordinary assassins, Xixu would have considered himself to have a fair chance at winning a one-on-three fight, but the bell's reaction told him that these people were less than fully human.

Keeping his guard up, Xixu advanced, sliding his foot half a step forward. Tagi lined up beside him, his stance casual.

“Who are these people? Acquaintances of yours?”

“They're the same as the black-clad assassins from the other day.”

“Ah. Them.”

Tagi's question had been disinterested, as though he'd been asking about the brand of a tea. But Xixu sensed the grim shift in the man's air. Tagi had crossed swords with the black-clad assassins too, so he knew they were no ordinary foes. He brought the well-honed tip of his blade up, directing it at the three assassins.

The woman, who was dressed in western wear, cocked her head slightly. “Black-clad? Ah, you must mean a different cell.”

“A different...” Despite himself, Xixu found that his voice had risen. “There's more of you?!”

Sari had been worried over how many people had been given her blood. And from the woman's words, it seemed that number was at *least* ten. Xixu glared at the bell; it was still quivering, still making noise.

The woman crushed it between her slender fingers and tossed it away, then pulled the *wakizashi* in her right hand closer to her body. “It seems like you might have an idea of who we're searching for,” she said. “We'll have to interrogate you after we've cut you to pieces.”

“What a coincidence,” Xixu replied. “You took the words right out of my mouth.”

The air was sharpened to the point of silence. As he honed his focus, in a corner of his mind, Xixu thought about how the tatami mats, stained as they were with blood and dirt, would all have to be changed after this.

In a room thick with the scent of blood, two shadeslayers steeled themselves in their own ways for the fight ahead. Amidst everything, the crushed bell rolled across the tatami mats, coming to a quiet stop in a spot illuminated by moonlight.



“Got you.”

Upon hearing her whispered words, a nearby maidservant looked up. Nobody else was present near the entryway, so perhaps she thought she was hearing things. She turned to Sari, who was standing by the door.

“Miss Proprietress? Did you say something?”

Sari’s reply was reflexive; her attention was occupied. “Yes, just...” She raised her right hand.

There was no time to shift locations. She needed to restrain their movements before they escaped. Thus, with her fingers, she reeled in the thread that only she could see. Her rouge-painted lips gently parted, uttering an ancient spell.

“Bind.”

Power, finely woven, ran along the threads that connected to the bells scattered across town, faster than the wind.

The god, who stood as the source of all these threads, exhaled a small, frozen breath. Then, with her right hand, in a gesture that resembled a dance, she *pulled*.



Just as he’d suspected, the three assassins had an abnormal degree of physical ability. As Xixu parried the terrifyingly swift thrusts of the *wakizashi*, an ill premonition caused him to look up at the ceiling, where he saw the kimono-clad boy crouching upside down. Immediately, Xixu leaped backward.

At almost the same instant, a sword thrust from above slammed into the

tatami, grazing his forelocks as it went. The boy landed on its hilt, balancing one-legged, before springing at Xixu so swiftly that it seemed he was weightless.

He was empty-handed. Then, Xixu saw the dark green stains on his fingers and clicked his tongue. “Poison!”

The assassin’s hands, which must have been prepared by constantly soaking them in venom, would be lethal upon contact. Xixu’s first thought was to back away further, but the courtesan and cowering guest were right behind him. Making a snap decision, he swung his blade at the approaching boy.

His cut flashed out, aimed at the boy’s outstretched arms, but he contorted in midair and avoided it. The inhuman movement sent a shudder through Xixu as he tried to bend back—and then a foot thumped into the boy’s stomach and launched him backward.

Tagi, who had been fighting the emaciated man to the side, pulled his leg back and gave a scornful laugh. Yet, in that same moment, the *wakizashi*-wielding woman was circling in from the left.

There was no time for hesitation. Before he was cornered, Xixu turned to face her and advanced, evading the *wakizashi* that had come thrusting toward his blind spot by a hair’s margin. He ignored the sensation of it grazing across his sleeve and swung his military sword along the shortest possible trajectory to his target.

The tip of his blade met the right hand of the boy—who had sprung at him once again—severing two green-dyed fingers and sending them tumbling across the tatami. Yet, as though he felt no pain, all the boy did was stoop low and attempt to sweep Xixu’s feet out from under him.

Xixu jumped on reflex, and then there was a *wakizashi* coming at his throat. Recognizing that he wouldn’t be able to avoid it unscathed, he prepared to place his left hand in the way as a sacrifice—and then the three assassins froze.

A sound echoed in his ears, like a thread being pulled taut.

For a moment, it was as if time itself had stopped. But then, it resumed, bringing with it change.

Dark blood began to burst forth from the wounds of the boy's severed fingers. Everyone hesitated, caught off guard. Among them, only Xixu saw through to the meaning of the bizarre phenomenon.

Evidently, Sari had managed to intervene somehow. She had to be forcing her blood out of his body, just as she had done with the black-clad assassins the other day.

As the boy began to regain his bearings, Xixu brought his sword down in a cut too fast to be evaded, severing halfway through his neck. Deep crimson blood, yet untouched by poison, sprayed outward, reaching as high as the ceiling.

In the meantime, Tagi had cut down the emaciated man from the front. The amount of blood that gushed forth was abnormal. He hopped back, examining it distastefully.

"What's with these people? Have they been drinking other people's blood and stocking it up?"

"I think it's the maiden's work," Xixu said. "I'd like to capture the last one alive, but..."

As matters stood, even a slight graze would cause her to hemorrhage to death. And with her physical superiority, Xixu doubted he could coerce her into surrendering at blade-point. He began to consider the idea of fighting her barehanded.

In contrast, Tagi readopted a sword stance, aiming his blade at the woman. "Then all it'll take is a small scratch to end this," he said. "It'll probably soak into the floorboards, though. Shame."

"Wait. We can't question her if we kill her."

"I know, but do you have any better ideas?"

Although Tagi seemed the type to not care about the fine details, he was evidently willing to hear Xixu out. Hesitation showed in the woman's eyes as she tracked the tip of his blade. She was likely weighing up her chances of escaping. As he watched her, Xixu considered the problem further. He was quick to reach a verdict.

“Fine. We’ll kill her.”

“*That’s* your conclusion?”

Tagi’s retort was exasperated, but Xixu had not simply given up. He adjusted his grip on his military sword.

“These special assassins have a fixed number,” he explained. “Even if that number is large, it is limited. Acquiring information would be the most optimal outcome, yes, but simply eliminating them one by one until they’re wiped out will suffice. It’s a more reliable option than simply standing here and giving her the chance to get away.”

“Huh. I figured you’d be the type to prattle on about refusing to kill a woman.”

“Not at all.”

Xixu strove to avoid killing women and children whenever possible, but matters were often not so black-and-white. His opponent was a foreign assassin who had ingested Sari’s blood and was searching for her. That made her a clear enemy. He could not let her escape and become a seed of worry in the back of his mind.

But as he closed in on her, Tagi called out casually, stopping him.

“Hold on.”

“What is it? Will it be a problem, if we kill her?”

“No, but if we’re going to do it anyway, we might as well make her talk.”

“That *would* be the best option...if we can even manage it.”

What person would reveal their secrets if they knew they were going to die anyway?

Ignoring Xixu’s skeptical expression, Tagi took a step forward. He smiled, wearing the look of one who knew he held the power, looking down on others as if it came to him naturally.

“You heard that just now, didn’t you?” he said. “We’ll let you choose. You may either die with pain, or without. If you’re dying anyway, what concern is it

of yours, what comes after? You've been used and tossed away, and your death will be meaningless. So which do you prefer? A painless, instantaneous death? Or will you writhe around in agony, expelling your insides from your mouth?"

Tagi pointed his sword at the woman. His blade had no edge pattern. His smile lacked any sadism or cruelty, and that only served to reinforce the truth inherent in his words.

Xixu realized that he was slightly surprised. Instead of chiming in, he slid his feet across the tatami, circling around to the woman's side to cut off her retreat.

The woman's expression had been serious, giving off an air of tension, but when the two men directed their blades at her, the corners of her mouth lifted in a smile. She pulled her *wakizashi* up and to the side of her face, settling into a stance.

"Talking as though you've already won, just because you have me outnumbered? You certainly are confident."

"You're one to talk, woman."

Tagi's feet tread on the blood-soaked tatami mats. The blood seeped out under the press of the man's weight, dark red, the color of human karma. Xixu, too, advanced on and over it, maintaining his silence.

Tagi laughed and voiced what they were both thinking. "You seem to have a lot of faith in your ability to maneuver in such unexpected ways. But to us, you're just prey. Irede's shadeslayers have fought those like you since time immemorial."

In this town where shades had physical bodies, a shadeslayer's opponents all possessed inhuman strength. Though the assassins might have exploited Sari's blood to gain superior abilities, it was not worthy of surprise. The shadeslayers simply had to fight as they always did.

Perhaps the woman sensed that from the two men's bearings, because her expression tightened.

Faced with an inevitable end, which path would she choose? Death was a force that brooked no hesitation. It came for her in the form of a duo of men,

advancing, unrelenting.



The enchantment on the bells worked so that if one was crushed, Sari would be able to trace its location. But after entrusting the day's affairs to a maidservant and rushing to a courtesan house that faced a main street, she came across a minor commotion.

Sari observed the scene, frowning. The house's hanging lantern had been taken down, and two hired bodyguards were herding people away.

"I wonder what happened..."

She wanted to go inside and take a look for herself, but the thought that whatever awaited her might be worse than she could imagine occurred to her. Just as she was wondering what to say that would gain her access, she spotted a certain man come out and suddenly wanted to run away.

Tagi, who was drenched from head to toe in water, clicked his tongue upon seeing her. "You'd better be compensating them for the tatami, walls, and ceiling, Young Miss. Thanks to your strange spell, the entire room's a write-off."

Sari blinked. "The tatami aside, I wasn't expecting you to mention the roof... What kind of cutting technique did you *use*?"

"Ask your man, not me. He'll tell you about the information we got out of her as well."

"Information?"

Sari's head cocked slightly, but Tagi, who reeked of blood despite being soaked in water, ignored her and vanished down the street.

The young man who came out of the building after him stepped up behind her. Upon turning, Sari realized that Xixu was drenched too.

"What happened to you?"

"Too much of the blood sprayed back and onto me. I washed most of it off with water, but as you can see..."

Sari considered that for a moment. "You'll catch a cold. At least change."

She peered past him into the courtesan house. Several militia members were running in and out in a hurry; it seemed unlikely that the house was in any circumstances to lend Xixu a change of clothes. After another glance up at the drenched young man, she set aside her confusion and grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Let’s go. We’ll stand out here.”

If they remained here in front of the courtesan house, they’d only draw attention that could lead to an impact on the house’s reputation.

Stepping off the main street and into the back alleyways, the pair began walking down a small path lit by moonlight. At first, Sari led them north, toward Pale Moon, but another look back at the damp trail Xixu was leaving behind him stopped her in her tracks.

“Um. Hmm. We can’t go to Pale Moon with you in that state.”

“Please don’t worry about me. More importantly, there’s something I need to tell you. Is now a good time?”

“I’ll hear you out after we get you dry first...”

At this rate, he’d scatter the faint smell of blood everywhere he went and end up catching a cold. Her mind made up, Sari explained their circumstances to the owner of a nearby rental room and borrowed it with permission. She shoved the unwilling Xixu into the bathroom while she prepared everything he needed in the dressing room.

“I’ll wash your clothes for you, so hand them over once you’ve undressed,” she called out. “I’ll leave a *yukata* here for you to change into.”

“It’s fine,” came his delayed reply. “I can wash them myself.”

“Just give them over. I need to get the blood out. If you’re not quick about it, I’ll come in there and strip you myself.”

Silence was his reply. Although, was it just her, or had she heard a deep sigh from the other side of the wooden door?

A short while later, the sliding door cracked open and a hamper containing a uniform was pushed out. With the quick remark of “I’ll wash them out back,”

Sari took it and left the room.

Behind the old rental room was a small garden that faced a public pathway. Sari, who had borrowed an apron, rolled up her sleeves, drew water from the well, and began cleaning the blood out of the clothes. The scent of it quickly filled the bucket, making her feel guilty.

“Tagi might’ve been right about the room being a write-off...”

If the blood had soaked through the tatami mats and into the floorboards, it wouldn’t be easy to clean out. It appeared that the spell she’d used had resulted in a greater effect than she’d expected.

The truth was, however, that she’d had a lack of other options to choose from in her current state. Unlike shades, humans could quickly shake free from a simple binding.

Sari considered the issue as she changed the bucket’s water. “Maybe I should’ve just focused on marking them... But then that could have resulted in casualties...”

Among all the enchantments she was capable of working right now, did she have a way of reducing the strength of her opponents while also preventing any collateral mess? Sari pondered the question as she continued to thoroughly wash Xixu’s uniform.

She looked up when she heard footsteps approaching along the small pathway.

“Doing laundry at this hour, young lady?”

The greeting came from a man nearing his elderly years, peering over the low wooden fence. His gaze was kindly, with a refined air, and Sari blinked, wondering where she’d seen him before. She summoned a smile to her face with the ease of habitual practice.

“Some clothes were dirtied, and I’m afraid they can’t wait,” she explained. “It happens all the time.”

“Is that so? I must say, though, that blood has a rather strange smell.”

Sari’s hands stopped washing. As she examined the older man, her superficial

smile did not falter.

He wore western style clothing with an underlying theme of dark green and a smile that matched his wrinkles. Nothing about his appearance was out of place. Yet Sari's instincts had revealed the source of her sense of déjà vu. She discarded the bucket of water and rose to her feet.

"Have you come here from the royal capital?" she asked. Her smile was one particular to those who worked in the business of service, a cover for one's true intentions.

"Indeed I have. I wished to lay my eyes upon the pleasure town that is said to have existed since the age of myth, you see."

With eyes that would delude one into believing in their owner's affability, Tesed Zaras smiled.



Xixu had wanted to talk to Sari, but because he'd been drenched, she'd pushed him into the bath and left him to his own devices.

He sighed as he washed the blood out of his hair in the small bathroom. There was much he needed to tell her. There were at least two cells of assassins who had taken the god's cold blood, and they were searching for its bearer as they carried out their designated assassinations. Their master also somehow knew that said bearer was a woman of Irede.

And that master was already in town.

Such was the information Xixu had extracted from the female assassin. Now, he needed to share it with Sari and discuss how they were going to smoke their enemies out.

Yet...there was something else he needed to talk to her about too. Sari would always be willing to hear him out regarding matters concerning the town's safety, but private matters were different. Since he was banned from entering Pale Moon, if she returned there he'd have no way to hold a face-to-face conversation. As such, he wanted to make the best of this opportunity. However, he couldn't prioritize it before the matter of the assassins, and she wasn't going to listen to him anyway if he was all soaked through.

Thus, the most vital thing at the moment was to hurry up and finish his bath while she was still giving him the time of day. Xixu doused his hair with lukewarm water and left the bathroom without using the bathtub. He threw on the *yukata* Sari had left out for him and returned to the main rooms.

However, Sari was in neither of the two tatami-mat rooms. She had to still be washing the blood out of his uniform.

Rental rooms such as these were primarily used by people with a courtesan in tow, so Xixu had sternly warned her in the past that it would be inappropriate for them to make use of one together, but her upbringing in Irede had made her completely unconcerned about such things. She would often drag him to one whenever her kimono had become dirty because they were chasing a shade.

Her idea of common sense was simply too different. But no, Xixu was the outlier here, not her. Perhaps he was just too misaligned with the character of Irede.

Yet, it was his belief that Sari didn't mind their differences. If he wished to know what was bothering her, he would have to ask her herself. Xixu felt guilty that that was all he could think to do, but it was also something that sounded desirable to him: learning new things about her, one by one, until he understood.

Even if, as a result, she did not choose him in the end.

He would not regret the emotions he dedicated to her. If, just like now, someone sought to harm her or the town she loved, he would remain in Irede and fight. He would spend the rest of his life protecting her secret and the daughter she would give birth to, and not regret a single moment.

For her being able to lead a life of smiles and happiness was no different to happiness of his own.

"Saridi?" Xixu called out. "Where's the laundry area in this place...?"

He opened the room's door and stepped into the hallway. Given the current state of Irede, he wished to avoid leaving Sari on her own as much as possible. Even if she was busy washing his clothes, he could just help her.

Then, just as he was looking around and getting his bearings, he heard the ringing of a bell.



As Sari maintained her smile, she thought.

She had only met Tesed Zaras once, when Xixu had been showing her around the royal capital. He had been the proprietor of a teahouse they'd visited.

However, he had evidently remembered her face. He examined her with curiosity; she had the appearance of a maidservant.

"I believe you mentioned you were an apprentice courtesan the last time we met," he said. "Is that still the case?"

"When time and circumstance permit me to be," Sari replied. "As my youth might suggest, I'm still working hard to achieve my goals."

"Come now, such modesty from the proprietress of the world's oldest courtesan house."

Don't let your expression falter. For Tesed Zaras to be here in front of her must mean that he had dug up all the information he could about her.

Sari gave him a beautiful, fabricated smile. "Just because I am the proprietress does not mean that I am above housework. Doubly so if it was a result of my own mistake."

"I take that to mean that you and His Highness are still as close as ever."

Sari gave no reply. Where had he been watching them from? The smile disappeared from her eyes.

As her demeanor shifted to one more intimidating, Tesed Zaras's mild expression remained unchanged. He faced her from the other side of the wooden fence, and continued as though they were making ordinary small talk.

"I had once thought that His Highness simply avoided making public appearances, but to think he was actually working as a shadeslayer in this town. I must admit to my surprise."

"He is on loan here, from His Majesty, and he is not to be disturbed."

“Oh? It appears that His Majesty is rather the eccentric himself too, then. His kingdom’s domestic affairs are unstable, yet he sends His Highness from being his right hand to another town entirely. Or perhaps that simply means...there is something here of equivalent worth to the effort, which must be protected?”

The gentle question came at her like a thrusting blade with a smoothed tip. Sari’s only reply was to faintly quirk the corners of her lips upward.

She did not know exactly what Tesed Zaras was after. But he was right in front of her now, and she had no intention of letting this end well for him.

Perhaps he had noticed the air about her grow sharper, because Tesed Zaras smiled ruefully. “A maiden and a holy courtesan. You are the one His Highness was dispatched to safeguard, are you not?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I’m afraid it doesn’t ring a bell.”

“That’s fine. I’ll simply have to ask His Highness.”

Tesed Zaras’s gaze shifted up toward the wooden building. So he even knew which room Xixu was in? Sari felt a quiet anger well up within her.

What was an equivalent price, for such insolence?

A pressure, beautiful in every facet and coated in a chill, thickened in the air. Sari, having lost her warmth, pointed a pale finger at Tesed Zaras. “I am not fond of being made to repeat myself. Do not disturb him. As long as you are able to abide by that, I shall refrain from any undue roughness.”

“My, my. How gallant of you.”

Was he ridiculing her because of her youth and gender? As Sari’s eyes narrowed, Tesed Zaras raised his hand. Accompanied by the ringing sound of a bell, black-clad figures emerged from the surrounding web of alleyways, their faces hidden.

Two of the assassins dropped from above, alighting silently at a distance to Sari’s left and right. She gave each of them a cold glance.

Two stood at Tesed Zaras’s sides, and two flanked Sari, making four assassins total. By their physiques, they were likely adult men, but they gave off no sense of individuality, resembling nothing more than clay dolls. They all smelled faintly

of blood, a clue as to what they might have been doing before they had come here.

Sari made a slight wave of her hand, stopping the high-pitched ringing of the bell placed nearby.

Tesed Zaras used the time to enter the garden through the nearby wicket gate. She glared at the man, her silver eyelashes flickering in the gloom. “What are your intentions? Surely you do not think that men such as these will be enough to handle me?”

“That’s some confidence you have there, young lady. Should I take that to mean you have the strength necessary to incapacitate ‘men such as these’? I am not so sure about that.”

“Try me and see for yourself.”

Humans who had ingested god’s blood were nothing more than blood bags to her. Once they had borne witness to that truth, they would all come to rue their own foolishness.

Sari inhaled deeply, distantly, taking in breath and power—the two were one and the same. Tesed Zaras watched her intently, scrutinizing, but before long opened his mouth to issue an order.

Yet before he could, a naked blade appeared before Sari’s eyes. In almost the same moment, a man’s hand yanked her backward.

“What are you doing here? You have some nerve, showing your face in this country.” His hair wet and dressed in a *yukata*, Xixu pushed Sari behind him and glared at Tesed Zaras.

The older man seemed unperturbed. Then again, perhaps Sari had been the only one who hadn’t seen Xixu arrive, since her back had been to the building.

“It has been too long, Your Highness. It is pleasing to see you are in good health.”

The sound of Tesed Zaras’s voice broke Sari from her surprise. She hurriedly grabbed Xixu by his *yukata*. “Xixu, you can’t. You have to get back.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth. Please get inside, Saridi.”

“You *can’t*!” Sari slapped Xixu on the back, but he gave no indication he would yield. At this rate, he could suffer something terrible because he was protecting her.

Just as that terrifying premonition made Sari go pale, the black-clad figure to their right moved, swinging a fist at Xixu’s shoulder.

The young man angled his body to avoid the blow, keeping his eyes forward. His military sword flicked out, seeking to cut through his foe, but before it could make contact, Sari screamed.

“Insolent wretch! Get back!”

Unshapen power exploded from her toward the assassin that had attempted to strike Xixu. The next moment, the man collapsed, retching a torrent of blood from his mouth.

The sudden spray of blood not only splashed onto Xixu’s *yukata*, but onto his forelocks and all over the bucket at their feet too.

“Saridi...” he said in a low voice.

“Oh! Oh, drat! I’m sorry!”

Now she would have to do another round of laundry. But while Sari was caught up in her bewilderment at her own uncontrolled burst of power, their opponent had not been idle. Still smiling—though it no longer reached his eyes—Tessed Zaras voiced a command to the remaining assassins.

“Go.”

In response, the two black-clad figures at his sides dived forward, approaching from the sides in a pincer movement. But as Sari hesitated, Xixu advanced a single step and swung his blade fast enough to cut the air. It slashed precisely across the eyes of the assassin coming from the left, and not a moment later its tip was already angled at the one on the right, who’d come charging with all the explosive momentum of a wild animal.

The man was unable to avoid the blade that suddenly appeared in his path. It stabbed into his throat, yet he still managed to slide to a stop and leap backward, regaining his balance—albeit he looked unsteady on his feet.

Xixu tore his eyes off the man and pierced Tesed Zaras with a frozen glare. “You’ve split into a number of cells that have infiltrated the town.”

“Oh? And who might have told you that?”

“Does it matter? I know you’re eliminating members of opposing factions in Irede while searching for the bearer of cold blood. Are you the ringleader?”

From her place behind Xixu, Sari’s breath caught. So they *were* searching for her, the source of the blood. They wanted to use her as a tool, like the flower that inflamed people’s desires.

But how had they known she was in Irede? As she fought to keep her expression from changing, Tesed Zaras grinned.

“Who can say? Cold blood? It sounds like someone’s recounting of a dream. A liquid that can alter a human’s base structure with a single spoonful. Just imagining it makes me shiver. If such a thing truly existed, it would have to belong to the realm of the gods... Don’t you think so, young lady?”

His gaze pierced deep into her core. The implication in Tesed Zaras’s words was plain.

Sari glared at him contemptuously, half clinging to Xixu’s back. “‘Realm of the gods’? Don’t waste my time with such roundabout nonsense. If there’s something you wish to say, then say it.”

Tsed Zaras faced the point of Xixu’s blade. He was flanked by the assassins: the one on the left had gone down to one knee, holding his wounded eyes, while the one on the right who’d had his throat pierced wavered unsteadily on his feet.

Both of the men’s injuries would have been fatal if they had been ordinary humans, but they were not down for the count yet, and there was still one black-clad figure who remained unharmed. Sari focused, readying herself to respond to any movement they made.

Despite the reversal in advantage, Tesed Zaras looked unbothered. “Something I wish to say?” he repeated, tone dry. “Very well. My desire, my dear, is for you to come with me. His Highness as well, if so willing.”

“I refuse,” came Xixu’s biting response.

Tesed Zaras chuckled. “Then I shall concede the issue, and have the young lady come alone. Oh, don’t worry. To borrow your words from earlier, we shall refrain from any undue roughness.”

Having her own brazen words thrown back at her made Sari’s delicate eyebrows draw into a frown. Xixu’s displeasure was more apparent, the irritation clear in his tone.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he spat. “I won’t let you take her.”

“Any chance you would be willing to back down...?”

“None. You’ll have to step over my dead body to get to her.”

His phrasing invoked memories of the prophecy Sari had heard. “Stupi— You can’t *say* that!” she exclaimed, hitting him. But she might as well have been talking to a stone wall.

Deciding that remaining behind him would only put her on the back foot should anything happen, Sari dropped her voice to a whisper. “It’s fine if I make them all explode now, right? I’m doing it.”

“Wait, Saridi—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll pay for any damages and do the washing too. All you’ll have to do is get back in the bath.” Perhaps he would get drenched in blood again, but that was a cheap price to pay compared to his safety.

Before she could act, however, Xixu’s exasperated voice reigned her back in. “That’s *not* the issue here.”

“But it’s not like they can increase their numbers anymore. If I rupture them one by one, they’ll be wiped out before long.”

“You know, those are rather violent words to be coming out of a person’s mouth...”

Sari felt the urge to snap back at Xixu’s serious tone—“*Well it’s a good thing I’m not actually a person!*”—but restrained herself. She couldn’t let that slip. She moved half a step back so as to not impede Xixu’s movements, her gaze fixed on Tesed Zaras.

“It’ll be fine,” she insisted. “I just have to leave him alive. We don’t need the rest.”

“Perhaps, but...”

“Besides, if we let them get away, they’ll keep killing people in Irede. If it’s going to end in bloodshed anyway, let’s make this the last time. All right?” Leaving no room for rebuttal, Sari lifted her right hand. Her fingers burned with power, and god’s breath gathered in her palm.

Tesed Zaras smiled ruefully. “Dear me. Such a frightful young woman. And with His Highness present as well, it indeed seems as though we have no prospect of victory. After all, His Highness’s ability for swordsmanship is exceptional, and the assistance of the young lady’s blood would only place him further beyond our means to best.”

“He doesn’t need—”

“Saridi. Stop.”

Xixu’s warning checked Sari’s irritated objection, but only too late did she realize that she’d been baited. Her hand flew to her mouth as she looked at Tesed Zaras. For a moment, she dared to hope that she’d interrupted herself in time, but she knew it was wasted effort.

She’d lost the exchange when her first reaction hadn’t been to ask what Tesed Zaras was talking about. The fact that she hadn’t considered the phrase “the young lady’s blood” strange was her downfall.

The older man’s expression was slightly apologetic. “Although you only confirmed what I already suspected, I feel somewhat guilty about tricking you like that.”

Sari was silent for a few moments before replying, “If you’d like to repent, then may I suggest beginning by handing over the rest of the blood in your possession and begging for your life?”

“I’m afraid that would be futile, as I no longer have any in my possession.”

“What?”

Xixu advanced a step. “Where is it, then?”

At that moment, the two injured assassins settled into stances opposite him, albeit unsteadily. Perhaps their natural recovery ability exceeded an ordinary human's because they had taken Sari's blood. She took a step back to keep all three assassins in her field of vision, ready to rupture them at any moment.

Tesed Zaras shrugged. "Where indeed? If you wish to know, I could suggest coming with me quietly."

"No."

"So it is to be a rupturing. What a shame."

Something was off; he almost seemed to be looking forward to it. But as far as Sari was concerned, her displeasure took precedence right now. She looked down at the bucket that had caught the splash of blood.

The crimson liquid was thick and sticky. How much of it belonged to her?

While her thoughts were preoccupied, Xixu spoke a question. "I'll ask you one more time. Where are your allies, and where is the remaining blood?"

"While I must admit that some small part of me wishes to tell you, I'm afraid that I do not know everything," Tesed Zaras said, shrugging again.

Sari nodded, recognizing the words for what they were. He would not give them anything. "All right, fine," she said. "Then we'll just kill you."

"Again, not something any decent person should be saying..." Xixu mumbled dejectedly.

His grumbling aside, Sari had mostly intended to do this from the beginning. She'd considered the option of handing Tesed Zaras over to the king, but if he wasn't going to part with any information, then there was no meaning in letting him live.

She took a step toward the older man.

As though reacting to the faint sound of her footstep, the two wounded assassins bounded forward across the garden soil. One charged straight for her, but Xixu's blade silently flashed out, cutting deeper into his throat than before.

After a slight delay, the crisp sound of Sari snapping her pale fingers resounded through the dark of night.

It was a small gesture, but one that was well practiced, and it was enough to blow the remaining two assassins away. One slammed into the ground and stopped moving, while the other collided into the wooden fence and collapsed.

A fresh coat of blood once again sprayed out across the garden.

Sari felt an equal amount of displeasure and pity for the abrupt end of the men who had strayed from the path of humanity. Outwardly, however, she pinned Tesed Zaras down with a look that could freeze a person to their core.

“You’re all that’s left.”

“It appears so.”

“You seem confident,” Xixu remarked. “What are you scheming?” He must have been bothered by the older man’s composure in the face of death.

Tesed Zaras gave him an affable smile. “Me in particular? Nothing. I am naught but a sacrificial pawn.”

“A sacrificial pawn?”

“Yes. I must repent for the sin of allowing a certain precious flower garden to be destroyed, so I was given this role to fulfill. That being to confirm the young lady as the bearer of cold blood, whether I leave this place alive or not.”

“What...?” When Sari’s understanding caught up with his words—all too late, now—she began to tremble.

Tesed Zaras’s appearance before her had been far more premeditated than she had foreseen. If they let him go, he would report to his allies what he had confirmed about her. Yet if he did not return, whoever awaited him would consider that as confirmation of its own. The result of this encounter had been determined from the very start.

The woman who was a god scanned the night garden that smelled of blood, seeking some manner of recourse. Her support came in the form of Xixu’s reply.

“That doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the fact that we’ll be eliminating all of you, in the end.”

“Even if it will expose the young lady there to danger?”

“I’ll protect her.”

I’ll stake my life on it.

Xixu’s declaration resounded through Sari to her core. She stood stock-still, as though struck by lightning, looking up at his back.

She was being suffocated by an overwhelming wave of emotion, though she didn’t know if it was hers or his. But this was something she had known from the beginning. This was the person Xixu was.

The unyielding obstinacy that kept him standing and the sincerity behind his refusal to impose his ideals on others... Those qualities were why she had fallen for him. She’d been drawn in by their charm.

It was the first time she had seen a person with such facets, and to her, they were as beautiful as the clearest crystal. It was why she had hoped he would never change.

So why had she harbored the impossible desire that he would ever care for his own life?

She had been a coward. This entire time, she should have simply accepted him.

Sari’s lips, which she had been pressing together, parted. She pulled on Xixu’s sleeve from behind. The young man turned, puzzled, and Sari wiped away the blood that had splashed onto his cheek with her finger. Then, with the same finger, she pointed at Tesed Zaras.

“Very well. Return and tell this to your allies. I am the one you seek.”

“Saridi?!”

“One thing, however. You must take this bell with you.”

A faint ringing sound echoed through the night. From the eaves of the building to their rear, a gleaming silver bell gently floated over, gliding through the air and nimbly biting into the flesh below Tesed Zaras’s ear.

As he grunted in pain and made to remove it, Sari added, “Wherever you scurry off to, that bell will inform me. Ah...you’d best hurry, however. It will pierce through your skull before long.”

The bell rang again, faint but clear. Little by little, its slight trembles dug it deeper into the man's skin. Standing beside her, Xixu was at a loss for words.

Tesed Zaras's gaze darted around the garden, panicked terror in his eyes. Though he had to be feeling the pain, his refusal to scream or weep spoke of his strong sense of pride. Finally, his gaze settled on Sari. The question he asked seemed to peer into her core.

"Are you...even human?"

"I'm afraid not. Unfortunately for you."

The god who governed Irede closed her eyes, the gesture resembling two closing seashells.

Sari spoke not another word until Tesed Zaras had gone from sight.

It did not take her long to reach a decision. In fact, the verdict alighted on her as naturally as breathing. She remained silent, however, waiting for Xixu to relax his guard.

When Sari heard him exhale, she finally opened her eyes and raised her head. Xixu, who must have come running because he'd heard the bell, combed back his hair, now wet with blood as well as water.

"We'll need to clean up the bodies," he remarked.

"I'll do it," she said. "You should get back in the bath, Xixu. You'll catch a cold."

"Ordinarily, our roles would be reversed, and that's as it should be. Besides, you shouldn't be alone outside. We don't know when they'll come knocking again."

"I think we're fine for now, though."

Even if Tesed Zaras made it safely back to his allies, it would be a while before anyone else came. Sari also thought it was quite likely that the older man would run off somewhere alone and die quietly to protect them.

Sometimes, humans valued certain things more than their own lives and acted accordingly. The man's adherence to his principles was worthy of praise,

and it evoked a bittersweet emotion in Sari as she recalled those who she had lost. But she had already resolved to stop allowing her fears to prevent her from moving forward.

She suppressed the conflicting sense of warmth she was feeling and reached her hands toward Xixu. If hesitation was a trap, then her only option was to take a deep breath and make the plunge. She rose up onto her toes and gripped the collar of his *yukata*.

“I pick you.”

“What? For what?”

“To be my sacred offering. I pick you.”

The maiden of foresight had declared that the future of inhuman beings could not be read. In that case, all Sari had to do was bend fate to her own will. There was no need to be afraid. She knew she was strong enough.

The silence born from her words seemed as though it would continue forever, if she allowed it to. Even though she had waited for the situation to settle before telling him, Xixu had still frozen in surprise.

Sari cocked her head, confused. “Huh? Don’t tell me... Am I...too late?”

“No. It’s just...”

“Really? Then become my guest.”

She would receive him as her sacred offering, and they would share their warmth through the nights they spent together. She would never let anyone or anything hurt him again, be they god or man. Such was the depth of the vow Sari made to herself as she spread her arms and pulled him into a tight embrace. Leaning against his chest, she closed her eyes.

The moon shone a pale white.

There was no sound of bells.

The warmth in the arms that circled around her back—still shy, still reserved—was so kind she thought she would melt.

Xixu looked down at the woman embracing him. Her small build made it look like she was a child clinging to him. Yet he knew the weight of the burdens that weighed on her mind. Without a word, he brought his own arms around her. A quiet sigh was breathed into his chest.

She was so delicate she seemed almost fragile, and he held her with the greatest care. The warmth he felt from her slowly transformed his surprise into another emotion entirely.

He had wanted to be one of the options she would choose from.

But, truth be told, he had not ever expected her to choose him. Despite all the teasing they received from others, he was an ignorant outsider who had committed any number of mistakes. He doubted there was anybody in the whole of Irede who had been tactlessly rude to her more times than he had. He knew Sari was tolerant and forgiving, but it was honestly puzzling to him why she still treated him with her smile.

Yet most of all, to Xixu, she was someone far more sacred than himself. The place she belonged was far further—far higher—than he could ever go.

But she had chosen him. Selected his love, and raised it up to be hers.

He wondered why, and found that he had no answer. But the shock to his emotions hit him faster than that thought. His arms tightened around her back, as though possessed by a will of their own. He allowed the feeling burning up his throat to gradually suffuse through the rest of his body.

Xixu gazed down fondly at the woman in his arms. The delicate nape of her pale neck was right before his eyes. A faint sweet scent lulled him into a state resembling intoxication. Within him, the resolve to protect her delicate form warred with the desire to run his hands across her smooth skin. He wanted to kick himself for his own blasphemous thoughts.

He felt no dissatisfaction at receiving the words, “Become my guest” to his marriage proposal.

Given her position, a regular marriage would have been a difficult prospect to begin with. In fact, he had only worded it as a proposal because he’d wanted to—he had every intention of following Irede’s ways.

Yes, that was what he'd wanted. He'd wished to stand at her side, supporting her as she courageously sought to fulfill her duty.

But she had chosen him as her sacred offering. Did that mean there was more? If so, what should he do? Would it be acceptable for him to take her back into the room they had borrowed? Silently, Xixu agonized over whether he should voice his questions.

Still, he had enough presence of mind to recognize that doing *nothing* was most certainly wrong. But as he made to lift her into his arms, Sari looked up.

"Um, I need to prepare, so could you wait a few days?"

"Prepare?"

"A special meal needs to be readied, and I'll need to perform a kagura dance in traditional clothing. I have to inform the other two sacred houses too."

"Ah... Right."

Although on paper it would be the ceremony for her to receive her guest, in practice it would be the ritual of dedicating him to her as her sacred offering. She'd mentioned in the past that there was a formal procedure that needed to be followed. Perhaps the process of completing each step, one by one, was her version of a wedding ceremony.

Xixu wondered what his friend—her older brother—would say when he heard and began to feel the premonition of a slight headache.

Sari, noticing the change in his expression, cocked her head. "Xixu? Is something wrong?"

"No. It's nothing important."

"Okay... Oh, make sure you don't catch a cold. If you don't have enough strength to last you through the ceremony, you could die."

"Hold on. Why am I only hearing about this now?"

"You really should get back in the bath. Or should I go in with you?"

"No. I don't think my heart could take it..."

Sari must have taken his entirely serious answer as a joke, because she burst

into happy laughter. Yet fear soon clouded her blue eyes. She smiled at him, a lonely thing under the pale moonlight.

“Hey, Xixu.”

“Yes?”

“If it’s okay with you, could you stay with me until you die?”

A meager but earnest wish. Her pale fingers gripped his hand tightly.

Clear night air spread through the dark garden, becoming invisible waves that lapped at Xixu’s feet so gently it was though they had always been there.

He held a god in his arms. It reminded him of the time he’d first learned the truth about her. Back then, he had been unable to respond.

Xixu nodded. “Yes. I promise.”

Sari’s expression broke into a happy smile.

It was the next morning when Tesed Zaras’s corpse was found on the outskirts of town.

5. Myriad

“Just a little longer...”

The voice was low in pitch, slithering through the earth, and filled with rapturous emotion as its owner savored the taste of what was slowly seeping down from the surface.

“Just a little longer!”

Again and again, it repeated its euphoric whispers, as though caught in the throes of longing. It reared its head, driven by the desire that had smoldered within it for so long.

For how could it not? The moon of this generation was so strong, so beautiful.

Perhaps it was because her line of existence, forever unbroken, had been on the verge of being lost in the previous generation, but the daughter had been born possessing a light with no precedence. As her existence developed and stabilized, both gods and men were forced to act. She could not be ignored. They sought to take possession of her or eliminate her.

“Soon...”

The ancient snake sleeping beneath the earth—a former god contaminated by the emotions of countless humans—raised its black head and dreamed of the moon it could not see.

Aboveground, the sun in the form of a young man heard its whispers. His lips drew into a cynical smile.

“We both have such outrageous delusions, don’t we?”



“To be the maiden’s guest means, in simple terms, being her husband.”

Another shadeslayer had once told Xixu that, not long after he had arrived in this town. At the time, Sari had been an inexperienced girl, while Xixu himself had been focused on his role as the king’s servant and observer.

So he could not have imagined that one day, she would choose him as the sole guest she would ever receive in her lifetime.

“Finally. I foresee a lot fewer stomachaches in my future now.”

That was what Sari’s brother, Thoma, had to say after Xixu reluctantly informed him of the news. The man reacted as though a burden had been lifted from his shoulders rather than with joy; he had long since insisted that Xixu become her sacred offering.

Xixu, who had proposed they meet in accordance with proper etiquette, found himself with a great deal he wanted to say. Thoma had an overbearing personality and didn’t concern himself with the smaller details, so perhaps he could treat Sari’s choice as a given, but as far as Xixu was concerned, he had been the recipient of a truly unexpected stroke of good fortune. He had clashed with Sari over their differences in opinion many times, and invoked her ire without knowing why many times too. Thoma might see what had happened as an inevitable outcome that had taken them far too long to reach, but for Xixu, that had been far from the case.

Those sentiments must have shown on his face, because Thoma’s expression turned incredulous. “You... Look, Sari’s almost eighteen. Eighteen!”

“I know. I’ll have to think of a gift to give her.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at. I’m saying you really took your sweet time. You know, for how much you both overthink things, you hardly ever voice your thoughts and talk things out.”

Thoma stopped and brought a bowl to his mouth. They were currently in a tatami-mat room in one of Irede’s traditional restaurants. Xixu had made the reservation, as was appropriate for a formal meeting with one of Sari’s relatives. Thoma had been on the verge of saying something at first—“*You’re such a...*”—but in the end, he’d bit the words back.

It was Xixu’s opinion that the tendency not to voice his thoughts—which Thoma had just accused him of having—applied to everyone, not just him and Sari. Regardless, they had their reasons. He tended to keep himself in check because he knew he was rather tactless, while Sari was the town’s mistress.

There were many times when she would not be able to speak her true thoughts because of her position.

But voicing all of that would be more trouble than it was worth, so Xixu decided to broach the main issue at hand instead. “I invited you because I wanted to discuss my engagement gift.”

“Yeah? Well, I came knowing you’d bring up something weird like that, so I can’t say it’s unexpected. You don’t need one.”

“I...was going to ask if anything Irede-specific was required, or if there was a particular store that always handled the matter.”

“You don’t *need* one. I mean it. Stop or you’ll make me laugh.”

Thoma had a rather straight face for someone who thought what he was saying was funny, but Xixu supposed he was the last person who could accuse others of being inexpressive. He’d somewhat expected this answer, in any case, since Thoma had also told him once before that he didn’t need a witness for his proposal. That aside, there was another matter he was curious about.

“Still, I need *something*, don’t I? This is a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for her.”

“Did you forget about her courtesan’s price? It’ll be ten times the price of any ordinary engagement gift.”

“Oh.”

“Though I wouldn’t be surprised if Sari says she doesn’t need it. Not every maiden’s guest is a rich man, and the exorbitant prices are sometimes used as a more polite way to turn someone down.”

“Ah, I see...”

Now that Xixu thought about it, he realized he’d never heard an exact price, just that it was “enough to build a house.” Of course there would be guests who were unable to pay. He made a mental note to remind himself that he absolutely would, however.

Thoma picked up a small bowl with courtly grace. “In the first place, why are you thinking of this as though you’re taking a wife? It’s the other way around. *She’s taking you*. Sari’s the one who chose, isn’t she?”

“Oh.”

“That doesn’t mean you’ll be getting anything, though. You’re an offering being dedicated to her, after all. That’s what it means to have a contract with a god. So don’t go getting any weird ideas that you need to do anything special. Just leave it all to us.”

“But there must be *something* I can do.”

“Don’t try anything funny. It’s enough as long as you just don’t run away.”

“Isn’t...”

Isn’t that too low of a bar? was what Xixu wanted to say, but he held his tongue, recalling that Thoma’s father had failed to clear that very standard.

Then again, perhaps even the simple act of “not running away” was a heavy burden for a human to bear.

Become a sacred offering to tie the distant god of the heavens to the side of humanity—that was the duty levied upon the maiden’s guests. It was not the equal kind of compact shared between people, but one where the offering received nothing in return. If one were to phrase it unfavorably, they were a sacrifice.

But Xixu did not think that was true in his case. If he became her guest, he would receive her love. And that was the most important thing of all—a stroke of good fortune that could not be acquired simply because one wished for it.

Thus, he wanted to devote himself to her with the utmost sincerity too. That was simply his personal feelings on the matter.

“Still, I’d like to express my sincerity somehow...”

“You would, would you? Then dedicate your time toward reconciling that way of thinking of yours with Sari’s. You have until your daughter’s of the age when she’ll need to choose a guest of her own.”

Xixu’s head tilted to the side at the unfamiliar word, his chopsticks still extended. “Daughter?”

Thoma’s straight face finally broke into an expression of disbelief. “Don’t look at me like we’re talking about someone else. *Your* daughter, who Sari will give

birth to, will be the next proprietress of Pale Moon. But if you keep tacking on conditions like I know you will, there'll be no guests left for her to choose from."

Hearing his friend's warning caused Xixu to experience the greatest sense of mental friction he'd experienced yet. It wasn't that the thought of having a daughter was unpleasant—it just didn't feel real. But it was only a matter of course, when he thought about it. The proprietress of Pale Moon only took one guest. Then, she gave birth to her successor.

Xixu finally lowered his chopsticks. "Right. I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"That's honest of you to say. Part of me saw this coming, though."

"While I'm being honest, I should say that I never had a relationship with my own father, so it's still difficult for me to imagine, even when you point it out. Sorry."

"Ah, I see. You were told he was dead, or something along those lines?"

"No, just that I didn't have one, so I accepted that and moved on."

"You've always been strangely willing to take things at face value like that. So that's when it started, huh?"

Though Thoma sounded impressed, to Xixu, his father's absence had simply been the norm. Even when he'd been told the truth, the man had just become someone he'd rather avoid involving himself with. His mother hadn't made any particularly thorough effort to scrub his existence from their lives. It was simply that their household had consisted of the two of them, mother and son, with no place for a father to begin with.

Now that Xixu was being told he'd have to fill that role himself, it still felt utterly abstract to him. He wondered if this might pose an issue down the line.

"Don't worry about it," Thoma said, as though he'd read his thoughts. "Sari's the same. In fact, it's actually rarer for the father of Pale Moon's maiden to stick around. But you'll be staying by Sari's side, right?"

"Yes."

"Then work it out between yourselves. Ah, but you'd better not spoil her by

letting her walk all over you.”

As Thoma picked up a small bowl, Xixu considered how the other man must have been the father figure in Sari’s life, especially given the difference in their age. How much support must her older brother’s presence have been for her, who’d grown up without either of her parents?

As Xixu grew sentimental, he suddenly recalled another matter he needed to discuss. While Thoma was taking a sip of tea, he said, “Come to think of it, I’m considering renouncing my royal status.”

Thoma immediately began coughing violently, as though the tea had entered his windpipe. Xixu waited patiently while he struggled with his breathing. It took some time, but finally he recovered enough to reply.

“What...are you talking about? How did you come to *that* conclusion?”

“Vas once told me that...”

Xixu continued, explaining that Vas had once told him he wished for Sari to have an ordinary marriage, and thus didn’t need the burden of her guest’s status. The wish was biased toward the viewpoint of her family, the Werrilocia, but it was true that a guest of no renown would make the secret of her dual nature more difficult to expose.

In addition, Xixu wanted to fulfill Vas’s wish. The young man who had cherished his cousin had entrusted his wish to him, if only in part.

However, Thoma’s tone made it clear that he thought the matter was more complicated than that. “If that’s what Vas said, then I get how you feel. And as always, I think it’s incredible how you always try to back up your words with action. But your status comes with advantages and disadvantages... I think you’d better consult the Werrilocia about this. Wait, no... Sari’s probably the better option after all.”

In the year and a half since they’d first met, this was the first time Xixu had seen Thoma so at a loss. As he watched him, amused, the man scrubbed his hand through his hair frustratedly.

“Sorry. It’s not my place to weigh in on this. You should consult Sari. But whatever you do, don’t act on your own. We don’t need His Majesty to come

knocking so he can air his grievances with us.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and I figure I’d better warn you in advance, but don’t bother going to the Werrilocia to make any formal greetings or anything. They have no say when it comes to the matter of Sari taking her guest. It’s just how the separation is maintained.”

Xixu remained silent.

“Bull’s-eye, huh? Glad I brought it up.”

“But aren’t they Saridi’s family?”

“That doesn’t mean you need to show up on their doorstep before anything has even started. At least do it after. You can just go with Sari the next time she has to oversee the storehouse opening.”

“Is that how it is...?”

“Yes. Oh, and once the formal date for the guest-taking is decided, you’ll have to self-purify in the traditional way starting five days beforehand, so concern yourself with that instead. I’ll let you know when you should begin.”

“The purifying is because I’m a sacred offering? That makes sense. Will I have to fast?”

“Of course not. Why do you always overdo everything? You just have to avoid meat, and on the last day, everything except water. Impurities will mix into your breath otherwise.”

“I...see?”

“As for the consummation... With the other two gods out there...” Thoma looked up at the ceiling, brooding, then shook his head. “Well, whatever. Agonizing over it won’t dig up any answers.”

“What do you mean?”

The other two gods, Distira and Vas, were still lying low. Other than that, post-Tesed Zaras’s death, the assassins had stopped making appearances after two more had been cut down in town. The identity of the ally who had used

them as disposable pawns was still unclear, but the militia's investigations had yet to turn up any plausible suspects. It was a situation where Xixu and the others had to keep their guards up, yet had no available moves to make of their own.

With his death, Tesed Zaras had protected his allies from god's pursuit. If they had correctly interpreted the meaning behind him dying, then they would likely leave town.

But whether Thoma's thoughts were similar or not to Xixu's, he seemed to come to a conclusion. "Don't worry about it," he said. "It's more reassuring having you around, and Sari should stabilize. Focus your efforts on staying healthy. You might die, otherwise."

"She mentioned that as well. Why would I die, exactly?"

"Her power's just that potent. It's a good thing you're so sturdy."

Thoma's tone seemed to mark that as the end of the discussion, but Xixu still felt rather in the dark. Still, it sounded like it would be no ordinary marriage ceremony—more like a religious ritual. Perhaps *this* was the most well-kept secret among all the mysteries of Irede, the pleasure town of myth.

Xixu placed his chopsticks down and bowed to the man across from him. "Understood. I look forward to your guidance. Thank you."



“You know, I think I’ve gotten accustomed to that stiffness of yours...” Suddenly, Thoma smiled and bowed his own head, to Xixu’s surprise. His tone became more gentle. “She’s willful, and a real handful to handle. But...I’m glad it was you.”

There was relief in his voice, and a faint touch of nostalgia. The words, beyond a shadow of a doubt, belonged to the brother who had watched over Sari ever since she was small.



For the proprietress of Pale Moon to take a guest, it was necessary that she go through three stages: the divine feast, the kagura dance, and the consummation.

The man who would become her guest would begin the self-purification process five days prior, restricting himself to only water on the last day. On the day of, he would partake of the divine feast to cleanse his body. Afterward, he would face the divine through the kagura dance, and then the consummation would take place.

The choice of whether to hold the ceremony as the moon was waxing or waning was dependent on the potency of the maiden’s power. Sari’s grandmother had once told her that since hers was so potent, hers would likely take place around the new moon.

Ultimately, however, it depended on the guest. Since Xixu was a skilled, able-bodied shadeslayer in good health, Thoma had said that whenever would be fine. Thus, it was decided that Xixu would be invited to Pale Moon in the evening ten days after he and Thoma had their discussion.

As she saw to the various necessary preparations, Sari, who had been strictly ordered not to go outside alone, passed the days in a restless, flighty sort of mood. Still, the proprietress taking her guest did not mean that the house’s business was on hold.

Sari, having come outside with a maidservant to purchase sweets for the customers to go with their tea, absentmindedly looked up at the midday sky. “It kind of doesn’t feel real...” she murmured, hugging the bag of confectionaries.

“Are you talking about taking your guest, Miss Proprietress?”

“Yes.”

She’d known this day would come eventually, but it still hadn’t sunk in. That her partner was Xixu, too, inspired a vague sense of weightlessness within her.

Sari was quite familiar with the street she walked upon, but today, it felt like it was made of cotton. “I think I might trip over thin air,” she mumbled dreamily.

“I’m sure it’s because you can’t wait for the day to come.”

“Do you think so?”

Those rough fingers that wielded a sword... Sari recalled how awkward they’d been whenever they’d touched her, yet how gentle they’d been when she grasped them and they squeezed hers in return. An emotion similar to a young girl’s yearning whispered that it wanted to feel the touch of his hands.

Realizing that she was about to break into a smile, Sari covered her mouth with her hand. “You might be right.”

“Only two more days.”

“It hasn’t sunk in yet...”

The preparations were proceeding smoothly, of course. Her raiment for the kagura dance had been retrieved from storage, and the set of tableware for the divine feast as well as the bedding had been placed in a side room, awaiting the day. Time always seemed to stand still in Pale Moon, but now it was moving, and the house was brimming with a restless, buzzing atmosphere. Even Sari had taken to rehearsing her kagura dance whenever she had a spare moment.

The dance, which was only performed before the man who would be her sacred offering, had been drilled into her by her grandmother when she’d still been alive. Now, though, there was no one to correct her if she made a mistake. She was exceedingly anxious about it, given that it was a once-in-a-lifetime performance.

“Oh. Come to think of it, Miss Proprietress...” The maidservant clapped her hands together as though a thought had just occurred to her. “There was a bell on the floor in the entryway. I picked it up and placed it on the shelf.”

“Was there? Thank you.” She’d thought she had collected all of them when they had scattered everywhere, but apparently she’d overlooked one.

Although Sari’s thoughts were still in the clouds, her attention was finally dragged back into reality by the maidservant’s next words.

Holding a package of tea leaves, the maidservant inclined her head to the side. “I found it because it suddenly began ringing. Did you put an enchantment on it of some kind?”

“What...?”

The enchantment on the bells caused them to ring whenever anybody with Sari’s blood, apart from her, was nearby. If it had rung, did that mean an assassin had approached Pale Moon?

Sari’s expression grew stern. “When was this?”

“Yesterday evening, Miss Proprietress. You were out visiting the Midiridos, so it must have been around the time of the lantern lighting.”

“The lantern lighting?”

It was true that she’d left to discuss her guest-taking yesterday, but she hadn’t been out for that long. She hadn’t noticed any abnormalities when she’d returned, nor had the bell been ringing. She thought back to when the bells had scattered across the entryway, frowning.

“Did you see anyone suspicious around?” she asked.

“No, not that I recall...”

There were no records of any customers being in the flower room that day. The young merchant who had visited every day right after the lantern lighting had stopped a while ago, perhaps realizing that the courtesan he had eyes for wouldn’t warm up to him.

Sari puzzled over the mystery. Then, an answer occurred to her. It had no basis whatsoever, but it was enough to form a seed of doubt.

“Could it be...?”

“Oh. Miss Proprietress.”

Sari looked up at the maidservant's urging to see a man walk out of one of the teahouses that faced the street. A kimono-clad woman came out after him to see him off.

They were both familiar to her, but it was surprising to see them together. Sari watched Vendt, the man whom she had to regularly turn away at Pale Moon, and Mifileu, who had once worked there, from a dozen or so paces away. Unconsciously, her thoughts formed into a whisper.

"Talk about an awkward pair to run into..."

She'd wanted to avoid seeing either of them until after taking her guest, if possible. Casually, Sari attempted to make herself less noticeable, but Mifileu chose that exact moment to turn and their eyes met. She cursed her own bad luck.

Still, the proprietress's smile was already on Sari's face. She bowed to Mifileu and received a cheerful smile in return, which relieved her.

As matters stood, only a select few people knew about the fact that she'd chosen her guest, so there was no actual reason she had to be so on guard with Mifileu. Still, she couldn't help it, both because of a sense of guilt and a feeling of jealousy she just couldn't quite fight down. She had no intention of pestering Xixu to talk about his past now that she had formally chosen him, and she knew that even if she did, her reaction to what he told her would probably be, "Oh, was that all?" anyway. As such, it was best she kept quiet and worked through her feelings on her own.

Evidently, Mifileu had other customers to see to, because she bowed to Vendt and returned to the teahouse.

If only that had been the end of it. Having noticed Sari and the maidservant, Vendt approached them, looking cheerful. The path he took essentially barred their way, and when he reached them, he leaned forward and smiled.

"Sari. It's been a while."

"I don't think enough days have passed for that to be true."

"You haven't been in whenever I've gone to see you recently. Things are so dull when I don't get to see your face."

“I’ve been busy with several matters. Such as purchasing necessities like these.” Sari slightly raised the bag she was carrying to show him, then without giving him any room to respond, bowed her head. “Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

However, it didn’t seem as though he’d be so willing to let her go. As Sari walked around the corner, he followed along. She felt more than a little annoyed, but then again, perhaps this was a good opportunity.

The trio—two women of Pale Moon and a man who was not a guest—began walking along one of Irede’s waterways.

After glancing around to make sure there weren’t any prying ears, Sari asked, “Do you have a destination in mind, after this?”

“I’m thinking of heading to Pale Moon, since I’ve run into you and all.”

“We are not yet open, I’m afraid. None of the women will be awake.”

“You’ll be there.”

“I will be busy preparing to take my guest.”

Sari waited for the man’s reaction, not looking at his face. It was still bright outside, and they were accompanied by a maidservant. Someone who cared about the opinions of others wouldn’t resort to violence here.

Casually, Sari adjusted her stride so that she was positioned between the maidservant and Vendt. However, when he spoke, his voice was much gentler than she’d expected.

“Guest? So you’ve decided on somebody?”

“Yes, just the other day.”

“What will you do if he refuses you?”

The question was so bold that Sari’s lips twisted indignantly. “He won’t.”

She was uneasy for a moment, since, knowing Xixu, there was no telling what he might do, but he wouldn’t refuse her. Probably.

As Sari reminded herself of that, Vendt continued, sounding genuinely curious, “Even if he accepts you now, what will you do if he abandons you? You

might even come to dislike him, in time. If that happens, will you choose another man?"

"I won't. I will only ever have one guest."

"No matter what kind of man he is?"

"He will be the man I've chosen. That will not change, nor can it."

The sacred offering was the god's most intimate companion. He himself was the link in the contract that tied her existence to the world of mankind. At the very least, until she gave birth to her child, that bond could not be cut.

In light of that, an outsider's unwelcome opinion held no weight at all. As Sari's displeasure began to creep into her expression, the maidservant began shooting her nervous glances.

Vendt nodded, his eyes still facing ahead. "I see. That's good."

There was a dull impact, and Sari's body began to tilt.

"Ngh...?"

She steadied herself before she fell and looked down at the object that had pierced her side. It was a thick, rodlike thing that gleamed dull silver, shorter than a *wakizashi*. The man who wielded it showed her his carefree smile.

"That makes things simple, Sari."



She grunted as intense pain lanced through her. The rod in her abdomen was like nothing she'd ever seen, its surface crowded with engravings of some kind. She couldn't see what the tip was like, but she could feel it inside her, having stopped just short of her organs.

Perhaps that was why she had not yet passed out. Forcing strength into her trembling legs, Sari raised her right hand through sheer force of will, attempting to blow the man away in a surge of cold.

Vendt grabbed her hand with ease. He examined her eyes, which had begun to glow faintly, as though he were studying some manner of rare insect.

"So you *are* inhuman. Still, an ancient god? How arrogant."

"How...do you know...?"

"M-Miss Proprietress!"

The maidservant inhaled to scream, but Vendt let go of the rod and struck her. She collapsed with a shriek while Sari groaned at the sudden added pain of the rod's weight.

The agony painted over her thoughts. A wave of vertigo overcame her, as well as the urge to vomit. She tried to focus, but her concentration and power only ebbed away. Still, she found it within herself to fight the pain off enough to raise her head and glare at Vendt. She wrung out anger from the back of her throat in the form of her voice.

"*How...dare you.*"

"What's wrong, Sari? You suspected me to some degree, didn't you? You must have heard something from Tesed before you killed him."

"Wha...?"

Tesed Zaras hadn't said a thing. He had died without ever returning to his master's side. Sari had only begun to suspect Vendt after hearing about the bell from the maidservant.

If he had simply kept the blood hidden on his person without drinking it, then even if the bells reacted, Sari wouldn't have been able to tell. And it was always him who had come right after the lantern lighting. He had even been there the

day all of the bells had scattered to the floor.

As Sari's breathing grew labored, Vendt smiled and leaned in. "Or did you just not expect me to have a method such as this at my disposal? You were too confident in your own power. All you inhumans are the same."

His scornful laughter resounded through the midday air.

Sari, half hanging from his hand, looked down sluggishly at the rod impaled in her side. The wound was bleeding, but only slightly—not the amount one would expect from a stab wound of that depth. And yet, it felt like all the blood in her body was being siphoned out. Her consciousness grew further and further away.

As her head drooped, Vendt seized her chin and made her look up. "I'm glad it works even on you. It's a tool made for hunting your kind—it seals your power and drains your blood. They don't exist on this continent, so you failed to take precautions, didn't you? It's adorable how you're so foolish, Sari."

"Shut..."

Despite Sari's feeble attempt to curse him, he had spoken the truth: the rod in her side was gravely affecting her. She was unable to spare any strength for anything beyond the bare minimum. As her power flowed out of her in an endless stream, she began attempting to store it within her body.

While she focused on that, she suddenly heard the sound of great wingbeats in her ears.

Even without opening her eyes, she knew it was the silver-winged hawk that had once attacked her on the street, slashing her arm and plucking her hair. The hawk perched on Vendt's shoulder and folded its wings. Its eyes fixated on Sari, coldly observing the source of the blood it had been given.

"So it was...you..."

It must have been the blood and hair the hawk had brought back that had allowed them to determine the source of the blood near Tesed Zaras's estate was in Irede. She felt like grinding her teeth in frustration, wondering why she'd ever let the bird go, but the dizziness caused her head to drop.

That was when black essence began to slowly ooze from the earth.

The corrupted essence coiled around her feet, lapping up the blood she spilled. Sari recognized its presence—it was familiar. She finally grasped the true nature of the situation.

This could be worse than she had thought. She urged her trembling hand to move, hoping to at least extract the rod from her body.

“Relax, Sari,” Vendt’s voice whispered into her ear. “I’ll keep you for a long time yet. Since you can’t change your man, you’ll just have to live tied to me for the rest of your life.”

He casually brushed her hand away and twisted the rod deeper into her abdomen.

As she loosed a choked scream, Vendt lifted her into his arms. He signaled toward the shadows of the alleyway with his eyes, and two men stepped out to carry the unconscious maidservant. Blood streamed from a gash in her forehead. Seeing that even through her fading vision, Sari felt herself fill not with anger, but a cold that resembled an empty void.

“You...scum...”

Her body temperature slowly dropped, and she grew distant from the world of man. In her core, she could sense herself changing.

If this continued, she would be able to freeze everything, and break them.

She wanted to do it. No one could fault her. It was fair repayment for the humans who had harmed her of their own will. So what if she severed the contract she had with mankind? She would have access to all of her power, regardless of her wounds.

Sari exhaled a frozen breath, ice shards mixed in among it. It crept across her abdomen, driving away the black essence that sought to drink her blood.

The power that had congealed within her began to change into pure light, its purpose to erase a person. It would wipe clean everything before her eyes. Even the black essence that reached for her would be scorched through to its roots beneath the earth, and meet its end.

Yet, the slightest of hesitations stayed Sari's hand. If she transformed completely again, she would no longer be able to stay in the world of man.

If that happened, she would no longer be able to take his hand. She would be trampling over the life a man had once given to stop her. The faces of all the people who had ever reached a hand out to her flashed across her mind.

She inhaled a small breath.

This was okay. It was still too early to bring everything to an end. It would only be foolish and naive to give herself over to anger.

The only thing she truly feared was his death, and that time had not yet come. So it did not matter if she had been wounded. She would find a solution. She could change fate.

It did not take long for Sari to reach a decision. She halted the change to her consciousness and closed her eyes, focusing her efforts instead on stemming her bleeding. Whether Vendt had noticed the drop in her body temperature or not, he smiled as he began walking.

"Don't even think about escaping. Try anything and I'll have your servant girl killed."

Sari did not respond.

The man entered an empty house facing the alleyway. The scent of old tatami mats was familiar to her, but right now, she was more preoccupied with the scent of rusted iron.

As Sari's body went limp, as though she'd passed out, Vendt laid her onto the floor. He left the rod in her side untouched as he placed a hand on the collar hem of her white kimono.

"Soon, you won't be able to defy me at all. You can only choose one partner. Serve me with everything you have."

Sari smiled feebly at the arrogant declaration. Her eyes opened slightly, and she looked at him. "Even so, once I am with child, that will no longer apply. Look forward to how I'll kill you."

"I'm sure someone will cut open your belly when that happens."

His hand moved roughly to her throat. Given her wound, the touch of his skin on hers meant she would drain his vitality. However, she didn't know when that would begin to take effect. Perhaps she would lose consciousness faster.

Pain shot through her as she felt his weight on her, and she bit back a scream. In the corner of her vision, she saw the black essence sucking at her blood, her power.

To think something like this would happen when she would have received her guest in only two days. It was her own fault for being so stupid. Still, while the circumstances were bad, they were not as bad as they could have been.

Sari's whisper, filled with self-derision, hardly made it past her lips. "Xixu's really scary when he gets mad."

Not a moment after she spoke the words, a meager expression of spite, she heard the sound of the door being kicked down.

6. Delicacy

In Irede, the likelihood of any problems arising dropped by half during the daytime. This was likely due to the subtle differences in businesses and clientele between day and night. Nevertheless, that did not mean that there were no incidents at all.

Xixu, who was on one of his frequent casual patrols, halted mid-stride in shock upon seeing a familiar figure in the middle of a busy main street. The young man in a black suit caught Xixu's eye and gave him a friendly smile. He beckoned him over, as if there weren't a myriad of problems with this situation.

His nerves on edge, Xixu approached, moving past the other pedestrians. He felt separated from the hustle and bustle of the street, as though it were all behind a curtain.

The young man gave Xixu a shrewd smile once he'd drawn close. "It is a pleasure to see you again, after so long," he said. "May I have some of your time?"

Xixu didn't bother to hide his wariness. "What do you want?"

Sari's cousin simply raised a single cynical eyebrow.

The pair set off at a walk at Vas's suggestion, as standing in the middle of the street would have drawn attention. If Xixu, an obvious member of the militia, was seen stopping to question a pedestrian while wearing such a grim look on his face, it could trouble the surrounding businesses.

Beside Xixu, whose expression remained tense, Vas was smiling. As they followed the wave of moving humanity, coming and going to wherever their destination may be, there almost seemed to be nostalgia in his gaze. Strangely, it evoked memories of the human he'd once been.

The young Werrilocia—who was being treated as missing after the series of incidents that had led to his unfortunate fate—waited until they had walked for

a while before suddenly launching into conversation. “Are you aware that there are a number of races in the Country of the Open Sea descended from the inhuman?”

“Descended from the inhuman?” Xixu frowned. Where was this going?

Vas nodded slightly. “I am not aware of how such blood came to run in their veins. I do not believe they are related to any constants of creation, such as myself or my sister. It is more likely because of the gods of man who inhabit this world, such as the snake, or perhaps something else entirely. Whatever the case, the fact remains that such races exist on that continent, living in hiding from humans.”

“Are you saying they’re related to Saridi in some way?”

“Who can say? What I *do* know is that they live in hiding because if the secret of their inhuman blood was discovered, it would be extracted from them by force. Or worse.”

“What? They’d have their blood...?” A disquieting feeling bloomed in Xixu’s chest.

Vas noticed the change in his expression and gave him a deliberate shrug. “Yes. I understand that their blood serves as medicine—or poison—and that in a certain country over there, the art of crafting tools to extract inhuman blood is passed down through the generations. These shamanic implements, purified in hearths using human blood and flesh as fuel, can seal an inhuman being’s powers and drain their blood. It’s ghastly to think about, isn’t it?”

“What are you implying?” Xixu snapped. But the suspicion within him was already morphing into something more solid.

How had Tesed Zaras conceived of the idea to *use* the blood from Sari that he’d acquired? Was it because he’d already been aware of a precedent?

The ringleader of the faction currently throwing the continent into chaos could very possibly be from the other continent. If they were, then it would not be a stretch of the imagination for them to see Sari as similar to the prey they hunted back home if they learned of her existence.

Xixu was struck with the urge to run to Sari’s side immediately and make sure

she was safe. Yet the young man walking beside him was a threat that he could not turn a blind eye to. Vas had told Sari that he would come back for her. Whether he would make his move now or later was uncertain, but Xixu wanted to stifle that threat now, while he still knew his whereabouts.

As Xixu became keenly aware of the military sword at his hip, Vas continued as though he were oblivious to the shadeslayer's thoughts. "Those such as I do not simply let ourselves be captured by such individuals. Ah, but I suppose I cannot discount the possibility. *She* is rather clumsy, in that regard. It may well lead to her falling victim to them."

"Even so, Saridi wouldn't be lenient on her enemies."

"She wouldn't, no. She can be rather harsh, despite her usual temperament. However, the mistress of Pale Moon bears a constraint. She cannot bring an excessive amount of power to bear against a pure human. Blood bags that burst apart at the slightest stimuli are a different matter, of course."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Humans are craftier than you think—though that's rather favorable for me. It means that when she's led into the right trap, she will be forced to break her constraints and strike back against humanity. Then, her bond with them will thin, and she will discard her life spent in the world of man."

"She..."

If Sari were ever to use the full extent of her powers against humans, she would need to cast off her fetters. But in exchange, she would become an unbound god. Would she make that choice? Would she abandon the second chance that Eid had sacrificed his life to give her?

The answer Xixu reached was no. Not unless it was the direst of circumstances. Sari would not make that choice unless the fate of someone close to her or the town itself hung in the balance. Any harm done to her, she would calmly endure. For better or worse, she had the strength to not balk at cruelties directed only at herself.

Vas spoke again, his tone light, as though he hadn't noticed the blood draining from Xixu's face. "She is a part of the very foundation of heaven. Remaining

silent and allowing herself to be devoured would be nothing more than the height of folly. It would not be of benefit to anyone.”

“Saridi wouldn’t—”

Xixu had begun to reply sheerly on reflex, but cut himself off when he saw a woman stagger out of an alleyway a short distance ahead. His old companion Mifileu gripped a man’s wallet in her hand, but she was shaking so badly that she could have dropped it at any moment. Her eyes darted around, clearly seeking aid, and when they found Xixu, her voice came out in a half shriek, half strangled whisper.

“H-Help! The proprietress! Sh-She was stabbed, and—”

The stuttering appeal drew puzzled looks from other passersby, but Xixu immediately gleaned its meaning. He ran over and supported her by the shoulder. “Where?” he demanded.

“D-Down there, at the canal. But they took her—”

“Got it.”

Xixu ran, unable to delay any longer. He turned the corner into the alleyway Mifileu had emerged from and sprinted to the pathway by the canal up ahead. It extended to both sides and there was nobody in sight, but he picked the direction of Pale Moon and resumed running. Before long, he came upon a collection of footprints clearly left behind by some manner of disturbance.

The tracks reduced in number and continued ahead. Xixu followed them at a run. He had yet to see any traces of blood, despite Mifileu claiming that Sari had been stabbed, but that only made the situation seem more sinister.

It did not take long before the faint footprints turned into an old vacant house that faced the pathway. Xixu declined to call out any sort of challenge in favor of simply kicking the thin wooden door down. Two men were in the entryway, looking startled as they rose to their feet from where they’d been sitting. Farther inside, a maidservant lay unconscious upon the tatami.

Instantly taking in the circumstances, Xixu allowed his movements to flow into unsheathing the military sword at his hip. His blade flashed out as he ran between the two men, and he didn’t bother to spare their collapsing forms a

glance as he charged past the maidservant toward the inner room.

“Saridi!”

He saw silver hair splayed out across bedding and a man’s back, its owner in the midst of rising to his feet.

He would be lying if he said he’d expected it, but Xixu was not surprised to see that the man was Vendt. He didn’t bother to question him, simply directing a horizontal slash at the man’s neck.

The strike had enough force behind it that it would have severed bone if it had connected, but Vendt made the snap decision to tumble to the side. He turned, allowing Xixu to see that he was holding a hand to his own bleeding mouth. His hate-filled gaze turned to Sari, who had not risen from the floor.

“Bitch...”

She turned her pallid face to the side and smiled, not bothering to hide the mockery in her tone. “Oh? Is this the first time you’ve been bitten by a woman?” There was blood around her mouth too, but more prominent was the dull silver rod sprouting from her left side. Her kimono was lightly stained crimson.

Recalling Mifileu’s claim that Sari had been stabbed, terror struck Xixu. It mixed with a rage hot enough to boil his blood, transforming into a pure killing urge. With the last scrap of his remaining reason, he asked the mistress of Irede a question.

“Saridi. Do I have to leave him alive?”

“No. Do as you wish. Oh...but His Majesty might be happy to have him alive.”

“I don’t care.”

It was fortunate that she had no need for Vendt. That was all the reason Xixu needed.

Without the slightest hesitation, he advanced a step and brought his blade down. The strike, slower than his usual fare, bit into Vendt’s arm before he could pick up the sword he’d been reaching for. Xixu pulled it back before it touched bone and the man exclaimed in pain, shouting abuses.

A blade pierced his throat, and a sentence was delivered in a voice struggling to stifle its owner's rage.

"Shut up."

Xixu knew that if he heard a single thing more, he would lose himself. He slightly shifted the position of his sword, expression as blank as a mask. Vendt's body arched, and blood began trickling onto the tatami from the expanded wound.

Xixu had never once considered the idea of toying with an opponent. But now, in this moment, he wanted this man to suffer pain comparable to that he'd caused.

Silently, Xixu withdrew his sword—his longtime partner—from the man's neck. He flicked the blood off, and for an instant, he saw its polished blade. The sight of the woman reflected in it was like a wound in his heart.

Her kimono had been wrenched open at the chest, but that had done nothing to diminish her undaunted beauty. Her trembling hands moved to grip the rod piercing her side. One of her cheeks was flushed red and looked as though it had been struck. Xixu's breath stopped. His lost reason trickled back as he remembered what truly mattered, and what didn't.

There was no meaning in prolonging this. She had told him to do as he wished. He did not have the time to spare for trivialities.

Xixu closed his eyes, focusing on what little presence of mind he had left.

His blade came down, taking a man's life before Sari's eyes.

"I'm sorry. I was late."

"You weren't, not at all. Thank you. But how did you know?"

"I happened to be nearby and I heard you were taken."

Cold sweat covered Sari's brow. Her wound was serious, but as Xixu knelt at her side to inspect the rod's angle, he decided that it didn't seem life-threatening. He stopped her hands from trying to pull it out.

"You'll bleed out if you try to extract it here. Wait until we're somewhere

more sanitary with something to stop the bleeding on hand. Can you hold out?"

"Yes, but I can't summon up any power with this thing in me."

"That's..." Xixu frowned, recalling what he'd heard from Vas about the blood-draining implements passed down in the Country of the Open Sea, used to seal inhuman powers. The fury he'd almost given in to mixed with regret, creeping up the back of his throat. His arms, on the verge of lifting up Sari's delicate frame, stiffened. "Why didn't you cast it away?"

"Huh? Cast what away?"

"Your contract with humanity. Things never would have gotten this far if you had. Whatever the consequences might have been, you would have been safe."

A god such as her would not be content to brook insolence from a human. She had no need to remain silent and allow them to treat her with contempt. From the beginning, this town's purpose was her enjoyment.

Sari's eyes widened slightly upon seeing his serious gaze, but she soon closed them and smiled. Her breath lacked warmth as it drifted toward her pale chest. "I can't do that."

"You can. If this world hurts you, then you don't need it. You don't have to endure."

If she departed, then it would only be what the world of man deserved. It was a far better outcome than her enduring suffering. It was the choice he hoped she'd make.

But as Xixu grappled with his own weakness, Sari smiled. "But I don't want to leave you."

Her voice was serene, love with no ornamentation. Blue eyes focused their gaze on him. Pale fingers brushed his cheek. The shudder that went through him was equal to the first time she had pierced his chest with her hand. No, it was greater. Xixu's breath caught in his throat.

Perhaps, until this very moment, he had not understood how she felt at all.

He had not realized that her eyes, so proud and facing ever forward, had been looking at him too. Instead, he'd been caught up in his elation at becoming her

sacred offering and the desire to protect her.

Xixu broke from his brief moment of stupefaction, feeling ashamed, and gently embraced Sari. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?"

"Just..."

Xixu was about to shake his head when he sensed a new presence behind him. Still supporting Sari with one hand, he used the other to take up his sword. He hadn't heard the newcomer enter, but he knew who it was.

The ashen-haired young man stood at the entrance of the tatami-mat room, a detached scorn in his eyes as he stared at Sari. It was as though he were watching a procession of insects.

"I suspected that was the choice you'd make," he said. The cold words were not spoken so much as they were casually tossed.

"Vas..."

"Well, if you will not cast it away, then so be it. You were never one to heed the advice of others anyway."

Vas drew the rapier hanging from his hip. Light ran along its blade as he angled it toward Sari's face. It illuminated the faded tatami mats a faint crimson.

In contrast to the red light his rapier shone with, the young man's expression was like ice. He didn't spare Vendt's corpse a single glance, and the gaze he directed at Xixu and Sari contained hardly any more interest. He spoke as though he were simply seeing to the last minor tasks of an unavoidable responsibility.

"And here I had thought to take you back to where you belong."

"I won't go."

"Apparently so. If that is how firm your determination is, then there is no meaning in being any more forceful. It is fortunate that I foresaw this possible outcome and secured a substitute."

“Substitute?” Xixu repeated reflexively.

Vas’s only answer was a faint smile. His blade remained pointed at Sari’s face, and the grim truth settled in for Xixu that he truly no longer was the man he’d once been.

Sari had once explained that Nerei’s ego had been overtaken—painted over—and Vas’s case must have been the same. Xixu channeled the urge to grind his teeth into gripping his sword. He faced the young man with whom he’d once fought a god and settled into a stance.

“If you have a substitute, then you should have no reason to care about Saridi anymore.”

“Wrong. Leaving her here would mean her existence continuing to be birthed in the world of man again and again. It would make the substitute meaningless, and who can say when her presence here might cause something bothersome to happen again?” The young man smiled, his eyes cold as he addressed Sari. “So, if you would live beside humanity, then you shall die beside it.”

The cruel verdict was delivered akin to a farewell, sending a chill through Xixu’s heart even though he’d half expected it. He’d wanted Sari not to have heard it, if that had been possible. He regretted not having navigated this better.

Yet that was when she tugged at his clothes, and he saw her eyes. They were tranquil, resembling a lake’s surface at night, and he refocused his thoughts.

Sari had already made her resolve. She would fight her brother god who wanted to be rid of her.

Though their opponent had Vas’s form, it was a god that lay within. There were two young men who had once sought to protect Sari, but they were no longer here. Xixu had to make up for their absence, or their efforts would be for naught.

He stifled his roiling emotions and let go of Sari. Rising to his feet, he kept her behind him as he adopted a sword stance before Vas. “Then all I have to do is turn you away until you stop trying to interfere in the world of man.”

“How admirable, coming from a human. I doubt your ability to achieve

anything alone, however.”

“Xixu, pull this thing out of me,” whispered a voice from behind him. The exhaustion in it was audible, but her words were not slurred.

Xixu hesitated, keeping his gaze on the god before him.

Vas smiled and raised an eyebrow. “If you do that, she’ll just bleed to death. Why bother?”

“Don’t listen to him, Xixu. Just do it.”

“Saridi...”

The rapier that Vas held, gleaming with sunlight, left Xixu no room to act. If he turned and bent over, Vas would run him through without mercy. If he chose to fight, on the other hand, Xixu didn’t know if he would be a match for the god while having to protect Sari.

As though seeing through his hesitation, the young man smiled mildly. “Just stay put. I’ll make it quick.”

“Pull it out! Hurry!”

A pale hand reached for him. Xixu grabbed it and pulled it closer. With his right hand, he brought his sword into a parry, deflecting the incoming rapier. Holding Sari steady against him, he seized the rod piercing her side—

A blinding flash consumed his vision as the power of two gods clashed. The aftershocks of the collision shook the foundations of the old house.

Sari was standing, wreathed by drifting bands of white frost. She exhaled a long, thin breath. Her nails gleamed silver as she pointed at Vas. “So be it. I accept your challenge.”

Her long, loose silver hair shone with faint light. Her finely woven, plain white kimono was in such disarray that she might as well have been naked, but even that only seemed to add to her beauty.

Sari’s ethereal transformation was complete. The quiet resolve to fight exuded from her form as she glared at Vas. Xixu stood at her side, supporting her, but as more and more blood began to seep from the wound he was holding with his left hand, his unease began to get the better of him. They had to defeat

Vas and stop the bleeding as quickly as possible, but they also could not let that impatience create an opening in their defense.

After some thought—not even several seconds passed—Xixu continued to support Sari with his left hand while he readied his blade in front of her with his right. It was not a stance he'd adopted to strike, but to give his undivided attention to her protection.

Sari seemed to receive the message, because she nodded, exhaling. "I'll finish this quickly. Just wait for me."

"Don't worry about that. I can't let you get hurt any further."

If they could not overcome this moment, then they had no future. Even in the best of circumstances, they would have been outmatched. A single error in judgment would immediately cause them to lose everything.

Above all, Xixu's highest priority was Sari's survival. It was why he had chosen to entrust the offense to her, while he played the part of guard.

Though he was outnumbered, Vas's eyes as he studied them lacked any emotion. "Interesting. I'm curious to see how much you think you can achieve with your body in that state."

"Then just shut up and watch."

Sari's icy rebuke was accompanied by the swelling of a silver light in her hand. She launched the mass of gathered chill, cold enough to cut skin simply by proximity, straight at Vas with no prior warning. Yet the young man simply made an annoyed expression and raised his blade.

Whatever he did, Xixu could not see, but he knew that Vas had just put up a barrier of some kind. Sari's power collided with it, the windstorm of ice shards ripping into the tatami. The room's battered old sliding door was torn to shreds, and frost began to creep over Vendt's corpse.

Sari released a small groan, perhaps because the blowback from her power had agitated her wound. Yet she gritted her teeth and kept her arm held out. Her power sharpened, becoming akin to a naked blade that she thrust out again and again.

Meanwhile, Xixu struck aside the golden pebbles that weaved through the storm. They scattered into a spray of droplets upon touching his sword, dissolving into nothing amidst the cold wind. The two powers clashed and counterbalanced, slowly forming a single whirling maelstrom.

Sari entrusted her weight to Xixu and drew a ragged breath. "Hold me up." It sounded as though she was about to make one final push.

A pale radiance took hold in Sari's silver hair, one strand at a time. A small ball of light, resembling a tiny moon, appeared in front of her chest. As though she was pouring all that remained of her power into it, it quickly grew denser and denser.

At some point, Vas's pupils had turned gold. He was frowning heavily.

Abruptly, Sari stilled her breath and smiled, bittersweet. She pointed a silver nail at the young man.

"Begone."

The pale light expanded.

But before it flew, a small black shadow skimmed across the tatami behind Vas, passed him, and sprang forward. The young Werrilocia's expression became one of irritation, while a shudder went through Sari.

"Xixu!"

By the time he heard her voice, Xixu's blade had already cut through the shadow that had leaped toward their feet. But even as it scattered, the black dregs coiled around the fallen silver rod. With a resonant sound, a deep crack opened through the engravings on its surface, and Sari's blood began to spill out from within.

It was unclear how much of her blood it had taken, but it was enough to pool across the tatami. Yet no sooner had it begun to spread than it was gone, sucked down into the earth at a bizarre speed. Dumbstruck, Xixu stared at the tatami mats, now free of bloodstains.

The faint vestiges of the black shadow formed into a small snake...and bared its teeth in a smile.

“Such a delicacy.”

The words crept up from below the earth. Xixu recognized their sinister timbre—they reminded him of the snake-possessed shaman he’d encountered after first coming to Irede.

As though it had read his thoughts, the small snake slithered across the tatami, positioning itself against the wall of the room in a spot between Sari and Vas. More black essence oozed from the faded mats, adding to the snake’s form until it had taken the vague outline of a person. A hawk flew in from out of nowhere and perched on its indistinct shoulder.

The shadowy puppet smiled again and spoke: **“Blood of the White Moon, sweet as nectar. There was worth in my intricate machinations after all.”**

“Enough. Trust a snake to be cunning...” There was venom in Sari’s words, but they came out feeble. She didn’t appear surprised.

Xixu, who had not expected the appearance of the black shadow, realized that the hand he’d been holding to Sari’s wound had gone ice-cold. She must have tried to freeze the area to stop her own bleeding. Her frail form seemed as though it would collapse at any moment, but he did his best to disguise that as he held her up.

Vas glanced at the now-empty silver rod. “I imagine you didn’t notice until the very last minute,” he said to Sari. “It was the snake that instigated that dead man over there and sent assassins on a rampage throughout Irede. The fellow is royalty in the Country of the Open Sea, and he came to lay the groundwork for creating a vassal state for his country on this continent. But once he learned of you in the process, he gained a new ambition—that was what the snake preyed upon to use him. It took advantage of the time you spent skipping around, investigating Tesed Zaras.”

The implication in his words was clear: *You reap what you sow*. It was reminiscent of the manner in which his old self had spoken.

If he had been the Vas of old, perhaps he would have prevented these circumstances. The young man who bore the duties of the Werrilocia family was proficient in gathering information and never hesitated to reprimand Sari if she attempted anything risky. It was the presence of people such as he around her

that had been her support from the shadows.

Xixu was already resolute that he would not let her come to harm here, but the memories of those she had lost only redoubled the feeling. Ignoring the biting cold, he applied more pressure with the hand he was holding over her wound.

The tip of Vas's rapier pointed at the shadow in human form. "In accordance with its scheme, you ruptured blood bags all over town. I imagine there has been a great degree of change beneath the earth, with the introduction of such a large amount of human blood suffused with yours. Not that it is any concern of mine, of course."

Sari did not reply. Irritation, mingled with hurt, flickered in her blue eyes.

Before their two foes, Xixu's breath caught. If everything had only been carefully laid groundwork to drive Sari into a corner, it would mean that the snake had completely led them by the nose. Their attention had been fully occupied by matters aboveground.

Xixu had attributed the recent lack of shade manifestations to the possible presence of the other two gods in Irede. But if that void had only been because the snake had been secretly storing its power...

Ever so slightly, Xixu pulled Sari in a little tighter. It would be difficult to defeat both Vas and the snake in their current circumstances. The best he'd be able to manage was to ensure Sari's escape.

And that was precisely what he had to do. It was human greed—born from a matter not even related to Irede—that had caused Sari to leave herself vulnerable. She could not be made to pay the price. Furthermore, he also had orders from his liege to protect her.

It took no time at all for Xixu to steel his resolve.

His footsteps made no sound, but Sari must have noticed that he'd shifted his center of gravity. She reigned him in with a whisper only he could hear. "No. I'm not leaving you behind, and I won't let you get hurt."

"But..."

“No.” Her fatigued voice was nonetheless unbending.

Focusing her attention back on the human shadow, Sari sluggishly brushed away the silver hair that had fallen across her face and sent it a glare.

“So you played a little game in your attempt to devour me? How amusing.”

“A token of gratitude for all you have done, White Moon. I shall drain you of your lifeblood until the very last drop.”

“Do as you wish.”

There was a soft noise, and then the silver hawk burst apart. Feathers scattered as high as the ceiling, and gore splashed across the tatami mats and dirty wooden walls. Yet in another moment, it was gone, sucked up into the black shadow.

As Vas’s left eye narrowed slightly, Xixu deftly withdrew a throwing needle from his breast pocket and let it fly.

When it pierced the shadow puppet’s forehead, Sari gripped Xixu’s arm and screamed, releasing a wordless, violent torrent of power. Pale light burst in every direction, painting over all it touched.

For a moment, Xixu thought he would be frozen down to his bones, but the incredible pressure passed into and through him harmlessly, as though it were no more than a simple breeze.

The black shadow by the wall, however, was scattered apart by the white wave of pure power. The muddied torrent then assaulted Vas too, and the young man raised his rapier to defend himself.

But a naked blade was thrust at his back.

It was not Xixu’s. It was a god-slaying sword, its scabbard bearing the crests of both the Werrilocia and Pale Moon and its blade sharpened to a fine edge. Vas, who’d managed to evade it just in time, glowered at the newcomer with cold eyes.

“What a pitiful sight to behold. I should advise you that strutting about in such a state is hardly convincing.”

“Thoma!”

It was Xixu who'd called his friend's name. Sari was limp in his arms, her blue eyes half closed and having lost their luster. Yet her focus was still on Vas—that was apparent from the frost spreading over the tatami. Her power had seized dominion over the room.

Vas, who had been unable to protect himself from that power, looked down at his cracked sword blade and frozen right side. Blood had slowly begun to ooze from his body, suggesting that physically he was still close to being human.

The chill wreathing Sari formed a number of sharp spearheads that pointed at Vas. He fixed his posture and breathed a small sigh. "It appears you've gotten the better of me. I wouldn't mind killing you all, but I'd like to leave as much power in reserve as possible..."

His eyes, resembling two brooding suns, looked as though they were evaluating a being who was not present. The snake that was the source of the now absent black shadow still lurked underground. Perhaps he had other matters that concerned him too.

The young man glanced at Sari, who was still in Xixu's arms. "Shall we take this back to square one?"

The words sought agreement, but received no reply. Sari's silver eyelashes raised as she opened her eyes to return the gaze of the young man who was her brother, cousin, and a god. Vas returned the look with a smile that could have been called gentle. Then he shrugged lightly and vanished.

Sari crumpled the moment he left, and Xixu hurriedly adjusted his hold on her. A dull throbbing pain ran through his right arm, the same side as the hand which gripped his military sword, and he finally noticed that it was horribly burned. It must have made contact with the spray from Vas's attacks that he'd guarded against. The sleeve was scorched off, and blood welled from the blistered skin. Perhaps it was the fault of the blood loss, but it also felt heavy and slightly numb.

Thoma sheathed his sword and frowned. "Burns, huh? Just wrap them up in something for now. Sari can heal them later."

"Right... Sorry. I'm getting her kimono dirty."

“Like it wasn’t already messed up enough. Don’t worry about it.”

Thoma took his little sister, no doubt concerned over Xixu’s injuries. She had passed out, and the other man wrapped her in his overcoat and gently lifted her into his arms. He spared a glance at the frozen corpse on the tatami.

The lower half of the dead man’s face had been destroyed, creating a large pool of blood that his head had sunk into, but the blood had frozen solid. Shadowy black flecks, perhaps remnants of the puppet, drifted above the scattered gore.

Neither foresight nor far-sight had been able to observe the shadowy agitator, an important figure from the Country of the Open Sea, who had stoked the flames of the continent’s current war. When Xixu had learned of that, he had thought it was simply because an inhuman being had accompanied him. But perhaps the matter was far simpler, and it was because the man had been in Irede—Sari’s domain—the entire time. Whatever the case, Xixu would no longer be able to ask the man to confirm his hypothesis.

It seemed that Thoma didn’t particularly care either. His gaze quickly moved on from the corpse, and he left the room in silence.

There were no words to be spoken for a death begotten by insolence.

The girl who was the pinnacle of the town called Irede was borne away on the other man’s back in cold indifference.

7. Fulfillment

It wasn't long before other members of the militia came running to the vacant house. Apparently, Thoma had been involved in cleaning up several assassins before he'd arrived, and Mifileu's information had gotten to him during the conflict.

After Xixu and Thoma entrusted the maidservant to the militia to be taken to a clinic, they took Sari back to Pale Moon. Along the way, militia and House Radi manservants caught up to them with a number of successive reports, including witness accounts of people suspected to be assassins suddenly hemorrhaging blood.

Xixu looked at the unconscious Sari. "Was that the aftershocks of her power?"

"No," Thoma replied. "It probably deemed that they'd served their purpose."

There was no need to inquire as to what "it" was. The answer was obvious.

The snake had utilized human conflict to further its goal of acquiring Sari. There was a high likelihood that its machinations had led Vendt to Irede in the first place. Shades had physical forms here; it was not unimaginable that the snake had acted under a guise of humanity.

And because it had led Vendt and its other pawns to Irede, it had been able to acquire Sari's blood. Even if it had not achieved that level of success, the simple act of mixing the blood of humanity and the divine and contaminating the town would have served to add to its power.

Either outcome would have been favorable for the snake, and even if Irede had caught on to its scheme, they would have still had no other option but to eliminate the assassins. In the end, the snake had had no motivation beyond the simple human desire to devour a god.

Xixu glanced at the sleeping Sari and sighed. "I'm sorry. I brought an outside conflict into Irede. I'll have the royal authorities take care of the postincident investigations."

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Thoma replied. “Vas would have been lurking around anyway, outside conflicts or no, and a falling-out between gods is an opportunity the snake never would’ve overlooked. If it hadn’t orchestrated this, it would have simply used another method.”

“Still...”

“Instead of looking back, focus on what comes next. Assuming we can foist the human-related troubles on the royal authorities, that still leaves us with two problems to see to. And something tells me they won’t be doing us the favor of taking each other out.”

Both the snake and Vas were after Sari’s life. It was unlikely that they’d ignore her and go at each other. In fact, it didn’t seem out of the question that Vas might support the snake, given his goal. The prospect of facing either one alone was already daunting enough, but the possibility of having to confront them together...

Xixu tensed. It was a high wall for a human to overcome. Would he be able to keep Sari safe?

When Pale Moon’s gate came into view, he saw a number of women waiting by it, even though it was before the time of the lantern lighting. They must have heard the news that Sari and the maidservant had been attacked.

Isha was the first of them to run over. She was visibly taken aback when she saw Sari’s ragged form. “How did this...?”

“We can talk later,” Thoma said. “The militia are taking the maidservant to a clinic. Leave Pale Moon closed today.”

Isha nodded and began giving instructions to the others.

With his unconscious sister in his arms, Thoma crossed through the gate. Xixu accompanied him, his eyes on Sari’s pallid complexion. As he stepped onto the paving stones, his wounded right arm began to throb.

Thoma glanced around briefly. “The annex...probably isn’t our best option. Let’s use the proprietress’s room. Come on, Xixu.”

“I’m banned from using it right now.”

“So? You’ll formally be her guest in two days. What does it matter if you’re a little early? It’s not a good idea for you two to be separated right now.”

“I...suppose you’re right.”

Although Vas had offered a clean reset, there was no telling when he might make his move again. It was best to remain by Sari’s side, at least until she recovered. Xixu entered the manor, still applying pressure on the cloth he was holding to his burns.

After laying his little sister down on the proprietress’s room’s bed, Thoma blew out a breath. “How did things get so messy? I wasn’t exactly expecting smooth sailing, but still...”

“Did you realize the snake was behind it?”

“No. I didn’t think it went beyond the group that had infiltrated the town looking for Sari. I’d planned to eliminate them in a single sweep once they were caught in our net.”

“So that’s why you made your move today?”

“Yeah.”

Xixu didn’t know whether Vendt had received information that Sari had taken her guest, but the remaining assassins must have taken advantage of his attack on her to make their move. Or perhaps he had instructed them to cause a diversion to distract from his departure from Irede, since he had acquired Sari and no longer had business in the town.

However, that would mean they had made enemies of the entirety of Irede. The thought of what they might have done sent a shiver down Xixu’s spine as he stood in the bedroom’s doorway.

Thoma sat cross-legged by Sari’s pillow. He looked up at the shadeslayer. “To be fair, I could only act because I had information coming in from all over the capital, meaning neither the royal authorities nor the Werrilocia were able to get a read on the nonhuman side of things either. From here on out, this is Irede’s problem.”

Xixu studied the man’s profile as he looked down at his sister. Gone was his

usual calm and easy air, and the cold resolve was plain to see. His expression was reminiscent of a naked blade.

There were three sacred houses who served the god, and Thoma shouldered the responsibility for one. His sharpened demeanor made Xixu straighten his own posture as he recalled that he, too, was one of her offerings.

Thoma seemed to ponder for a while as he watched his sister's sleeping face. Suddenly, he looked up and beckoned Xixu over. "Sorry, but watch Sari for a bit. I need to talk to the Midiridos."

"Of course. But are you sure you should be going out alone?"

"I've already asked them to come here; they should arrive soon. I'll need to inform them about the rescheduling of the guest-taking ceremony too."

"Ah, you're right." Xixu nodded. "It would be best if we postponed that." His own wounds aside, Sari was hurt. Even if she was capable of healing, it would be beneficial to allow her a period of rest.

Yet Thoma looked at him incredulously as he climbed to his feet. "What? No. We're moving it up. Tomorrow, at the latest, but tonight if we can manage it."

"What?"

"It's the only move we can make. As it stands, our side's lacking too much raw power. Though it depends on Sari, in the end. If she doesn't wake up today, it'll have to be tomorrow."

Xixu's thoughts were whirling around in a confused jumble as Thoma patted him lightly on the shoulder and made to leave the room. He turned to stop him, but the man beat him to it, looking back as though he'd just recalled something.

"Oh, and I'm sure you're already aware, but don't touch her. Even if it hastens her recovery, we can't go through with the ceremony if you're drained of vitality."

"Wait. I'm not following."

"I'll explain later."

The sliding door shut mercilessly. As the sound of Thoma's footsteps disappeared down the hallway, Xixu's bafflement redoubled. Yet he was also

hesitant to chase after the man for an explanation. Still holding his arm—which hurt terribly—he sat by Sari’s side.

The total lack of color in Sari’s face made her resemble a doll. Emergency or not, the fact remained that nothing had been done to treat her wounds beyond stopping the bleeding, and she had not even been changed. Perhaps if a woman had been present something could have been done, but there was only Xixu, and he was under strict orders to not touch her.

Feeling restless, he picked up a folded cloth beside Sari’s pillow. Taking care not to make direct contact, he began gently wiping away the blood around her mouth. A small sense of frustration twinged in his chest, and the pain in his right arm flared. It was gradually becoming numb. The sigh he released turned into words.

“If only I had...”

If only he had agreed to be her sacred offering when her divine self had first manifested, she might not have been cornered into such difficult circumstances. The events of today, at least, would not have happened. She would not have been stabbed and had her blood drained.

Xixu’s wounded arm hurt. The sun’s power had left it with severe burns, and the pain throbbed through the melted flesh down to the bone. He frowned, realizing that the unpleasant numbness had caused him to lose the sensation in his fingers.

He was thirsty. So thirsty that it was making him dizzy.

Fingers touched Sari’s neck. A thick, muddy emotion slithered within him.

In his mind, he recalled the crimson color of oozing blood, and a phantom sweet scent tickled his nose.

It was the fragrance of her blood. The flavor of it, as sweet as nectar.

Xixu jerked back, recognizing the shift in his own thoughts. He looked at his own bandaged right hand. Black shadows coiled around his fingers. When they had gotten there, he didn’t know.

“It couldn’t be...”

He hastily unwound the bandage. The wounds underneath looked no different, but instead of red blood oozing from the burned flesh, there was a thick black liquid.

“Wha...?”

Xixu did not know when the change had taken place, but he retrieved a small knife from his breast pocket and made a quick cut in the spot the black liquid was seeping out from. No blood poured forth, just more of the black substance. And that wasn't all. When he pushed the cut open, he saw that the flesh was stained black.

He stared at it, lost for words. The shadow coiling around his right hand resembled a formless shade, and the hand itself was blackening. And he knew why.

He'd thought the snake's essence had scattered earlier, but it had entered his wound, corroding it, no doubt to bypass Pale Moon's boundary and infiltrate a human body it could use to get close to Sari. It had done the same to a shaman in the past, whose body had become so corroded by the snake that it ceased to be his.

Or perhaps *this* had been the snake's goal all along. Sari could not wield excessive power against humans. As such, remaining within a human meant safety, so long as the snake remained hidden. And the people beside Sari in times of strife would be the same ones who were nearby when she was at her weakest.

Xixu tried to stand, to move away. But his right hand was faster, its five fingers closing around Sari's neck, so delicate that it seemed he could snap it with ease. His nails bit into her skin. She flinched and began to tremble, releasing a soft groan.

“Saridi!”

Xixu tried to pull his arm back, but he had no feeling beyond the elbow. The limb refused to obey his will. He grabbed it with his left and forcibly peeled it away.

Sari coughed quietly, her eyes opening a fraction. Yet rather than the blue of

her eyes, Xixu's attention was drawn to the red of the blood oozing from her neck. He made a small noise in the back of his throat.

He wanted it.

The color evoked such hunger it made him dizzy, as did the sweetness of her blood's scent.

He wanted to sink his teeth into her soft flesh and lap it up. He wanted to devour it to the last drop and make it his. His thoughts twisted and warped, leaving him unsteady. Was this what it meant to be poisoned by the snake?

Xixu looked at the right arm he was holding back. It was burning hot, and clearly the source of the snake's corruption. If he didn't do something about it, he would be taken over and lose his humanity.

The decision was easy.

Still holding his right hand, Xixu backed away across the tatami. When he was a safe distance away from Sari, he let go with his left hand and picked up the sword he'd left by the sliding door.

Sari wasn't entirely awake yet. Her eyes were unfocused and looking up at the ceiling.

As he watched his right hand reach out greedily toward her, Xixu drew his military sword. He stabbed its tip into the tatami and tightened his grip around its hilt with his left hand, angling the blade so that it would come down just above his right elbow.

"Xixu...?" Sari's voice sounded like she was still half in a dream.

Xixu dropped his weight onto his sword. The blade came down at his right arm.

But before it made contact, Sari screamed. "No!"

Divine power exploded forth with the sound of her voice. It shattered the sword's blade with ease and blasted Xixu away. He crashed into the sliding door, knocking it from its frame, and landed on the tatami in the neighboring room. The impact drove the air from his lungs, and he gasped for breath as he felt the aftershocks of the chill that had passed through his organs.

When Sari saw that he wasn't getting up, she crawled unsteadily across the floor toward him. "X-Xixu? Are you okay? It was all so quick—I couldn't control my strength..."

Her face was sickly white, and the hand she reached out toward him was shaking. Perhaps she thought she had killed him with that blow. Blue eyes watched Xixu, trembling with the fear of losing even more.

When he saw her pale fingers reach for him gingerly, Xixu whispered, "Run, Saridi."

"Huh?"

"The snake is coming."

As Xixu spoke, he pushed his left hand against Sari's shoulder and shoved. While her light body tumbled backward, he picked up his scabbard which had fallen nearby.

His right arm had gone dead, perhaps from the shock of her power. But the effect wouldn't last long. The snake still lurked within, having used his body as a shield. Xixu watched as more black liquid oozed from his right hand.

His head throbbed with pain.

The desire to slake his thirst swelled within him. It agitated his own desires and emotions, inflaming them as it gradually spread through his entire body.

Yet even if he were to be completely taken by the snake's essence, Xixu knew Sari would not choose to destroy him. He had realized it earlier.

So he extracted the long needle set into his scabbard. It had been enchanted by the king's maiden, and its purpose was to kill shades.

Xixu stabbed it through the back of his right hand without hesitation, avoiding the bones and pinning it to the tatami.

As Sari's eyes widened, Xixu did his best to keep his voice as gentle and calm as possible. "Saridi. Leave the room and get Thoma. Don't come back until he says it's okay."

Her brother would be able to ignore emotion in favor of making the most optimal choice, whether that was severing Xixu's arm or his neck. His first

priority would be the safety of his sister.

But Sari simply watched the black shadows coiling around his right hand, dumbfounded. “Oh... Is that...?”

Understanding dawned in her beautiful eyes and quickly became fury. She pressed her lips together firmly and reached out with both arms, touching Xixu’s pinned right hand. Power flowed from her fingertips...but she pulled back in shock when she saw the surface of his flesh freeze and crumble away.

“Wh-Why...?”

Xixu was unsure what to tell her. He’d half expected his outcome.

The flesh that had been corrupted by the snake’s power could not endure Sari’s. And as for the parts that had not yet been corrupted, she was barred from using the degree of power necessary to eradicate the snake’s essence.

In short, her power was simply not suited to ridding a person’s body of the snake.

Sari seemed to come to the same conclusion as tears welled up in her blue eyes. She had not even cried over her own injuries, but the pride she had borne herself with then was now gone.

Remorse lanced through Xixu, and he gritted his teeth. “Saridi. It’s okay. I’m sorry to ask you while you’re still hurt, but you have to leave the room.”

“D-Don’t worry about *me*! This is... I don’t...” Tears began to stream down her face.

Xixu was at a complete loss. How was he going to convince her?

Then he heard the sound of a door opening, followed by an exasperated voice. “What are you two doing in there? I can hear you from across the building. Are you planning on demolishing the place?”

“Thoma!” shouted Sari.

The sliding door was flung open. “Seriously, though, what were you doing? Did you get into a fight?” As Thoma entered, he frowned when he saw his sister on the ground and Xixu slumped in front of her. He took in the broken sliding door and the blood scattered everywhere. “Why is it that I leave you two alone

for barely a moment and it results in bloodshed? You should be saving your stamina.”

“Thoma...” Sari uttered weakly. She was sobbing.

“What? What’s wrong?”

Abruptly, Thoma fell silent, his breath dying in his throat. He had finally noticed the needle stabbed through Xixu’s hand.

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“What do you think it means for a person to die?”

There was no remonstrance in Thoma’s voice. Simply a bone-weary exhaustion, as though the life had been drained from him, and the faintest self-derision.

They were in Sari’s room in the annex, and the man was holding Sari—who was sitting on his knees—close to himself as he looked at Xixu, who sat on the floor by the wall. The young man had a needle through his hand and the back of his elbow, and his right arm and body had been bound by white cord.

Xixu tilted his head to the side. “I’m not sure how to answer that. Death of the body, perhaps. Or loss of the self.”

If those were the definitions of death, then he was on a slow advance toward them. The snake’s encroachment had been temporarily halted with the needles and divine cord, but it was not a permanent solution. A gloom settled over Xixu as he recalled Sari’s crying face.

She was currently curled up on Thoma’s knees, her eyes open but half-lidded, so that it was difficult to tell whether she was asleep or awake.

Thoma nodded, stroking his sister’s hair. “That’s about right. Most people meet their ends when their bodies die. A rare few, after their egos get painted over. But if you ask me, those aren’t the only ways for a human to die.”

“What do you mean?” Xixu looked up at his friend, unsure what this conversation had to do with their current circumstances.

Sari was likely asleep after all. Up until things had settled, she had been beside herself with terror that he was going to die. That she wasn’t saying

anything now had to mean she'd devoted her efforts to recovering her lost stamina. Her vacant eyes were unfocused, resembling glass marbles.

Thoma glanced at his sister in his arms. "I've been wondering why the brother god decided to show up when he did. The explanation is simple, I think. Sari's an unstable maiden."

"Are you referring to how her power is too strong for her?"

"That's part of it, but it's also because the god skipped a generation—her mother, remember? There was a gap of several years before Sari was born, and then her mother didn't stay around. She had me and her grandmother, of course, but that's no proper replacement."

The usual contempt Thoma showed for his parents was absent from his expression. He was starkly calm, as though he thought they didn't deserve any emotion from him, negative or otherwise.

"As you know, Pale Moon's maiden is unstable until she receives her sacred offerings. That imbalance is usually kept in check by the nature of her birth—via human flesh and blood—and her position as the mistress of Irede. But in Sari's case, her power is too great, meaning the instability is too. I think that vulnerability is what drew the other god in."

"Even if that's true, it wouldn't be Saridi's fault."

Thoma smiled upon hearing Xixu's blunt reply, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. His hands simply pulled his sister in closer, supporting the fragile god as though safeguarding the most precious of treasures.

"That's why, to tell you the truth, I've always thought that someone would die for her sake one day."

"You..."

Thoma's prediction could be said to have come true. In fact, more than one person had died because of their connection to Sari.

Yet why was he bringing it up now? It was plain that Sari would be hurt if she heard. Feeling something akin to indignation, Xixu opened his mouth to make his friend retract his words.

Thoma must have surmised his thoughts, however, because he forced a smile and added, “Not for the reason you’re thinking of. I’m talking about her sacred offering. Her companion.”

“Her sacred offering?” Xixu was confused; did that mean his friend had foreseen his current predicament?

Thoma smiled and placed a hand on Sari’s head. “Only one person needs to die for her. No more. Do you understand what I mean, Sari?”

“No.”

Her reply surprised Xixu. He’d thought she was asleep.

Sari remained unmoving. Her eyes were still vacant. But there was no mistaking that she was there.

“Yes, you do,” Thoma insisted, as though trying to convince a stubborn child. “You can do it. It’s okay. There’s no other way, now that things have come to this.”

“But...”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to be afraid of the prophecy anymore.”

Sari fell silent. Her only movement was the slight trembling of her long eyelashes. Then, she closed her eyes.

Thoma’s gaze shifted from her to Xixu. “Hey, Xixu. Are you prepared to die for her sake?”

“Yes.”

He replied without a moment’s hesitation. Thoma smiled. Though there was a slight loneliness within it, it was happy, like when he’d talked about the guest-taking ceremony. Yet the expression quickly vanished, replaced by a dignified nod.

“Then it’s settled. Xixu. Sari will kill you, and you will meet with the third death. It’s as simple as that.”

“The third death?”

Death of the body. Death of the self. What else? Without knowing why, Xixu

looked at his right arm.

Thoma's smile was tinged with sorrow. "It's nothing complicated. Just the death of a human. Tonight, you shall die...and become what Sari is."

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A death as a human. A transition into a god.

It sounded like sheer nonsense. If he had not heard it in this town, from *her* brother, he would have dismissed it out of hand.

They had moved from Sari's room in the annex to the bathroom in Pale Moon's main building. As cold water was poured over him, Xixu asked, "Is it really possible?"

"It is. The man who would become the god's sacred offering is the binding chain that ties her to humanity. Until she conceives the next incarnation of herself, it is he who is the closest to the divine."

Thoma finished by dumping another tub of cold water on him. Xixu's breathing stopped for a moment; the water had collided with his face.

Though the aqueous assault was so fierce that one might assume Thoma held a grudge, it was evidently for the purpose of purification. By all rights, Xixu should have gone through the lengthy process of a vegetarian diet abstaining from meat and alcohol, but they didn't have the time. Xixu accepted the water torture—Thoma really wasn't holding back—still clothed in his uniform, as the divine cord had to remain in place.

Thoma ladled the water, which would go down his windpipe if he opened his mouth at the wrong moment, from the wooden bathtub. It didn't seem to be anything other than ordinary. Was the man just using it as a distraction from his worries?

Xixu remained silent and watched the water drip from his bangs. If he started doubting his friend now, there'd be no end to it.

Thoma bent over and scooped more water into the tub. "You could say that the god's companion is a pseudo-demigod himself. He shifts halfway away from his humanity via consummation with her, thus binding the maiden to the world

of man. It also serves as a testament that the god has received her payment. Of course, I said ‘pseudo’ for a reason. Once the child is born, he returns to being human.”

“I see...”

“So, in your case, we’re going to try shifting you the *whole* way. Your existence will synchronize with Sari’s, becoming eternal.”

“Is that even poss—” Xixu closed his mouth as water crashed into his face with an audible *splash*.

Thoma looked at him as though nothing had happened. “It is. This is Sari we’re talking about. There’s precedent too.”

“There is?!”

“Yes. A century or so ago, the maiden had a poor constitution. She died shortly after childbirth, but her guest accepted her power and safeguarded it until their daughter was old enough. It’s exceedingly rare, but it has happened.”

Thoma dumped the tubful of water over Xixu’s right side. “Our current crisis is similar,” he continued. “But if you undergo the same process, that’s all the more raw power our side has access to. Our opponents would be difficult for Sari to handle alone, but with you in the picture, even if they come at you together, it’ll be two against two.”

“Raw power... You mentioned that earlier too. Don’t tell me you were always planning for this to—”

This time, it wasn’t water that flew at him, but the empty tub. Xixu jerked his neck to the side, barely evading it. His eyes met Thoma’s—the man was smiling.

“Hey, the process doesn’t matter so much as the result, right?”

“And the tub, just now?”

“My hands slipped.”

Xixu didn’t reply. He had a lot he wanted to say, but even Thoma couldn’t have expected that he’d be corrupted by the snake. At this rate, he would die anyway sooner or later, so there was no choice but to go through with the man’s plan.

As Thoma picked up the tub—which had bounced off the wall and come back—he paused for a moment and inspected his drenched friend. “Should I dump a little more on you...?”

“I’m surprised that I haven’t caught a cold yet as it is.”

“What does it matter? You’ll be dying soon anyway.”

What a thing to say. Still, Xixu couldn’t exactly refute it.

After a moment of thought, he decided to voice what he thought was the most obvious question. “How will my existence be ‘shifted’ after I die?”

If the process involved dying and being revived, then he wanted to spare Sari from having to watch, especially with how volatile she currently was. It was better if she saw his corpse after she’d calmed down, rather than have to watch him die.

“What are you talking about?” Thoma replied, as if it were obvious. “Have you not been listening?”

“I have.”

“Then why are you asking about something you should already know? The sacred offering transforms via his consummation with the god. Sari will be the one killing you *and* bringing you back.”

Xixu digested the words. He sank into silence, not quite able to internalize their meaning. The water assault immediately restarted.

After spending a while disinterestedly ladling water, Thoma’s hands stopped. “So, how is it? Can you move your right arm now?”

Xixu looked down at the limb, bound by two needles and the divine cord. He hadn’t been able to move it until now, but he tentatively focused on his icy fingers. Though they’d lost almost all feeling, he found he could direct them with natural ease, to the point it was almost anticlimactic. He made a fist, opened it, then tried lifting his arm up.

“It’s back to normal.”

“Oh? Then you can remove the cord and needles. It’ll be fine for a while.”

After carefully extracting his restraints, Xixu was relieved to realize that the abnormality seemed no longer present. His burns remained, but the cold water had chilled them to the point where the pain was only a mild tingling.

Xixu brushed his drenched forelocks back with his right arm. "It looks like the cold water really had an effect."

"Of course. Did you think I was just doing that to spite you?"

Xixu maintained his silence. Thoma had read his thoughts.

Of course, the purification on his arm was only a temporary measure. A gloom settled over Xixu again as he began taking off his drenched jacket.

Thoma watched him, but then suddenly seemed to recall something. "Oh, right. Listen, because this is important."

"Yes?"

"During the guest-taking, conception becomes easier. But if Sari actually conceives, her power will weaken, so you'll have to avoid that. Let her do what she wants to you, but don't make a move yourself."

Again, Xixu tried to digest his friend's words. They made absolutely no sense to him. Seeing that he had stopped partway through removing his jacket, Thoma smiled impishly.

"In other words, don't finish."

The man delivered the line as if it were the last bit of mischief he'd ever indulge in, tossing the empty tub into the bath.

Xixu was too speechless to react.

8. New Bed

“No.”

Sari listened to the sound of footsteps coming and going from the proprietress's room as tradesmen replaced the sliding door. She was in a corner in the inner room, having changed into a *yukata*, with her knees curled up to her chest. Her brother, who was crouching before her, ran a hand through his hair.

“Come on, Sari. At this rate, Xixu's going to be corrupted by the snake and die. You know that.”

She did, all too well. But she still didn't want to go through with it. “I don't have to make him *entirely* inhuman, though, do I?” she protested, her voice hoarse. “And just lying with me might be enough to purify the snake's essence from him.”

“But that's not a sure thing, and the price is too steep if it fails. The snake's essence has a high affinity with humans, which will only be more pronounced in Xixu's case because, like the snake, he has a strong attachment to you. Removing his humanity is the safest option.”

“I can't do that to him just because it's better for *me*...” It just didn't seem right to kill him and strengthen his existence so they stood a better chance against the snake and Vas, simply because they were after her. “Tying him to my being would mean making him a part of me. He'd have to truly die.”

“Yeah.”

Her brother's affirmation made Sari flinch. She should have been preparing for her kagura dance instead of protesting. She pulled her knees closer into herself.

Thoma himself had much to see to, but here he was, with her. “He's prepared to die for you,” he said matter-of-factly.

Sari flinched again.

“Don’t try to shoulder this burden alone, Sari. You can depend on Xixu.”

She remained silent. The last time she had tried to resolve matters alone, her union with her divinity had backfired, and she had lost her childhood friend and cousin. Xixu had tried to help her then too. If she had taken his outstretched hand, would things have turned out differently?

“The covenant between man and god might weaken once he loses his humanity, but I know he’ll make up the difference and tie you to the human world himself. It doesn’t matter if he’s human or a part of you. He himself *is* human. A good man. And that won’t change.”

He treated others with respect, honored their wills, and strove to understand them. He forged a path with sincerity as his blade, and lived with care and love.

His virtue was the result of the values humanity had nurtured throughout its long history. So even if he became no longer human, he wouldn’t change. He would protect Sari, becoming the tie that bound her to this town. Each time she saw him, she would think of the beauty in being human.

That was the man she’d fallen in love with. The man she’d chosen to be her one and only, forever.

“I know.”

The murmur fell from her like a shed tear. In truth, she was already prepared. She would not let him meet his end at the hand of another; she would do it herself. It was simply that she had wanted to try saying: “I didn’t want this.” From the very beginning, she had wanted more than anyone else for him to remain unchanged.

Sari cast her gaze downward. Her eyes blurred with moisture. “Do you think he’ll hate me for this?”

“Don’t be silly. That’s what your kagura dance is for—to show him yourself at your most beautiful.”

“Father ran away from mother when she did it.”

“Don’t lump Xixu in with *him*. As guests, they couldn’t be more different.” Thoma smiled. “Just be you. A lovely, undaunted, enchanting flower. That’s all

you need to do, and he'll never be able to bring himself to leave."

"That's easy for *you* to say..."

Still, she wanted to believe. Not in her brother's words, but in Xixu, who wanted her to be his wife. Even knowing that she wasn't human, even though he'd been on the receiving end of her selfishness and her temper more times than she could count, he had always stood his ground and looked her in the eye.

So she would have faith in his love. Rather than let herself be alone with her unease, she would strive to live alongside him.

Sari wiped her eyes with her sleeve. "Okay. I'll do it."

Her path was set now; she couldn't show him her tears. She would show him her true heart, how she had felt until the events of this morning: eager anticipation for the guest-taking ceremony. She would greet him with a beautiful smile, full of hope for the life they would spend together as husband and wife. Surely that was the greatest gift she could give in return for the young man who was giving up his life for her sake.

As Sari rose to her feet sluggishly, her brother smiled suddenly and leaned in close to her ear, whispering. Upon hearing the same warning he'd given Xixu, her eyes widened.

"Huh? I suppose you're right, but is that really okay?"

"Regardless of whether it is or not, you'll be better able to concentrate that way, right? There's no helping it."

"It *would* make things easier for me. But won't it be unpleasant for him?"

"Who do you think we're talking about here? He'll be fine." Her brother patted her on the shoulder and left the room. Evidently his duties could truly no longer wait.

Sari pouted as she saw him off. "Why do *you* get to tell us what to do...? He's *my* husband, you know."

After indulging in another moment of sulking, Sari straightened her posture. The look in her eyes became that of the proprietress of myth, and her childish

petulance was replaced by a stark tranquility.

This night, she would change Xixu's fate.

It was the pride of a god. The arrogance to wish for a life alongside humanity, yet take that very bond and pull it to her.

But if she could help it, the feelings that had led her to make that choice would never change. For him, she would offer up all over her love.



After the purification was complete, Xixu changed into a dark kimono. He had been told to wait until everything was ready, and since he had been contaminated by the snake, it was best he stayed put regardless.

As such, Xixu idled in the flower room, sipping at the tea he had brewed for himself. It was when the world outside the window had darkened and moonlight began to filter through that someone finally came to fetch him.

"Our sincerest apologies for the delay, Master Xixu." The maidservant who had opened the door bowed deeply. Rather than her usual plain kimono, she wore a blossom-pink *furisode*—a long-sleeved formal kimono traditionally worn by unmarried women. She looked embarrassed when she noticed Xixu's surprise. "Today is a special day for the proprietress," she explained. "Everyone is wearing their best. Though, as your guide, I am the only one allowed outside my room."

"Right..." Shaking off his surprise, Xixu bowed his head. "Sorry. This is a formal occasion, but I've made you change the schedule on such short notice."

"Please don't pay it any mind. Everyone was thinking that it might come earlier than planned." The maidservant bowed again, then began leading Xixu down the polished hallway.

Unlike usual, the front door was closed. The hanging lantern had instead been strung up in the entryway, casting its dim, pale light upon the surroundings.

The manor was utterly silent, the darkness of its hallways softened only by the basket lanterns that had been set at spaced intervals. It no longer looked like Pale Moon, but the domain of a god. Xixu found himself unconsciously

straightening his posture.

He followed the maidservant up the stairs leading to the second floor. She stopped midway on the landing and turned to him. "From here, please proceed alone. Maintain your silence on the second floor."

"All right. Thank you."

Xixu ascended to the second floor, which was dedicated to the guest rooms. Though he knew where the proprietress's room was, he saw that the hallway leading to it was the only one lit by the lanterns. Guided by their light, he headed deeper into the manor.

At the end of the long corridor, as per the instructions he'd been given, he sat kneeling before the sliding door. It opened as though it had been awaiting his presence.

Xixu bowed, then entered the room, stepping onto the tatami. Four others were present.

Directly in front of him sat Thoma of House Radi, alongside the Director of the Midiridos and her successor, Tozu, all in formalwear. To Xixu's right, in the room's corner, knelt Isha, wearing a *tomesode*—a formal kimono traditionally worn by married women. From her position, she must have been the one to slide open the door.

There was a sanctity to the mood in the room that resembled a fine thread pulled taut.

Before Thoma was a lacquered standing tray, bearing only a silver *sakazuki*—a saucerlike drinking cup. Tensé held a four-stringed *biwa*, and Tozu a bell and a *tsuzumi* hand drum. Each instrument bore the Midiridos crest: grass with roots.

The solemn atmosphere here, before god, was but another side of Irede. Xixu broke from his spell, advanced into the center of the room, and sat down. Thoma rose and silently placed the lacquered tray in front of him. Xixu bowed once, then drank the clear rice wine.

No words were spoken. He had heard it was because they would pollute their breaths, yet Tozu did not have a flute today.

As the music began, Xixu reflexively glanced at the sliding door to the side. Behind it was the bedchamber, where Sari waited alone.

The kagura dance did not have an accompaniment. Like the cold water and the sacred rice wine, the music was for Xixu's purification.

The tune was at times loud, and at times soft. He listened in silence as the music diffused through him, mixing with his body like the wine he had swallowed.

A complex tangle of emotions swelled within him as he reflected on the path he'd taken, from his upbringing in the royal capital to here. He remembered the girl who had greeted him at the door, the first time he had come to Pale Moon.

Despite himself, he'd been captivated by her, thinking her beautiful. Her silver hair and white kimono had seemed dyed in moonlight, and her blue eyes had reminded him of the depths of the ocean. When he'd been told she was a maiden, he hadn't been too surprised.

Irede, the town that inherited myth, vassal of no country. A courtesan house, known for its holy courtesans. The girl who lingered there had looked as though she were dozing, drifting in a reverie as she awaited the day she would bloom.

Would that be today, this night?

The music stopped.

So still was the silence that one could have heard the echo of a dropped pin. Xixu turned away from his reflections on the past and raised his head.

The other four occupants of the room bowed, then left the proprietress's room—Thoma with the tray, the Midiridos with their instruments.

Now alone, a young man looked to the room in which a god awaited.

He did not need to call her name. Without a sound, the sliding door slowly opened, revealing a single woman, kneeling. She bowed to him deeply.

Her raiment was formed from countless layers of thin white silk. Bells were sewed into its flowing hems, each one gleaming a clear silver. Her long silver hair was held up by two ornate hairpins, the ends of which had been inlaid with a pair of large pearls. Xixu recognized them as the gift he'd once given her.

Her pale, folded hands retreated as she rose from her bow, and a lock of silver hair rustled against her shoulder. She raised her head, placing him under the gaze of a god.

Clear, boundless blue, harboring solitude and love—Xixu knew those eyes. Today, however, they held a serenity he was seeing for the first time.

With how the shadows of night adorned her ethereal beauty, she could have been a true courtesan, or an innocent fake. Her divine essence—which he could sense even at this distance—chilled the room, causing the tatami mats to crackle softly. Only a moment had passed, but this was her domain now. Xixu realized that he felt tense.

Suddenly, she smiled at him and raised her silk-clad right arm. The sound of the bells sewed into her sleeve flowed like a wave. Her delicate form rose, and she smoothly took one step forward, her feet bare. It made no sound. All that accompanied the movement were the bells.

Then, she began her dance—a dance for one man alone.

Bells rang.

Each tone spread outward, like ripples on water, layering over the air. They were expressions of her power, the music of a god.

The woman danced, graceful limbs outstretched and trailing silk in their wake. Each time her small toes made contact with the tatami, they created blossoms of ice the size of one's palm. The chill became white bands of frost, settling over her flowing raiment.

Sari did not smile.

She was bewitchingly captivating, touchingly sweet. Her slender arms entwined and extended toward the heavens. Her exposed feet blossomed flowers into being.

The sound of bells was all there was, growing distant, closer, distant, closer. Soft breaths were drawn through crimson lips. Fingers sheathed in chill skimmed the air. Xixu could only watch each delicate gesture in silent wonder.

Such was the kagura dance's beauty that he almost forgot to breathe, and yet more overwhelming still was the god's power. Each time her slender fingers were directed at him, each time her blue eyes met his, he felt the pressure increase on his soul. Breathing became difficult, and his consciousness grew distant.

Her small frame seemed to equal the moon, shining in the sky. He was reminded that he was in the presence of the unfathomable, the certainty settling into his core without conscious thought. It felt as though a harsh light had been shone upon him, searing his very being.

Countless bells rang. Their tones folded outward like the heavens themselves.

By all rights, it was through this kagura dance that a person would first come into contact with the god. Sari's father had seen Distira's dance and, fearing it, had begged forgiveness. His heart had been incapable of enduring such a difference in existence.

But Xixu bore the pressure, and accepted it. They were both so different from the world around them in their own ways, and she had chosen him. That served as his pillar of support, genuine and unadulterated.

Sari looked at him.

Her small lips drew into a lonely smile, and she lowered her outstretched arms. Her slender legs extended, and before long, she was standing before him.

The woman who was a god knelt on the tatami and placed her hands before her again, as though time had reversed its course. She bowed solemnly. Her dance had come to its end.

The air was tense. Then, she raised her head, seemingly bashful. "How was it?" she asked tentatively. "It wasn't too strange, was it?"

"No..." Xixu cut himself off before he could continue with his usual reflexive response. He still didn't know whether he was allowed to speak.

But Sari was looking up at him as though waiting for an answer. He nodded, feeling a little embarrassed. "It was...very beautiful."

As clumsy as the compliment was, she smiled in relief.

The aftertaste of the kagura dance still lingered in Xixu's body. Each ripple created by a bell had possessed a clear echo, rebounding within him time and again. He felt a strange sense of weightlessness, as though his existence had become uncertain. Like the ringing in his ears despite the silence, reality did not feel real. Xixu shook his head lightly.

Sari smiled faintly when she saw, then reached her arms out toward him. "Take me."

The gesture was childishly adorable, yet inviting. Xixu opened his mouth, then decided against it and rose to his feet. He took her up into his arms, where she resembled a delicate flower.

As he carried her to the bedchamber, he did his best to maintain his calm as he spoke. "Thoma gave me a warning."

"I know. He told me too. But you'll be fine, right?"

"I...wouldn't trust me that much, if I were you."

He didn't wish to betray her faith in him over something like this, but depending on how matters turned out, he didn't have much confidence in himself.

However, Sari just giggled. Repeating his mantra of calm, Xixu entered the inner room. He'd been inside on many previous occasions, but the implications this time were entirely different, making it look completely unfamiliar.

All that illuminated the dim bedchamber was the meager light of the paper-enclosed lamp in the corner, set in its small, wooden frame stand. That, and the pale moonlight filtering through the sliding paper windows.

The bloodstains from the afternoon had been wiped clean, and the furnishings—paper sliding door included—had been replaced or rearranged. The bedsheet, which had not a single wrinkle, bore the emblem of Pale Moon, faintly visible in the low light.

Xixu laid Sari atop it, taking care not to disturb the countless bells. She rose into a kneel and patted the spot at her side.

“Sit.”

“Mmm.” Xixu obeyed, recalling Thoma’s advice to let Sari do as she pleased with him.

Meanwhile, she had brought her hands behind her neck, beginning the process of undoing the many threads holding her raiment in place. The rustling of clothing mixed with the ringing of bells. As the layers of silk fell one by one, Xixu closed his eyes and thought of things entirely unrelated.

Cruelly, Sari’s voice brought him back to reality. “Lie down on your back. Oh, and undo your sash.”

“Is that so I don’t dirty the kimono when I die...?”

“Of course not. What kind of lively corpse are you planning to turn into? You can just shift the knot to the side if you prefer. Otherwise it’ll dig into your back, won’t it?”

“Ah.” Still keeping his eyes closed, Xixu adjusted his kimono sash and lay down, taking care not to bump into Sari.

Just as he began to wonder if she was going to start wringing his neck or something, he felt a gentle weight settle atop him. His eyes opened reflexively, and the sight of her form illuminated by moonlight robbed him of words.

She had removed her hairpins, letting her glossy silver hair free. The outer raiment was gone. All she wore was a kimono undergarment weaved from thin silk, the sash undone so that the garment was open wide. It might as well have been nothing at all.

She sat atop him, her hands on his stomach. Her neck looked delicate to his eyes, and her skin was so flawless it seemed almost see-through. From the gentle swelling of her chest to her slender waist, there wasn’t a single blemish, her unconcealed form drawing arcs as beautiful as the dance she had just performed.

The sight was madly intoxicating, yet also so daunting and impenetrable that base lust seemed an unthinkable emotion.

Unfortunately, Xixu had grown accustomed to her divine side.

Perhaps an ordinary man would have shrunk back. But for him, the sight of her was tantamount to a violent blow to his confidence in his ability to maintain his reason—confidence he hadn't had much of to begin with.

Pulling free of his stupor, Xixu crossed his arms over his eyes and drew a shaky breath. "I'd appreciate it if you could put something on. Or move off me."

"Clothes would only dull the senses. Bear with it."

"But..."

Before he could finish, a cool hand slipped into the folds of his kimono, across his chest. In the time it took for a shiver to run down his spine, his kimono was open and she was lying atop him.

Her soft skin seemed as though it would melt where he touched it. It harbored an inhuman cold, but it was a cold he'd become accustomed to. The direct contact almost torched his remaining reason.

How much more pleasant would it have been, if this hadn't been the guest-taking ceremony, but an ordinary night they shared?

The desire was making Xixu dizzy. He opened his mouth to speak once more.

"Saridi. I'd like to hurry up and die now."

"What a thing to say. We have to do this gradually, or it'll be dangerous."

"I can't faint or pass out? I'd really like to."

"You can't."

Her breath on his skin accelerated his heartbeat. All she was doing was lying atop him, but at this rate, he didn't know if he could endure. He wanted to pull her delicate frame into an embrace.

Xixu inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, lowering his arms. "At the time of the first nation's founding, the land was lit by pillars of light and fires of plain wood —"

"No reciting from history books!"

"Could I have a metal rod or the like to grip onto? One that you wouldn't mind me crushing."

“You can hold on to my legs.”

“That would only make it worse...”

Sari breathed a small sigh, then carefully sat upright. She laid her hands over the place where she had ascertained his heartbeat...and her ten fingers sank gently into his skin.

It was like the times she cast her spells on him, except far deeper. The god's cold fingers brushed directly against his heart. Pure power flowed from them into him.

The shock of it made Xixu's back arch. Sari, her hands still buried within his chest, tottered to the side. Fearing her falling, his right arm shot up to support her. Flustered, Sari carefully withdrew her hands and peered at his face.

“I'm sorry. Did that hurt?”

“No... I'm fine. It was just reflex.”

“I'll be slower.”

Sari laid down atop him again. Yet instead of bringing her ear to his chest, she moved her face closer to his. Blue eyes studied him, then closed.

Gently, naturally, he placed his hand against her cheek. As he entwined his fingers in her silver hair, he accepted the sweet taste of her kiss.

The first was light, nothing more than a peck. When their lips separated, Sari was smiling softly. Her slender arms wrapped around his head.

The next kiss was to instill the breath of a god.

The chill ran down his throat. The power diffusing through his body resonated with his heartbeat, sending a light numbness down to the tips of his arms and legs.

It was cold, but not uncomfortable. The feeling was pleasant, as though he were making a descent into places unknown.

Xixu opened his eyes and looked at the woman right above him. “That feels strange.”

“It's because you're approaching death.”

Sari's smile was lonely, and she looked to be on the verge of tears. But when she saw that he'd noticed, she hid the expression with a smile much like her brother's.

"Ordinarily, I'm supposed to change you while we're joined. That way, you wouldn't notice when it happened."

"Is there something wrong with me noticing? This is nothing."

"I don't want you to hate me."

Sari kissed him again. He felt as though the power she breathed into him was slowly pulling him somewhere distant. A frail, desolate whisper reached his ears.

"I didn't want to kill you."

Gently, Xixu caressed her head. "Like I said. This is nothing."

She gave him another lonely smile. Her soft lips touched his eyelids. Her power soaked into him like a wave through the contact of their bare skin.

There was a saying that referenced a slow death by a silk cord, rather than a rope. Perhaps this was what it meant: fingers brushing the heart and instilled breath.

As the process repeated, he could sense himself becoming more distant from the world. If this was death, then death was a slow thing, like sinking beneath the water's surface on a moonlit night.

Sari's cold body was pleasant to the touch. Fighting the urge to pull her into an embrace was agonizing. But even that desire was swallowed by the sluggishness seeping into his mind and body, so akin to sleep.

He was slowly being pulled somewhere.

Somewhere far, far away, leaving only the barest thread of a connection behind.

Quietly, with tender care.

As though being loved.

Then suddenly, there was nothing.

“Xixu.”

Though she whispered his name in his ear, there was no response to her voice.

Sari sat up and looked down at his face. There was still a hint of color left in it. She gently traced a finger over his closed eyes and lips.

This was his death. The end of the life of a man who had been born as a human, loved and raised to be honest and upright.

He had not a wound on him. This was simply the conclusion of what it meant to be loved by a god.

“So kind... Why did you give me everything?”

Though she tried to endure it, her voice shook. Tears fell onto his face. She knew this was the best choice. It would wipe away the snake’s corrosion, and his death would also fulfill the terms of his prophesied fate.

Then, she would bring him back. As an existence akin to her, as a *part* of her.

Yet, death was still death.

As much as she had not wanted to do it, she had killed him with her own hands. That was something she would never forget. It had not been long after she’d met him that she’d begun to envy the woman he’d spend his life loving. Now, in exchange for that life, she would bear this sin until the end of her days.

“I’m sorry.”

A man more decent than anyone had been given an existence stranger than anything. That was what the gods were. Though they might wish only to live alongside others, they caused harm on the scale of entire lives.

But because that was who she was, she wished to repay his sacrifice. Not by granting him the position of a sacred offering to unite her with her divinity, nor as the bond that tied her existence to the world of man.

She simply wished to repay him with her love.

“You are half of me. All of my love.”

Sari wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and inhaled deeply. Once again, her pale fingers sank into his chest. She touched the soul that still remained in his body and poured power into it, slowly blending his existence with hers.

White light birthed in his chest, dim but pure, illuminating the god's new bed the color of the pale moon. Sari's exhaled breath fell atop it.

The power and soul that had mixed with her being seemed liable to spill through the gaps in her fingers. But she let not a drop escape, bundling it together with loving care.

Praying that he would remain his unchanged self, the woman who was a god called a name. No longer a common one, but a true one.

"Xixu," she called, and issued a command. "Be here, by my side."

Faint light overflowed from his chest. Sari watched it through vision blurred with tears as she gently withdrew her hands. She touched her husband's cheek. It had become inhumanly cold.

An eternity later, his eyes slowly opened.

He thought he heard her voice.

When had he fallen asleep? At some point, his thoughts had cut off. Dimly, Xixu opened his eyes and looked at the dark ceiling, thinking.

Distant.

An existence.

So small as to be a single point.

Connection and power.

Diffusion.

Place.

Void.

And meaning.

“Don’t push too hard so quickly.”

He heard Sari’s voice. It sounded very close. Physically, yes, but also as though there were a greater connection.

Xixu looked up at the woman sitting atop him. “Saridi...?”

“It’s not over yet. I’m adding more.”

Pouring new water into an earthenware pot that had gone dry. That was what she was trying to do.

To him, the change in his being had seemed like a severance and reconnection, as abrupt and quick as a splash of water, but perhaps that had not been the case. Sari’s cheeks bore tear tracks. Seeing them, Xixu pushed himself upright.

“Saridi?”

“Huh? Wha— Huh?”

He held her firmly in his arms. A solitary other. He had known that was what she was. He’d thought he didn’t care.

What did it matter if she was different from a human? It changed nothing. That was simply who she was, and he would accept that. He would not deny any part of her. She could be however she wished to be.

But now that he had changed, he saw her with new eyes. There, in his arms, was a woman. Just a woman. His dearest partner, like how she saw him, who had endured her loneliness all this time.

Xixu tightened his embrace, as though to console her. “I’m sorry I took so long.”

She had waited in this house for a single guest. For the man to whom she would dedicate her love. All the while bearing the fear he would not come.

“I love you.”

But she no longer needed to feel alone. Xixu took her pale hand and kissed it, a silent vow.

Sari said nothing.

When Xixu raised his head, he felt a pang of awkwardness to see her still staring at him blankly. Just as he began to wonder if he'd done something wrong again, she began to cry, biting down on her crimson lips to prevent herself from making any noise.

Sari placed her brow against his chest, her tears spilling down to dampen his chest.

"You...idiot..."

"Just to make sure you know, how I feel about you hasn't changed."

"I know."

He had loved her before, and he still did. It was simply that now, he finally understood her loneliness, and how scared she had been.

Xixu stroked her long silver hair soothingly as she cried. Perhaps it was because the daunting tension of interacting with a god had thinned somewhat, but it felt as though Sari had returned to being the girl she had been when he'd first met her. Again, it struck him how hard she had been pushing herself.

"Idiot... I've always loved you, you know. From the beginning."

"This is the first I'm hearing about it."

"That's because I gave up trying!"

Even her rebuke sounded childish. He knew she was trying to chastise him, but it only came off as adorable.

Yet—to his own mortification—it was difficult for him to ignore the feeling of her body against his.

When her tears finally made way for a smile, Xixu dispelled his wicked thoughts and nodded.

"There's still half left to go?"

"Mm-hmm... Lie down. I'll be too clumsy in this position."

"Can I pass out?"

"No. But you can touch anywhere you'd like, as long as all you do is touch. It's all yours, after all."

“That would only make things worse.”

He was exhausting his spirit in a different sense than dying. Reluctantly, Xixu removed his arms from round her slender waist and lay back down. Sari spread herself atop him, her blue eyes studying him from up close. She looked happy.

“Any requests?”

Xixu didn't reply. What, exactly, did she mean? A number of ideas crossed his mind and were just as quickly dismissed. He scolded the part of him that had wanted to speak them aloud and took a deep breath. He stroked a lock of silver hair that had fallen across the sheets.

“I do have one to make, but don't answer. I'll ask you again another time.”

“Okay.”

“I want you, Saridi.”

Honestly, his sheer lack of tact astounded even himself. But upon hearing his wish, her lips drew back in delight. The courtesan of Pale Moon smiled sweetly.

“If you ask me, you couldn't have said anything better.”

9. Half Moon

Before Xixu realized it, the bedroom's lantern had extinguished. Perhaps the candle within had burned out.

He sat up in the gloom and stroked the hair of the woman sleeping beside him, then reached over her exhausted form for the folded blanket and spread it across her.

The ceremony that had carefully changed him little by little into Sari's sacred companion had required her utmost focus. Toward the end, she had been visibly dozing off, and she'd fallen into slumber atop him the moment she was done.

Xixu gently shifted her to the side and sat on the bed cross-legged, breathing a single sigh. "I need a cold bath." He wanted to cool off not only his body, but his head, especially after all the mental pressure he'd endured.

Fixing his disheveled kimono as he rose to his feet, Xixu suddenly recalled the matter of his right arm. He held the palm under the moonlight to examine it.

No trace of his burns remained. At some point they had vanished, and so had the presence of the snake inside his wounds. Sari's breath must have washed it away.

Xixu looked down at his body. It bore the same form as when he'd been human, but now he had been...shifted out of alignment.

He wanted to say he didn't feel much different, but then of course, his field of vision had changed. What he could see was still the same, but the *way* he saw it differed. Even the room's sliding door felt as though he were observing it from a terribly high height, his mind recognizing it as one detail among the many that made up the world.

He would feel drunk until he grew accustomed to it. Vas had mentioned something similar once, when he'd borrowed Sari's power.

Xixu left the proprietress's chambers, heading to where he'd had cold water

dumped on him earlier in the day. Though the ordinary guest room was usually for courtesans and their customers, it had been prepared for use for the ceremony today. Upon opening the sliding door, he found Thoma, Isha, and the pair of Midiridos lounging around a low table.

Thoma glanced up at Xixu, then turned back to the other three, grinning suggestively. He held a wine saucer in his hand. "See? What did I tell you?" he asked. "He's propriety incarnate. I knew he'd heed my warning."

"He needn't have done so at all, in my opinion. There's no *guarantee* that she would have conceived. It was the guest-taking ceremony. Why not let them enjoy it?"

Xixu remained silent. It wasn't hard to follow what they were talking about, and he didn't have the spare energy to join in right now.

Instead, he entered the room, picked up a wooden tray from the low table, and smacked Thoma over the head with it. It made a pleasant sounding *thunk*. He then tossed the tray atop his friend, who was now clutching his head, and passed by the side of the table.

"I'm borrowing the bath."

"Go ahead," Thoma grunted. "Oh, hold on. Was it successful?"

To Xixu's ears, the question sounded almost trivial, insignificant. As he continued into the corridor that led to the bath he raised his right hand. When Isha and the pair of Midiridos saw the white chill that lingered around his fingers, they breathed sighs of commiseration.

Thoma was the exception. The man who shared blood with a god spoke a single word, quiet.

"Sorry."

"It's what I wanted."

The implication was clear: *You have nothing to apologize for.*

Thoma smiled ruefully.

The moon, visible through the corridor's window, was pale and bright. Yet to Xixu, it no longer seemed as distant as it once had.



He did not dream.

At first, when Xixu awakened in one of Pale Moon's guest rooms, he didn't know where he was. He felt unstable, as though the world itself was spinning.

He was lying on his back waiting for it to subside when the presence of someone approaching caused him to sit up. Her footsteps made no sound, but he knew who'd stepped into the adjacent room regardless.

"Saridi," he called out.

"Ack. You noticed me."

Sari knelt, opened the sliding door, then bowed gracefully to Xixu before finally entering. She wore light makeup, and she had brushed her hair away from her face and tied it back into a single tail. Moving over to sit beside Xixu, she pouted at him.

"You're awful, leaving me to wake up alone."

"I think staying with you any longer would have been bad for my sanity..."

"I wouldn't have minded. Not for you, Xixu."

Sari smiled prettily—how serious was she being?—and reached out a pale hand. She brought it to his forehead as though checking his temperature.

Xixu couldn't quite tell how warm her slender fingers were. Perhaps slightly cool? All he knew was that whatever their temperature, he was the same.

Sari's eyes were so clear they seemed almost see-through. She looked up at him, her smile tinged with sorrow. "Don't overdo it today. You'll feel uncomfortable until you're used to it."

"I *do* feel off...but I'd like to do what I can to get my body accustomed to it. Is Thoma around?"

"He is. You're thinking of hitting him, aren't you?"

"I was just going to make him my sparring partner. That's all."

He couldn't lay here idly forever. Xixu patted Sari on the head and rose to his feet, frowning when he realized that he could "see" behind himself, even

though he wasn't looking. He stood stock-still, thinking.

One step. If he took one step, how far could he travel?

Sari rose and put her hand on his back, supporting him. "You'll get used to it soon, and then you'll be able to adjust your sensitivity."

"Is that how it works?"

"Mm-hmm. I think you're feeling a little overloaded because you have sharp senses to begin with. At least wait until the afternoon to spar, won't you?"

Sari clung tightly to his side, standing on tiptoe and looking up at him with concern. Perhaps she thought he might fall. Xixu put a hand to his face, fighting down the urge to smile. He used the other to pat her on the shoulder.

"Okay. I suppose it'd only annoy me if Thoma toyed around with me during our spar, anyway."

"Huh?"

The dubiousness in Sari's tone made Xixu examine her face. With her right eyebrow raised and delicate lips tapered, her expression made her thoughts crystal clear.

"No, Xixu," she stated. "I'm telling you to put it off because you might kill Thoma if you spar right now."

Xixu blinked. "What...?"

He studied her, wondering if he'd heard wrong. Sari accepted his gaze, slightly tilting her head to the side and smiling. It almost looked ominous. Beneath her silver eyelashes, faint light could be seen in her eyes.

"No human can best you now. Since you were already so physically capable, you're probably even stronger than me. Be careful, okay, Xixu?"

Xixu stared dumbly at his own palm, digesting the mistress of Irede's warning.

Had he truly changed so much? But what part of him, exactly?

He stood there unmoving in a daze, grappling with the incomprehensibility, until Sari tugged at his kimono's collar, petitioning for a kiss.

“Sure, as long as we do it bare-handed,” Thoma agreed readily some time later. They had finished breakfast, and Xixu had explained his request. “Just make sure you hold back.”

The only places in Pale Moon spacious enough to spar in were the garden or the flower room. Since it was still daytime, the courtesans were absent from the latter, so Xixu and Thoma had moved the tables to the walls to make room. As they faced each other, the former’s expression was doubtful and the latter’s serious. It was a marked difference from their usual bouts.

Sari stood behind her brother. “Go slowly,” she called out to the young man who had become her kin. “Try not to make sudden movements.”

“Got it,” Xixu called back. He faced Thoma and took a relaxed step forward. Keeping every part of his body under conscious control, he jabbed a textbook punch at the man’s face, assuming it wouldn’t achieve anything.

As expected, Thoma deflected it, but for the first time Xixu could remember, he looked nervous. Even as the man’s handsome features twisted in pain, he threw a right-handed punch toward Xixu’s abdomen.

Xixu pulled his right arm back, moving to catch Thoma’s blow with the palm of his left hand. He made sure to limit how fast he was moving, as he’d been told.

“Xixu, stop.” Sari demanded, but he had already caught Thoma’s fist. There was a cracking sound, as though a fissure had developed in the air.

Xixu instinctively pulled his left hand back, sensing that something was wrong. At the same moment, Thoma grimaced and retreated half a step. Sari stepped between them, as though to defend her brother. Her blue eyes pinned Xixu down, underpinned by a scowl.

“That’s why I said to wait until the afternoon.”

“What...did I do wrong?”

“I told you to hold back,” Thoma complained. “Unless shattering people’s hands is a hobby of yours?”

Xixu was startled to see the man cradling his right hand, and a shiver went through him when he saw that it was half covered in frost, when all he’d done

was catch it.

Sari turned to her brother and touched his arm. “Are you okay? I thought you’d be more resistant, since we share blood.”

“More or less. Hurts like hell, though. I’m going to go thaw this out. You should dunk him in boiling water or something in the meantime. Vent off some of that chill.”

“Don’t talk like he’s made of ice. He’ll be able to control himself soon enough.”

Though Sari watched her brother go with concern in her eyes, she evidently didn’t plan on following.

Before Thoma left the room, Xixu broke free of his shock and called out after him.

“Sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. I thought something like this might happen.” The casualness of the response was no different to Thoma’s usual.

When the door closed, Xixu looked at Sari, perplexed. “Is my body cold right now? I can’t tell.”

“Very. Look—you don’t think *I’m* cold, right?”

She placed a hand to his cheek, proving her own words to be correct. Her fingers didn’t feel cold at all. Sari nodded, then dropped her hand to hold his.

“I’m going to raise my temperature a little bit at a time, so try it together with me. Concentrate. Take your power and submerge it within yourself.”

“Submerge...”

“If you stay cold for too long, you’ll forget what it was like to be human,” Sari said with a rueful smile. “It’ll make life hard.” The warning was laden with personal experience.

Xixu, as he’d been instructed, focused on the temperature of Sari’s hand. Then he gathered the power coiling around himself—and abruptly looked up.

After a slight delay, Sari followed his gaze to look at the door. “That was fast,”

she muttered quietly. There was no emotion in her voice.

“I’ll have to start at square one again, it seems.”

It wasn’t necessary to go out to Pale Moon’s front gate to know who awaited them there: a being close to, yet distant from themselves.

Xixu didn’t know what his new limits were, but he considered it good fortune that they’d been given even this much of a grace period. He headed for the door, then realized he didn’t have his weapon.

“Damn. My sword—”

“I’m-sorry-it-was-my-fault-but-it’s-okay-I-have-a-replacement.”

Xixu almost burst into laughter; it sounded like Sari had rushed to try and get all her words out in one breath. Certainly, she was the person who’d shattered the military blade given to him by His Majesty, but it had been unavoidable given the circumstances.

Sari went over to a closet in the corner and retrieved a katana—it was a god-slaying blade, the same one Thoma had wielded the previous day. She presented it to Xixu.

“Use this.”

“Is that okay?”

“Yes. They only have meaning when we use them. You should take it, Xixu.”

Long ago, the blade and its partner had been created for a pair of twin gods. The significance was clear: their purpose was to be used by a god to kill one of their kin. Xixu accepted the ornate scabbard solemnly, fixing it to his waist by its slender silver chain.

Sari retrieved something from her sleeve and gave it to him. “Take this too.”

“Is this...?”

It was a decorative cord ornamented with two half moons, one white and one black. The memory of it seemed almost nostalgic by now.

Xixu studied it carefully, knowing that it was meant for the man who was the maiden’s guest. It was a visceral reminder of how much time had passed, but

also the cause of a tinge of unease. How would this upcoming battle end for him? How would it end for her? He would need to tell her now, while he still had the chance.

“Saridi. If I die...you should choose another gue—”

“I’ll wait for you.”

The declaration was resolute, her will shining through with clarity. It left no room for objection or surprise. Sari looked up at her husband and smiled, and when she spoke, it was with an emotion that came from her core.

“If that happens, I’ll simply wait until you return. So don’t worry.”

My heart will not change, she declared.

Xixu matched her gaze, wide-eyed. He’d heard that the sin of the people of Irede ran deep. But perhaps sin and love were one and the same. Amidst all the life in this town, the connections, meetings, and partings that its countless nights brought into being, she only chose one man. Since bygone times and to this day, she waited for the only guest she would ever know.

And now, that would only be Xixu. No one else.

Xixu gazed at the courtesan by his side, the lingering aftertaste of her proclamation soaking into his chest. How blessed he was, to be able to witness the beauty of this flower of the night. He offered his hand—still cold—to Sari.

“I won’t make you wait. Let’s put an end to this.”

“Mm.” With a bashful, happy smile, she took his hand.

Then, Sari turned to the door, her eyes hardening to ice. Beneath her beauty was the determination to fight. She was, and always had been, a god who possessed both a stark austerity and the ability to feel profound emotion.

The entryway was empty. They opened the door and stepped outside. Pale sunlight harshly illuminated the paving stones leading to the front gate.

During the day, Pale Moon—the successor of Irede, the courtesan house of the north—slept. Despite that, the two visitors at the gate didn’t appear surprised in the slightest to see Xixu and Sari appear in the entryway.

Vas, clad in a black suit, cast the approaching Xixu a questioning look. “A kimono? How rare.”

“I didn’t have the time to go retrieve a change of clothes.”

“I can tell by looking at you.”

Xixu wasn’t sure if he was talking about his clothing or the change in his being.

Sari, meanwhile, was glaring at the other figure by the gate from half a step behind her lover. “It’s bold of you to show your face here,” she told the girl in a crimson kimono. “What are you doing with him, Distira?”

The girl in question studied them with a pair of languid pale blue eyes. Her face, small and as delicate as a doll’s, was not the one she had once worn. Her body, too, was now physical flesh—it belonged, in fact, to the assassin girl who had appeared before Xixu and Sari before. She must have been possessed and subsumed.

Though it had been Sari who’d asked the question, Distira chose to direct her reply to Xixu. “So you sacrificed yourself for her after all. If you had continued to live out a full human life, you could have avoided suffering.”

“That’s just who he is, remember?” Vas admonished.

The cynicism in his tone resembled his past self too well. But while Xixu felt bitter nostalgia at that, he also felt anger.

Sari put a hand gently to his right arm, as though having read his thoughts. The warmth he felt from her fingers helped him regain some of his composure.

The pair of lovers stopped just before Pale Moon’s gate, where Sari raised an eyebrow at the two gods. “Here?” she asked.

“While we have no objection, I imagine that would be greatly troubling for you,” Vas replied. “Shall we take this elsewhere?” He gestured casually with his right hand.

The surroundings changed. Bright sunlight vanished, pushed away by the darkness until they were enclosed in it. The stagnant air smelled of damp earth. The ground underfoot felt dry and hard. It seemed the space they were in was quite large.

As Xixu readied himself for whatever might come, Sari clapped her hands together. Sprays of light scattered upward in their vicinity, faintly illuminating the darkness.

“This place is...”

Bare stone and dirt walls. Xixu had been here before. A certain nobleman had once stored a large number of shades in this underground chamber. It should have been sealed off after that incident had been resolved. As he looked around, the sight of a familiar pit heightened his wariness.

“You brought the snake...?”

“No. I simply selected the most convenient place nearby. The pit is empty.”

While Xixu was not willing to believe that so quickly, it was true that there was no clear sign of the snake’s presence. The air was thick, and the shadows were reminiscent of shades, but that could just as easily be explained by the events that had once taken place here, in addition to the divine power currently running rampant above, suppressing what rose from below.

Xixu had heard that after the incident in which Sari’s divinity had been forcefully roused, this spacious underground chamber had been sealed more or less as is. That had likely been preferable to any careless investigations by people resulting in them experiencing ill effects.

The place looked exactly the same as when he’d last come, except for the lack of shades, but instead of any sentimentality, Xixu simply felt discomfort.

Sari fixed Vas and Distira with a cold gaze. “I applaud you for being gracious enough to choose your own grave. I’ll make sure you never have anything to do with this town ever again.”

“You’re free to try,” Distira returned. “I pity your companion, though, for everything you’ve put him through.”

“I’ve never once thought of it that way,” Xixu said. He stepped forward and drew the god-slaying blade. The clear silver of its blade was moonlight, and he felt it resonate with him as though a bell had rung in his core.

In response, Vas drew his own rapier. His eyes, handsome and gracefully

shaped, were dyed a deep crimson, evidence that he had been replaced by something not of this world. Xixu could tell from her presence alone that Sari was stifling her anger at the sight of the changes in her cousin, and the finality of it.

It was Distira who set events into motion. “Come, little novice who cannot fight without relying on a man,” she said. “Don’t drag your feet now.”

“You needn’t have asked,” was Sari’s spat reply. No doubt the brevity was so she could begin working a spell.

As she spread her arms, Xixu took position in front of her and raised his sword. Then, he advanced, keeping his eyes on Vas, who still looked relaxed and confident.

The god-slaying blade drew power from Xixu’s hand and began to shine silver. The young man who until last night had been human steeled his resolve and settled into a sword stance.

Vas readied his rapier, lined with heat. “Whenever you’re ready. I am the Nameless Sun, and I have existed since time immemorial. I shall be your opponent.”

“I, Kilis Raxixu Zack Torlonia, sacred companion of Saridi, accept your challenge.”

The pale light Sari had created flared brighter, illuminating the dark chamber. Xixu advanced, feet scuffing across the grit.

There was no room for carelessness, nor hesitation. In the span of a breath, he closed the distance, sweeping his silver blade at his red-eyed opponent. But his blade was stopped by a red-hot rapier.



The sound of metal on metal rang out with crystal clarity. Two powers clashed and swirled, creating a violent maelstrom centered on the two fighters.

The pressure would have sent an ordinary human flying, but Xixu only frowned slightly as he held it at bay. Even as the skin under his kimono felt like it was being roasted, he twisted his sword's hilt and pushed his opponent's blade to the left.

He shifted half a step to the right.

A streak of light grazed past his left shoulder, unleashed by Sari and freezing the air in its wake. But just before the bolt of moonlight could pierce Vas, it collided with another.

"Little girl." Distira floated in the air behind Vas at an angle, her scorn apparent. "Is that all you have?"

In contrast, Sari's reply was curt. "Shut up."

But a change occurred, and her response went beyond mere words. Distira's left leg was encased in ice from the knee down. As the girl was caught in the throes of her surprise, Sari pointed at her and issued a command.

"Shatter."

There was only a single sound, clear and clean. The next moment, the crystalline ice around the girl's leg—crimson kimono included—shattered to pieces.

Distira screamed in pain as her blood splashed onto the earth. But it was too small an amount for having lost an entire leg. She must have frozen the wound over instantly to stop the bleeding.

Sari smiled sweetly. "What should I take next?"

"Little girl..."

Xixu thought he heard Distira grinding her teeth from even this distance. He gestured at her with his sword. "Is she the replacement for Saridi you mentioned?" he asked his own opponent.

"Yes. Though to be exact, she is less a replacement and more the same

being.”

“They’re not the sa—”

Xixu leaped back, cutting himself off. He placed his left hand on the back of his blade for support and focused. The sword responded to his will, forming a coat of frost, which he used to counterbalance the rush of hot wind that had just been expelled at him.

Vas smiled cynically, a helix of flame spiraling around his rapier. “They *are* the same. We are unique, singular existences. For two of us to exist is an impossibility. That is why *they* must become *one*. They must *be* one. Of course, that also includes you, who has been changed by her.”

“And what happens if her existence is lost? All of it?”

“Who can say? Perhaps there will simply be a missing constant of creation forevermore.”

The reply was casual, as though no thought had been put into it, but it triggered a realization in Xixu. The god who had subsumed Vas spoke as if he had not lost his sister deity at all. He likely planned on taking Distira back with him after killing Sari and Xixu, meaning there would be no diplomatic solution to this—he was their enemy, no matter what.

Thus, they would have to settle the matter now, once and for all.

“Are you not going to summon your true body?” Xixu asked the young man of opposing essence. He kept his tone careful and deliberate. “The golden wolf.”

“I *am* my true body. The human who served as my previous vessel was mentally frail, so I simply used him as a proxy, but this one is related to her by blood. He had just borrowed some of her power when I took him too, making him plenty sufficient for integration.”

“I see...”

Xixu still vividly remembered when Vas had protected him from the wolf. That was when their paths had diverged. If he could turn back time, he would have chosen the path where neither of them would have had to be sacrificed, no matter how painful it might have been.

But reality could not be changed. And if Vas had merged with the golden wolf too, then ending him now would bring an end to this.

Xixu inhaled deeply, stilling himself. He lifted his sword to eye level, placing his left hand against the base of the blade. As he exhaled, he ran his hand along to the tip. Solid ice flowed from his fingers, encasing the blade whole.

Vas watched with a masklike smile.

When Xixu finished, he had a blade of ice—thin but unshatterable—that would cut through anything it touched. Once more, he turned it toward Vas. The shift in his plane of thought almost caused his mind to scatter, but he sharpened them again by recalling his time as a human.

Two paces left until his opponent was within the reach of his sword. Or there had been, when he'd been human. Now he could close the distance in less than one. Xixu focused, becoming one with his blade, and waited.

Tap. The quiet sound of Sari's footstep.

Xixu kicked forward off the earth. His blade flashed out faster than human eyes could see, birthing ice and snow in its wake.

His slash was aimed at Vas's left shoulder, and elsewhere, a Sari-sent projectile closed in. It was a careful, coordinated offensive that left no room to evade.

Vas's expression was irritated as he raised his sword. Sari's attack aside, he must have judged that he would not be able to sidestep Xixu.

Xixu slammed his blade into the rapier wreathed in flame and heat, and his field of vision was instantly blockaded by a cloud of white vapor.

"Xixu!"

By the time he heard the warning, he had already pulled his sword back and sprung to the left. A number of sharp icicles shot through the thick steam, sinking into the ground. Distira's work, no doubt.

But while she was clearly murderous and intent on riddling him full of holes, Xixu lacked the leeway to care. Parrying the flaming blade that struck at him, he stepped back to grab Sari by the waist and pull her to a farther distance.

A shard of ice grazed his right shoulder. Sari, still within his arms, seemed to be working at something. He heard Vas click his tongue from the other side of the steam.

“Are you okay, Xixu?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s turn this around.”

When he let Sari down, her delicate toes kicked the dirt. Distira screamed, and a fissure ran through the ground as though in pursuit of the sound. Xixu began running too, and a number of lights burst forward from behind him, streaking into the area where Distira and Vas likely were.

This was Sari’s true power, unrestricted because her opponents were gods as well. Even still, she was probably taking care not to collapse the underground chamber.

“You’ll regret ever taking a physical body.” Her proclamation cut clearly through the air. “I’ll slice you into a thousand pieces and burn the remains.”

A god with no mercy. The woman who had resided in Irede for an age flooded the chamber with scorching white light, using the same maneuver to conceal her companion.

Power rushed out in a torrent. The air trembled. Such was the thunderous pressure of the stream that one could be forgiven for thinking it was audible—but the underground chamber was almost utterly silent. All Xixu could hear was the beating of his own heart as he ran through the white light.

Two opponents. But *his* was Vas. Distira was floating and would be difficult for him to catch, and Sari would deal with her regardless. In combat between two groups, it was sometimes compatibility that decided the victor.

Xixu couldn’t see; the light had flooded his vision. He simply slashed his blade toward the intense presence that he could sense. But all he received in return was the vague feeling of cutting through something akin to cloth. As he stiffened in alarm, the exhausted voice of a girl floated down from above. She must have switched positions with Vas.

“Fool.”

A girl’s hand, slick with blood, reached out toward him from behind. Xixu could not see it, and yet he could. He turned, slashing his blade upward and at an angle.

But Distira kicked the air and escaped even higher, as though she’d predicted his movements.

Xixu gathered that what he’d cut through earlier had been Distira’s kimono, which she’d stripped off and used as a decoy. The girl now wore nothing but a light-pink kimono undergarment. There were wounds all over her body, but her smile remained fierce. She pointed her right hand at Xixu. It was missing two fingers, perhaps because of Sari’s attack.

“You rely too much on your intuition.”

There was a humming sound next to Xixu’s ear, like the flapping wings of an insect. A shudder ran down his spine as he recalled the nightmare Distira had once shown him.

It happened in less than the span of a second. Xixu reflexively brought his blade up, but it was too late; something slammed into his left shoulder.

He heard the sound of bones breaking before the agony struck. The pain dulled his judgment. He gritted his teeth and advanced a step, his blade of ice cutting the empty air and drawing frost in its path.

A massive black-winged moth fell to the ground. Xixu turned, ignoring the red blood seeping from its plump abdomen.

“Saridi!”

If Vas had not made a follow-up attack while he’d been vulnerable, it meant he was after Sari. Her power was formidable, but so was the other god’s, and he wielded a weapon. Their opponents must have made the decision to swap targets for that very reason.

True to his suspicions, Xixu saw that the young man in black clothing now stood before Saridi. Yet there was not the slightest tremor of movement between the two.

Vas's left arm was shredded from the elbow down; he must not have completely avoided Sari's stream of power. His right arm—the one he used to wield a sword—wasn't visible from where Xixu was.

"Why would you ask that?" he heard Sari ask. Her voice sounded dry.

"I'm not sure. Simple curiosity?"

Vas turned, smiling. He swiftly withdrew his sword from Sari's belly and caught Xixu's blade against it, triggering the hard ringing that came from metal vibrating against metal. Blood trickled down Vas's sunblade as Xixu ground his teeth and glared at his opponent.

"Bastard..."

"Please don't glare at me like that. My wounds are more severe, I'll have you know."

As Vas smiled wryly, Xixu saw that he had a small hole opened in his left flank. Sari's doing. As for her wounds, she was bleeding from the same place she had been stabbed yesterday. The stain spread quickly enough that its progress was visible, but there was no pain in her voice when she spoke.

"Keep him there, Xixu."

He didn't even have the time to nod before her bloodstained right hand thrust into Vas's back. She twisted, as though trying to tear his heart apart with her fingers. The young man's body arched and shook. But the next moment, a vast pillar of flame shot up from beneath his feet.

"O-Ow! Hot!"

"Saridi!"

As Sari exclaimed in pain and retreated, Vas simply turned and smiled dryly.

Xixu stepped into the pillar of flame, intent on preventing him from attacking Sari any further. Using his sword as a medium, he suppressed the heat with his cold and made a scything slash at Vas's side in the span of a single breath.

But his opponent caught it against his own blade.

"Xixu! Get back! He'll melt you!"

As unlikely as Xixu thought that seemed, there was no sense in remaining where he was. He hopped back out of the pillar of flame. But as though they'd been lying in wait, the sound of heavy wingbeats—a pair of them—flew at him from the left and right.

“...!”

“Distira!”

The scream was Sari's. Behind Xixu and to the right, there was a small explosion: it was Sari dealing with one of the moths. He turned left, relying on the sound of wingbeats to guide him as he slashed the air. A pair of black wings fell apart, revealing a girl in a red undershirt behind them. Distira was laughing delightedly.

She, in all her beauty, was a god too. Not a single shadow was present in her expression. There was nothing there but emptiness, as if something had been shifted out of alignment.

The sight of the girl who so resembled a broken doll forced Xixu to come to terms with his own powerlessness. However, all that he allowed to show in his expression was bitterness as he drew a needle from his breast pocket and threw it at her. The needle, coated with chill, flew silently through the darkness and pierced into Distira's collarbone.

“Ngh!”

The girl groaned in pain and folded over in midair. Xixu used the brief opening to confirm his own condition.

His kimono had been scorched through or charred in multiple places, and the burns across his body throbbed painfully. He wound cold air through his injuries—including his broken shoulder—dulling the pain for the time being. A vortex of fire assaulted him from behind, but he kept his eyes forward as his sword flashed out to cut it down.

“I think...I'm getting used to this.”

Both his senses and his power were finally beginning to feel like they belonged to him. No doubt it was because of the fierce air of the true life-and-death battle currently stinging at his skin.

Xixu glanced at his blade of ice. That it showed no sign of melting from the flame he'd cut down was proof his concentration had not wavered.

He turned to check on Sari, and saw that she was facing off against Vas, who was still within his pillar of flame. It looked like she had just dealt with the wound on her flank by freezing it over. The single bloodstain on her white kimono looked like a crimson flower imprisoned in ice.

Sari tossed her hair back behind her shoulder and exhaled deeply, her delicate body lifting from the earth. She examined Distira, also floating, then Vas within his flames. Her silver eyelashes fluttered like smoke as she directed a question at her companion.

"Which one, Xixu?"

His answer would determine how the rest of this played out. If they continued to let their opponents direct the flow of battle, it was certain to become a protracted conflict, if not a losing one. Sari had the advantage over Distira, but not so much that she could make it quick. That was why she had deferred to Xixu, who possessed far more combat experience.

After only the barest moment of thought, he gave his answer.

"The moon."

Hearing that, Sari birthed a bright ball of light in front of her chest. She turned to Vas, within his pillar of flame, and launched it. It expanded as it flew, ignoring the fire in pursuit of its target. He cut it apart with his blade.

But Sari was already flying through the air. She passed Vas, brandishing her pale right arm toward Distira's ragged form. The girl's eyes widened.

"You're just an immature little girl!" she shouted at Sari.

The sound of moth wings redoubled, but Sari showed no sign of caring. Her only expression was the faintest of smiles as she skipped through the air.

"It's time you left this conflict, mother."

Shapeless power crashed down over a wide area indiscriminately. Distira's attempt to fly away proved futile, and she was slammed into the ground before the dark pit like a *temari* ball. Her blue eyes flew open as she lay spread-eagled,

gasping.

“Ngh!”

Perhaps she could not even bring herself to scream for all the physical pain she was experiencing. Coughing blood, Distira turned her gaze upward. God’s companion already stood above her, sword in his hand and sorrow in his gaze.

A god who had been refused by a man, and a man who had discarded his humanity for a god. The paths they had walked had never crossed. He thought of how foolish humans could be.

“If there is a next time for you...”

Xixu said nothing more. Distira sighed and closed her eyes, as though she understood completely, and his god-slaying blade bit into her chest.

The sensation was not unfamiliar to him; he’d experienced it before. Yet the final tremors of her body left a poor aftertaste in Xixu’s mouth.

No sooner had the blood began to flow from her body than it began to freeze. It wasn’t Xixu’s doing—at least, not intentionally. His blade had been forged to slay her and her incarnations. It seemed that meant it also prevented her divine blood from spreading unnecessarily.

Keeping his sword where it was, he looked up to check on Sari...and a ball of fire slammed into the ground at his feet from behind, instantly surrounding him within tall walls of flame.

“A cage!”

Vas had to be aiming to keep him split from Sari. As the heat pressed in on Xixu, stealing away his breath, he pulled his sword free from Distira’s body to cut through the flaming wall. But then he was struck by a premonition.

Darkness.

Clinging, coiling, writhing.

Ravenous greed and desire that knew no bounds.

A foe he knew well. His foe for ages past.

It was there, here, now. Rearing its head behind him.

“It can’t be...”

A shiver slipped down Xixu’s spine, reminding him of the time he’d been human. It sent a throb of pain through his right arm, though he knew it was only illusory. He forced himself to focus once more and looked down at his feet, at the ground lit by the flaming wall.

“No...”

The fire was thawing Distira’s frozen blood. The deep crimson liquid shone with a luster that was almost obscene. It moved as though it was being pulled into the fire, into the pit that lay beyond.

Xixu stared at the girl lying beneath him, her eyes closed.

“Distira.”

A second shiver ran through him as he realized Vas’s intent.

Why had he brought Distira with him?

Why had he chosen this place for their confrontation?

Why had he separated Xixu and Sari with a wall of flame?

Each act had been the groundwork for this moment. From the beginning, Vas had intended to use Distira as bait. He had never planned on taking her back with him.

Xixu steeled his resolve and cut down the flames with his blade of ice. With his vision clear barring the lingering waves of heat, he saw what lay beyond.

A vast dark pit, and the head of the massive snake rising out of it.

10. Heartflame

The titanic form of the snake, its head alone thrice the height of a man, exuded a heavy, humid pressure on the chamber. Black contours coiled and swayed in the gloom. Eyes of a red characteristic to shades were nonetheless so shadowy they approached the color of darkness.

The snake examined Xixu, its eyes unmoving, its jaws spread wide. Glistening white fangs could be seen, along with a deep crimson tongue. Beyond them, there was a void that led to the depths of the earth.

The tongue that had lapped up Distira's blood trembled as the snake's soundless voice resounded through the room.

"O Sacred Companion..."

From inside the insatiable void, a wind of nothingness blew. The one rooted in the depths of the land, the god corrupted by human desire, laughed.

"Gladly shall I accept the White Moon."

The snake's tongue squirmed greedily, its jaws stretched as wide as they could open. Xixu swung his blade of ice, shattering one of the fangs intent on devouring Distira, and him with her.

"Xixu!"

He could hear Sari's scream. But just as quickly as it had come, the sound of her voice seemed to drift far away. His surroundings went black. Sound faded to nothing.

As he fell into the darkness of the snake's belly, even Xixu's thoughts melted into the void.

All he could do was reach out with his left arm and grasp the hand of the girl who was being digested.

※

"Wha..."

Sari saw the snake that had slithered out of the pit swallow Xixu.

She hadn't been able to do anything. She hadn't made it in time.

As she stood there in a daze, Sari noticed a chattering sound ringing in her ears. When she realized it was the trembling of her own teeth, she screamed, piercing and wordless.

Her vision dyed red. She knew it was only a trick of her mind, but she could no longer be still. The maelstrom of power overflowing from her delicate form caused the very space of the chamber itself to creak and quiver.

She had experienced this same terror once, in an underground chamber beneath the capital. But her opponent now was not a shade, but the snake.

"You wretched—!"

Amidst the center of a howling blizzard, Sari summoned all of her unbound power to strike the titanic jet-black snake. Gathering it within her arms, she formed it into the shape of an awl—but her body jerked violently and she lurched over before she could unleash it.

"Ngh..."

The pain, wreathed in heat, was enough to rein her thoughts back in, if only slightly. She glared at the rapier sprouting from her left thigh.

"How dare..."

"Please don't get so angry. I'm only fulfilling your wish."

Vas withdrew his blade with as much casual ease as he'd used to impale her and hopped back out of the way. Fresh blood splattered across the ground, its scent drawing the attention of the snake, which turned its gaze toward them.

Sari staggered involuntarily, still channeling the vortex of her power, though it now had nowhere to go. She swept a hand toward Vas, forming a set of icy stakes in midair to prevent his approach. His lips quirked dryly when he saw them and he shrugged.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten your own words. You told me you cannot return so long as the snake is still stained in the foundation of these lands, remember?"

“I...” She faltered, caught off guard. She had indeed said such a thing. It had been when the being before her had possessed a different proxy.

Vas gave her the kind of smile one would use when admonishing a small child. “That’s why I baited it up here. Drawing it closer and giving it physical form exposes it for the slaughter. And once it is dead, gone will be one more of the vows that chain you.”

The young man spoke like a human talking about his own backbreaking effort. It was a jarring dissonance to how the original Vas had been.

How sincere was he being? How much was simply due to his lack of understanding?

Just thinking about it made Sari feel like she was suffocating. She wanted to throw up. To clutch her head and scream.

The red-eyed young man, the snake that had swallowed her companion, and her own flowing blood. They swirled in Sari’s thoughts around a single point of focus. She placed a hand, shaking with rage and impatience, to her brow.

It would be easy to let go, to go berserk. But she knew what her priority should be. She had no time to hesitate.

Sari glowered at the snake that had been drawn to this place, slithering, by blood. Aiming between its eyes, she once more began finely working her power. Vas seemed content not to interrupt her anymore. She heard his mild voice to the side.

“Yes, just like that. Running wild will only lead to mistakes. Be careful with your aim.”

“Shut up.”

If her blood was what called the snake and became its power, then she must reply to its excessive desire with force. For she in her entirety only belonged to one other, down to the last drop of blood she spilled onto the earth.

Sari kept her thoughts in check, preventing herself from going mad, and pushed away the pain. She suffocated what she truly felt—the urge to lose control—and the impulse only showed itself on the surface as the slightest of

tremors.

White light formed into a pair of large spearheads. Sari lifted her right hand, suspending them in the air by her flanks. To the great snake crawling across the dirt, she spoke.

“Your long slumber is over now, snake. Return my man and scatter into nothingness.”

Dark red eyes clashed with eyes of ice.

The woman who owned the latter pair aimed the purest of her power at the desire that had taken the form of a snake and let loose.



When Xixu came to, he was alone at the entrance of Irede.

The townscape was spacious and orderly, but the sky was dark, and there was no one in sight. The streets, usually so adorned with glamorous color, were a simple monochrome. The paths themselves were gray, as featureless as artificial creations.

“Where...?”

Xixu looked at his left hand.

It still held the girl’s. The pale color of her skin brought life into this gray world. Despite a vague sense of unease, he was relieved that he wasn’t alone.

He adjusted his grip on the girl’s cold hand. “Let’s see if anybody else is around, Distira.”

No response. Xixu nodded and set off at a walk, pulling the girl—whose form only extended to the crook of that hand’s arm—after him. They crossed under the gate and started along an empty main street.

Xixu couldn’t remember how he’d gotten here; the memories were hazy. But he felt as though there was something he needed to do. Occasionally, blood dripped from the girl’s arm in his grip. He cocked his head.

“Something feels off...”

He would be able to ask someone for assistance if he ran into them, but he

had yet to see a single soul. Still, Xixu did not think this was strange as he walked through the monochrome landscape.

They passed by a stretch of courtesan houses and through an empty plaza. The sky was gray. There were no birds, and the air was still.

Finally, they reached Pale Moon at the northern tip of the town. They had not encountered anyone on their way.

The front entrance was open, but nobody was around. The hanging lantern was a bright, pale white, but that only made it difficult to tell whether or not there was a flame within.

Xixu stood in the entryway and called out, "Is anyone there?" But though he waited for an answer, none came. It was as though his voice had been sucked up into the long corridor.

He thought about stepping up and inside, but it occurred to him that they had just traversed the entire length of the town. While he was fine, the same could not be said for the girl who accompanied him.

So Xixu sat down in the entryway with Distira's arm. He held it atop his knees to prevent the wound where it had been bitten off from trickling crimson blood.

The world was silent.

The outside scenery that Xixu could see from the entryway was flat and smooth, seemingly with no end. It was looking at an eternity of nothingness. The sight was a stark contrast to the blue eyes that he always felt as if he could drown in.

Blue eyes. Such beautiful blue eyes.

Suddenly, he recalled her name. "Saridi."

He hadn't forgotten. It was simply that, for some reason, it hadn't occurred to him until now.

Why hadn't he thought about her?

Now that he had noticed the gap in his awareness, Xixu rose to his feet. He turned back toward the manor's interior, still holding Distira's hand.

“Saridi?”

He didn’t expect an answer. Sari wasn’t inside. Neither was she in the town. This, he knew. No matter who else managed to blend into this world, she alone would not. Her existence was different, other, a foreign presence.

“I have to see Saridi.”

So what should he do? Wait at Pale Moon?

This place was her home. If he waited here, she might come.

Distira, who was only an arm, seemed to think this a good idea. But after some thought, Xixu shook his head.

“No...”

He couldn’t wait.

Sari didn’t know this place. This world was incompatible with her, and the town belonged to a dream the snake conceived amidst its slumber. No matter how close he tried to get to her, as long as he was here, he would only continue to pass by her, and her, him.

Xixu began to walk outside, but then turned to the arm in his grip.

“Are you going to stay here?”

Distira had wanted her own place to belong. She’d wanted someone who would be by her side. She’d needed them.

For her, perhaps this could be a place of peace. Like how shades were birthed as copies of human emotions and took human forms, this town, too, had been born from human desire.

It was another Irede. A second seat that humans had prepared for the god, a town within the heart of a sleeping snake that had been corrupted by man. It was an insect cage formed from deep-rooted delusion, yes, but it was wanted all the same, and so tranquil sleep was possible, for one who remained here.

Yet, Distira’s answer was no.

Xixu looked down oddly at the girl who was only an arm. “You want to come with me? I don’t mind, but I’m Saridi’s companion.”

"Is that all right?" was his question.

"Yes," was Distira's answer. *"I've made my peace."*

When Xixu nodded, the pale arm crumbled away. From the fingers he'd been holding, her power flowed into him, along with a cold, fragile awareness.

But the moment her individuality and thoughts entered him, they dissolved and vanished like transient bubbles on the water's surface. As her emotions revealed themselves in one final moment of radiance, Xixu followed each one as if it were his own.

Once they were gone, leaving only power behind, he turned to the staircase that led to Pale Moon's second floor.

"So that's how it was..."

Distira had loved Sari's father.

She had been rejected, cut away, and sealed, but she had still loved the man she had chosen for herself. Whatever the future might bring, the women of Pale Moon did not change their guests.

How restless must she have been, as she went through her preparations the day before the guest-taking ceremony? When he had prostrated himself before her, begging forgiveness, how much had she wished to weep and scream? If fate had but taken a single step to the side and walked a different path, perhaps Distira would be Pale Moon's proprietress today.

If that had been the case, would Sari's life have been different?

It was no use thinking about now.

Xixu turned away from the memories of the girl who was no longer there and stepped outside the manor. Time resumed its flow.

As he drew his blade, he watched the sky beyond the gate. It seemed so small.

"She'll cry again if I make her wait too long."

Irede's mistress. A resolute and terrifying woman. Yet she was honest enough to cry when happy or sad. And while the sight of her burying her face into his

chest like a child as she sobbed was heartbreakingly adorable, he did not ever want her to suffer. That was why he had become her sacred companion.

Xixu gathered power into the sword in his right hand. As if in response to its blade cooling, the trail left behind by Distira's fallen blood began to shine a pale white. To his eyes, it showed a path that led outside of town.

As his thoughts followed the blood's course, Xixu exhaled a breath. "If you think I'm going to lie down and accept defeat, then I'm afraid you've got another thing coming."

All he had to do was overcome his current predicament.

Xixu looked on, unsurprised, as the artificial town warped, returning to its original colors—those of blood and entrails. The view before him was naked human desire. It was a part of him too.

God's companion raised his blade of pale light. He could sense Sari's power coming from outside.

"I'll be there soon."

Maybe she was already crying. Guilt drew his brow into a frown.

Then, in a single breath, Xixu cut the snake's belly open.

The world changed.

The snake's dream of Irede vanished, and Xixu found himself standing by the pit in the underground chamber. Distira's body was gone.

In front of him and some distance away was Vas, his rapier held across Sari's throat. Despite the danger to her own life, she looked delighted from the bottom of her heart to see him. But before her grin could fully form, her calm expression settled back into place. A pale finger pointed in his direction.

"Xixu, behind you!"

The warning came at almost the exact moment he swung his blade.

He felt an uncomfortable resistance, as though he'd just cut into rotten meat. Avoiding the drizzle of black viscera, he hopped to the side, turning back toward

the pit as he did so.

What he saw there could only be described as a mass of dead flesh. The vast, collapsing shape was the color of blackened mud. As the mass slowly oozed out of the pit, there was no mistaking what it had been until just a few moments before—the snake.

It gave off no smell nor sound as it moved. But the melting pile of meat was unmistakably a physical, tangible thing.

Xixu spotted a red eye buried amidst the exposed entrails and frowned. “What is this...?”

“I expected as much. Just as her strike brought it close to death, you cut your way out and dealt the finishing blow.” Vas’s tone was dispassionate. “Its physical form was only a result of Distira’s power, so once you stole that, it was no longer able to maintain its shape. A foregone conclusion, given that a sacred companion would have the higher affinity to her power.”

“Distira...” Xixu examined his left hand. He felt as though he’d been with her until just a moment ago. Yet he could not recall in what way, nor whatever words they might have exchanged. What he did know was that she was gone, and that he had inherited some of her power.

Xixu and Sari were reflected in the dull eyes of the sludge that had formerly been the snake. Whether attracted by her presence or the smell of blood, it slowly dragged itself across the ground toward her. A voiceless murmur rippled through the air.

“O...White Moon...”

Desire that resembled thirst, that knew no bounds.

Xixu launched forward into a dash. Vas still had his rapier to Sari’s throat, but right now, the snake came first. He brought his sword down, severing a section of the melted meat oozing across the dirt.

The undulating carrion froze from the point where his blade made contact. There was a crackling sound as frost spread, blanketing the entire mountainous mass in the blink of an eye.

As Xixu ran across it, he saw a delusion in the crumbling fragments of black flesh that overlapped his own. A piece of a dream he had no memory of throbbed in the corner of his consciousness.

It wanted her. It loathed her. It wanted to devour her.

It wanted to touch her, to make her a part of it, to crush her until she lost her shape. So was the intensity of its love.

It was an obsession it could not control. Greed that sought to devour the distant moon. Within him, Xixu knew that the root of that same greed existed. The only difference between him and the snake was whether they'd obtained her or not.

Xixu stood above the snake's dark red eyes on a hill of black flesh. He could feel the frozen entrails beneath his feet. Once more, he had a realization.

The first god had once severed the snake's head here, upon this land. Compared to that, these events would only be a bookmark at best. Nothing would end. As long as humanity existed, the snake would one day return, as would its desire for the proprietress of Pale Moon.

"But this is the last time you will ever see Saridi."

There was no substitute for her. Unlike the snake and its blind desire for the moon, that was what Xixu believed.

So he would not hand her over. He gripped his blade with both hands, steadied his breathing, and honed his power.

A soft shiver trembled through the snake's body. **"White Moon..."**

A whisper of obsessive love.

Muddied red eyes turned toward her.

Clad in a white kimono stained with blood, Sari watched the snake with eyes of clear ice. When she spoke, her voice was neither warm nor cold.

"Scatter, melt, and vanish. The next time you come, do so as a guest."

The world froze.

Then a blade for slaying gods was brought down upon a stagnant, obsessive

desire.

The frozen black mound shattered at the single swing of Xixu's blade, producing a clear, resonant sound. The countless fragments scattered like powdered snow, glittering in the pale light as they melted in the air. Some ascended, while others sank into the earth. One day, they would return to Irede.

Xixu flicked his blade clean and turned back to the two remaining individuals in the chamber. He asked the young man standing behind Sari and holding a rapier to her neck a question.

"How much of this did you anticipate?"

"Who can say? Planning ahead only gets one so far."

In contrast to Vas's casual tone, he wore a slight frown, as though he were enduring a headache. Due to their positions, Xixu was the only one who could see the expression.

Sari, standing one step in front of Vas, was keeping her expression deliberately blank. Her complexion was sallow, however, perhaps because of the blood loss. She had a bleeding wound in her thigh that hadn't been there before, and nothing had been done to stop the flow.

She took a deep breath. "You're next," she told Vas.

"Confident words coming from someone on the brink of death. It must be difficult for you to even stand."

Vas gave Sari's back a light push, and she collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. Xixu had to force himself not to dash forward. The tip of Vas's blade still threatened her.

The young man smiled dryly. "Now for you. I'll start by asking you to drop that sword."

"Don't do it, Xixu," Sari said hoarsely.

Without even glancing at her, Vas thrust his rapier into her calf. She shuddered violently, but didn't scream. Rage threatened to overcome Xixu as

he watched her grit her teeth and try to endure the pain.

Vas frowned again and withdrew his sword from her leg. “Drop your sword, then come over here. You’ve fulfilled your usefulness to me already.”

Red eyes observed Xixu as if he were something of no significance.

Distira was dead. The snake was gone. After the sun god killed Xixu, he would take Sari back with him, and that would be the end.

For Vas, that was likely the plan. One could even say he’d made an unnecessary concession for Sari in getting rid of the snake.

But the fact that he thought it a concession at all proved that Vas was no longer his original self. It was an old truth by now, but bitter all the same. As he faced the young man, Xixu internally spurred himself on, scrounging through his thoughts for a plan of action.

He couldn’t let Sari come to any more harm, but neither could he simply let himself be killed. It was under those two conditions that he had to find a way—any way—to defeat Vas.

Xixu dropped his gaze to the god-slaying blade. There was no time for hesitation. He returned it to its scabbard and placed it at his feet.

Saridi’s breath caught in her throat. “Xixu.”

“It’s okay.”

He took a step forward. Vas’s first strike would be critical. If he could just endure or avoid that, the rest would work out. Even alone, he could fight an inhuman opponent—that was why he had changed. Right now, his first priority was to get Sari away from him.

Xixu advanced deliberately across the viscous earth, melted by the snake’s dead flesh. The distance between him, Sari, and Vas closed. At the halfway point, he felt something off beneath his feet.

Without dropping his gaze, he “saw” what it was and stopped. His cold eyes flickered to Vas, still at Sari’s side. “Is this far enough?”

“I believe my exact words were ‘Come over here.’”

“Get away from Saridi. I won’t move a single step forward until you do.”

“As always, you prove to be stubborn at the strangest of times.” Though he shrugged incredulously, Vas withdrew his blade. He studied Sari’s pitiful form. He seemed deep in thought, but it didn’t last long.

Vas frowned and held his left hand out toward Sari.

“Stop!” Xixu cried.

But his shout came too late. Red light flared.

Sari’s slender form jerked, then slumped limply. Her blue eyes closed, and her silver hair fell across her face.

Xixu, who had almost burst forward, stopped when Vas gestured with the tip of his blade.

“I only rendered her unconscious. I’d rather not take the risk of leaving my back to her, and it would be troublesome if she went berserk again from watching you die.”

“So you mean to take her back with you while she’s asleep?”

“That would be the quickest solution, yes.”

Vas turned to face Xixu. Blade still in hand, he began to stride toward him across the slick dirt.

Within the young man’s handsome features, one could still see the marks of Sari’s blood relative peeking through. He grimaced occasionally as he walked, perhaps being reminded of the several wounds he’d received.

Feet crunched on grit as Vas came to a stop. Xixu could read no emotion in his eyes. His blade tip, still wet with Sari’s blood, pointed at Xixu.

“So this is the end. Though I must admit, it required slightly more time than I anticipated.”

“Are you satisfied, after all the strings you pulled behind the scenes?”

“I wonder about that. It’s not as if I exhausted my options, after all.”

“You had more?”

Vas's only reply was a small smile. Likely he thought that explaining would be wasted on a dead man. Xixu kept his gaze focused on the red-hot blade, as well as the ground at his feet.

One step from either of them, and they would be within the other's reach.

Vas rolled the hilt of his blade in his hand. "So much loss you've experienced, all due to the matters of others."

"I don't think of it as loss."

If it were loss, then no one would know it better than Vas, who had protected Xixu and been painted over as a result. Everyone faced the crossroads of fate thinking of someone other than themselves. That was how Xixu had come to where he was today, and so he wished to carry on the hopes of those who had come before him.

He closed his eyes.

Truly, humans were such fools. They were motivated by desire, by emotion, by justice. They killed themselves and killed others.

It was always humans who made the most foolish of choices.

Yet it was also humans who declared those choices to be good. Who continued to struggle.

That was why she loved them.

"This is the end."

Vas's voice came from directly in front him.

Xixu sensed him raising his sword. He felt the hot wind, and channeled strength into his toes.

When he stomped, a buried blade flipped up out of the dirt. It was stained, rusted, and belonged to an already dead shadeslayer.

Xixu stooped and seized it. A red blade skimmed the left side of his collarbone.

He ignored the pain blazing across his shoulder and stepped in close to his opponent.

There was a feeling of dull resistance. A beat later, he heard a surprised mutter.

“So this was your plan?”

“No.”

It had been a simple coincidence. Or, if not that, then the will of the blade’s previous owner.

Xixu looked down at the decorative cord tied to the hilt of the blade in his grasp. The yellow quartz, smeared with dirt, held the story of a man who had once been banished from Irede.

That day, the sword Xixu had struck down had remained here, buried, and so it had stayed until he’d spotted it among the melted earth. He watched as the blood of a god trickled down its blade.

Vas watched it too, running forth from the wound in his chest. His smile was cynical.

“Honestly. You never give up.”

The power Xixu was channeling through the blade rapidly cooled Vas’s body. As the sun god’s breaths lost their warmth, he slowly turned his head to look behind him.

His left eye—and only that eye—narrowed as he watched the woman sleeping on the ground a distance away.

“Very well, then. I entrust her to you.”

The words were slightly bitter, yet one could also hear happiness in them.

They were all the young man left behind as his body became golden light and scattered.

11. Lifethread

With her eyes closed, Sari slumbered. She slept with her knees to her chest and her head tucked in, the same as when she'd been but an unborn child.

There, in the cold stone chamber, she crouched. Drops of ice fell onto the smooth skin of her legs, formed from tears. Each strand of her silver hair spread across the floor harbored moonlight, and a pale luminescence clung to her graceful, unclothed form.

Her body was full-grown, yet she kept her eyes closed like a stubborn little girl. But suddenly, she lifted her head. Pushing herself off the cold floor, she rose to her feet.

"Xixu."

She couldn't see him.

But she knew he was there.

She reached her right hand out to the empty air. She smiled, spellbound, and waited, with only love in her heart and only an imploration in her thoughts.

A promise unbroken since ages past.

The first and final vow.

At the end of her long solitude, her slender fingers touched warmth.



Sari stirred within the arms that held her.

They had left the underground chamber behind them, and the sky was just beginning to cast off the thin veil of morning. Xixu, who had chosen a path back to Pale Moon that would be relatively empty of pedestrians, called to her gently.

"Saridi? Are you awake?"

"Nnn..."

Though her eyes were cracked open, her complexion was still slightly pale. While he'd stopped her bleeding, she had to still be suffering from a lack of blood. But the fact that she'd awoken likely meant she was slowly recovering, absorbing the vitality of him, her companion.

Her gaze wandered about before finding Xixu. Seeing the resolve in them, he opened his mouth to tell her about Vas. Before anything else, he needed to let her know what had happened to her cousin.

His words were stymied, however, when Sari threw her arms around his neck. "Th-Thank goodness..." she murmured.

"Saridi."

"I thought...you were dead..."

The arms around his neck pulled tighter. Xixu stiffened when he felt her begin to cry.

This entire time, his thoughts had been occupied with matters of more importance than himself, but now that she had mentioned it, he realized that she hadn't seen what had happened to him. After some uncertainty, he shifted her so that she was higher up in his arms.

"Thanks to you, I survived."

"Oh, come on." Sari let a giggle slip. She pulled her face from his shoulder and smiled, her eyes wet. "You saved yourself."

"No, I would have died if I'd still been human. And..."

Xixu thought for a moment about whether he should mention the sword before deciding to hold his tongue. Somehow, he had the feeling that Eid wouldn't have wanted him to tell her.

Regardless, the truth was that he had only come this far due to the aid of others. He could never forget that. As such, there was something he needed to say.

"About Vas..."

"I know."

Sari's firm response suggested that no more words were necessary.

For her, who had faced the god who was her cousin and yet was not, perhaps the matter was one she'd come to terms with already. It could be that she'd considered Vas dead for a long time now. All too late, Xixu realized how stubbornly he'd been clinging on to a forlorn hope.

Sari exhaled. Her breath was the same temperature as her skin. "It's okay. It happened because I was weak. I'll bear that burden for the rest of my life."

"Saridi..."

"Don't worry. It's something I've decided for myself."

Her tone was decisive, as though she was trying to convince herself. Perhaps it was that very pride and compassion of hers that caused her to suffer.

Yet, even knowing that, she had chosen this as her way of life. She would continue to be the proprietress who cared for the oldest courtesan house in the world. To live alongside humanity was the path she had chosen.

That was why Xixu would stay beside her for the remainder of his life, supporting her until the end, never forgetting that the town's mistress was still but an ordinary woman who suffered and worried like anyone else. Only he could safeguard her freedom.

As they proceeded through the twisting alleyways, Xixu examined their tattered appearances. "Thoma's in for another surprise..."

"We look like we tried to elope and ran into trouble. Shall we try and run, since we already look the part?"

"I know you don't mean that. Don't worry, I'm taking us to Pale Moon."

When he said that as if it were a matter of course, Sari exclaimed in delight and hugged him. Something he'd said must have struck a chord with her, though he couldn't for the life of him figure out what. He still didn't really know why she had chosen him to begin with. Perhaps narrowly avoiding death had caused his thoughts to slacken, because he found himself turning the simple question over and over in his head.

"What's wrong, Xixu?"

“It’s just...I was wondering why you picked me.”

“You’re asking that *now*?! You really still don’t know?!”

“Well...I was so happy that I never stopped to think about it beyond considering myself lucky.”

“Since when did luck play a part in it?! Wait, are you being serious right now?!”

“Was it a bad guess? Sorry...” It appeared he had yet another mistake to reflect upon.

Sari giggled, bright and clear. “You know what? Stay that way. It’s funnier if you don’t know. All you do need to know is that to me, you’re special. You and no one else.”

“Can I at least know the reas—”

“I knew you’d ask that! No!”

Sari laughed, delight in her voice.

The leftover tears in the corners of her eyes resembled the lingering moon in the morning sky.

Sure enough, when they returned to Pale Moon, they found everyone in the midst of conducting a manhunt.

In the end, it was decided that Xixu and Thoma would oversee the cleanup while Sari took a bath to rid herself of all the blood and mud. As she washed herself in hot water, she checked and saw that all of her wounds had closed.

That did not mean she had fully recovered, however; the backlash from exhausting her power had left her with an unbearable fatigue. But of course, she had fought two gods and the snake—the outcome could easily have been far worse.

She owed the fact that it hadn’t to the help of those around her, Xixu foremost among them.

Recalling the ones she had lost, Sari hugged her knees to her chest in the

bathtub, gaze downcast. Tears once again trailed along her silver eyelashes, falling from the tips. She pressed her fingers, warmed by the water, to her eyes.

Her losses, too, were a part of her. That was why, as she had told Xixu, she would live with them until the end.

No matter what may come in the future, it was her duty to face it. The snake, which by now had progressed halfway toward becoming a pillar of the very earth, had been lured up and killed. The proxy of her brother god, a constant of creation, had also been killed. There was no telling what these events might set into motion.

But whatever came for her, she would drive away. Because her companion had given her his life and bound her to this world.

Bright, pale blue eyes stared into the water.

“Hmm...? Oh, drat!”

Her essence had responded to the intensity of her thoughts, and it had cooled the water. If she remained in this ice bath any longer, she’d catch a cold.

Quickly washing her face and getting out of the tub, Sari wrung out her hair and bound it into a single tail, which she fixed into place with an ornate hairpin. She donned a soft silk *yukata* over her kimono undergarment and went into the next room.

Her brother and Xixu, who were evidently back from taking care of the cleanup, sat on the tatami facing each other across the low table.

They looked up when they noticed her walk in, and recognition appeared in their expressions almost simultaneously when they saw the swelling around her eyes. However, neither of them broached the subject, instead inviting her to sit.

When Sari sat by Xixu’s side, Thoma began to speak.

“After surveying the location, we’ve determined that damage to anything aboveground was minimal. The building’s foundation was burnt and frozen, but it belonged to a criminal, so the issue isn’t significant. To make a long story short, Irede suffered no damage.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Material damages aside, *you two* really need to stop recklessly charging out at the drop of a hat. What would we do if something happened to you?”

“It worked out fine, didn’t it?” Sari pointed out, pouting.

Xixu spoke at the same time, apologizing solemnly. “Sorry.”

Regardless, from the beginning, Sari had no intention of involving other humans in her conflict against her fellow gods.

People, as well as their lives, were fragile. Yet sometimes, even knowing that, they leaped into danger with no reserve. She knew that Thoma would give his own life for their sakes without any hesitation, which was why she’d wanted to leave him behind.

As Sari huffed and turned her face away, she noticed that the two men’s teacups were empty. When she tried to rise to her feet, however, Xixu beat her to it.

“Sorry to do this while everything’s still so busy, but I’m going to head to the capital today.”

“Huh? Already?”

“Yes. I need to report to His Majesty and...make some arrangements.”

“Arrangements?”

Sari cocked her head suspiciously as Xixu gave her a strained smile. He presented the god-slaying blade to Thoma, which the man accepted in exchange for a standard militia sword.

“He’s moving out of the capital completely to settle down here,” Thoma explained when he saw his sister’s wide-eyed surprise. “Unlike past companions, he’s not fully human anymore. It could be problematic if he dedicated his support to a single country.”

“I...guess you’re right, but...”

Xixu, even while he had been a shadeslayer of Irede, had maintained his position as a vassal of the king. Was it okay to force him to change that, even if he had become her sacred companion? The recent events had been so hectic that she hadn’t given much thought to the consequences, but now the thought

made her pale.

“See?” Thoma said to Xixu tiredly. “She’s not taking it well. I should add, Sari, that he’s going to relinquish his royal status.”

“Relin—?! *What?! But you’re legitimately related to His Majesty by blood, aren’t you, Xixu? Why would you do that?*”

“We do share blood, but as far as I’m concerned, our relationship is nothing more than master and servant.” Xixu looked slightly unsure of himself—had he not expected her surprise? He seemed to fight past the feeling, however, because he continued, “But hereon, I wish to prioritize you over my liege. I don’t need my current status to achieve that, and neither do I think I deserve it.”

“Oh, so that’s what you mean.”

Because of how serious and earnest he was, Xixu believed that he didn’t deserve the status and privileges afforded to him in the capital if he could not fully dedicate himself to his liege—not that he had really ever taken advantage of his position as the king’s brother to begin with.

“But while you might not think of him as such, I think His Majesty considers you family, Xixu. Your status is just a bonus that comes with having a family. If you don’t expressly dislike it, I think it’s fine to leave as is.”

Personally, Sari didn’t mind either way. It was enough that his heart was hers, and she had already changed his existence and true name. That was why part of her felt guilty toward the king, that she might even end up robbing him of the proof he had a brother. After all, the king hadn’t sent Xixu to Irede to gain her blessing for his country, but to protect him.

“You should ask His Majesty himself if he’s okay with you prioritizing me. If you suddenly renounce your status, he might fall into a depression thinking you want to cut ties with him.”

“You think...?”

“Yes. I don’t want His Majesty bearing a grudge against me either. Though the choice is yours in the end, Xixu.” Sari appended a grin to her words.

Xixu nodded, expression pensive. “I understand. I’ll ask him. I still don’t have perfect control over my power either.”

He retrieved the decorative cord with the half moons from his breast pocket and affixed it to the military sword Thoma had lent him. For a moment, Sari watched the movement of his fingers, captivated, but then she broke from the spell and began to get up.

“In that case, I’ll go with you to the cap—”

“I don’t think so. *You* need to stay here, recover, and see to the remainder of the cleanup.”

“Thoma...”

“Don’t give me that look. If you want to go to the capital, I’ll accompany you. *After* you’re in better condition and everything’s taken care of.”

She couldn’t press the issue any further, not when Thoma had such a stern look on his face. She’d get her chance to go eventually anyway, since she would have to meet with the king. Fyra, too, who had lost her younger brother.

Recalling her position as the maiden and the head of the Werrilocia, Sari suppressed her selfish desires. As she looked at her husband, however, she couldn’t quite keep the uneasiness from her eyes.

“Be careful.”

“I will. I’ll be back soon.”

But before the young man left the room, he stopped as though he’d recalled something. Hand still on the sliding door, he turned. “Come to think of it, Saridi...”

“Yes?”

“When we were underground, he asked you a question, didn’t he? What was it?”

The question caught Sari off guard, and she stared at him blankly for a moment. She racked her memories of when she’d fought Vas. “Oh, right. That.”

“If you’d rather not say, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s okay. It didn’t make much sense anyway; it kind of came out of nowhere. He asked me if we’d truly married. I wonder what he meant by it.”

She hadn’t been able to grasp the point of the abrupt question, so she hadn’t given it a yes or a no.

But as she folded her arms, head cocked, Xixu’s breath caught and his eyes widened. Realizing that he knew something, she uncrossed her arms and stretched them.

“Xixu?”

“No...it’s nothing. I’ll be going now.”

“Huh? Oh. Okay.”

“Be good and listen to Thoma for me while I’m gone.”

Sari didn’t reply. Wasn’t that something you said to a child?

But Xixu was gone already, not even giving her thoughts the time to form into dissatisfaction. She turned to her brother, feeling a vague lack of closure. A building sense of unease made her go over to him and voice her doubts.

“Am I...going to be abandoned?”

“Stop talking nonsense and go to bed. You’re enough of a pain already; don’t make it worse.”

To that, she had no response.



The audience chamber, overflowing with flowers, was enclosed by the darkness of night. A sweet scent filled the air, almost thick enough to be suffocating. Yet the king, master of this chamber, was absent. Only moonlight filtered in.

Beside the throne stood a single woman, eyes closed and hand placed on the throne’s ivory back. She was the maiden said to be the king’s right hand. Her long hair was plaited into a single braid, and not a speck of dust stained her white maiden’s robe as she waited.

She had waited like this for a long time. From the day she was born, she had

always been waiting for something.

The blind maiden who saw a different world to those who could see turned toward the door when she sensed a new presence. "I have been awaiting your arrival."

There was no sound. Yet there he stood. She bowed her head before the god who had come to visit.

"So you saw ahead this far?" he asked, unsurprised but not bothering to hide his displeasure. "I'm afraid to say that leaves a rather unpleasant taste in my mouth."

She smiled dryly. "You have my sincerest apologies."

One who had the power of foresight would always be ostracized by others to some degree. Not because they could see the future, but because they tried to manipulate it.

She, who was no exception, waited for the presence to approach. The cadence of his footsteps was regular, speaking of his good breeding. When they stopped, a young man who had become a god stood before her. He was clad in black and slightly taller than her.

He looked down. "That you foresaw my arrival must also mean you know what I wish to ask."

"Yes. You wish to know the course of history if it had been allowed to proceed untampered with."

It was to answer that question that she had waited here. She had considered keeping the answer to herself until the end. But she wanted to tell somebody. Somebody who wasn't her liege, or the women who were one and eternal.

For that somebody to be him could be said to be the just reward for her arrogance. The maiden smiled faintly.

"In the first history I saw, over half of this continent was engulfed in the flames of war. Human hearts were barren of kindness, countries burned in the flames, and death and desire ran rampant."

"And this was at the instigation of the Country of the Open Sea?"

“Yes. Their third prince, Vendt Xinosia, was a man with a deep thirst for conquest. With this country as his primary objective, he tore through other nations with abandon.”

“I see. And you managed to divert his attention by dangling a tantalizing piece of bait. Inhuman beings are on the verge of extinction on his continent. He would not have been able to resist such a rare resource.”

Instead of nodding, she simply bowed her head once more.

Irede’s mistress, the beautiful god, had been the perfect bait and trap, all in one. The maiden had known that once Vendt discovered the power in her blood, coupled with the fact that she was a woman, he would pursue her before all else. That was why she had sent him a letter without telling her liege. That was how the king’s maiden had pushed the man who would drag the continent into chaos toward Irede.

She heard the young man sigh.

“What I want to ask comes before that, and is far more trivial. I imagine I already have a good idea of the answer, however.”

“I am aware. You wish to know how I changed her sacred companion.”

That she could not see the fates of gods was and had always been a lie. She had hidden the truth even from her liege. If she had not, he would have had to shoulder yet another burden on himself. So she had maintained the deception.

Her bare lips, unpainted with rouge, drew into a smile. “It is as you already suspect. The original fate of His Highness Kilis was to die here, in the capital. If nothing had changed, he would never even have met her.”

“So you dispatched him to Irede to prevent his death, making sure to even change his name.”

“I believed he would make a fine shadeslayer.”

“That he was. But I take that to mean his death was prevented the moment Everie took an interest in him. It was rather audacious of you to browbeat her with a long-concluded prophecy.”

The young man’s tone was exasperated, rather than irritated. But the truth

remained that she had caused his cherished princess no small amount of torment.

“I understand that my actions have been the height of rudeness,” the maiden apologized sincerely. “As meager consolation as it might be, I was not certain that I, a human, would be able to change her fate.”

“You mean to say that she may have chosen her original companion?”

“Yes.”

If fate had been left unchanged, Sari would have chosen her childhood friend. If Xixu had never visited Irede, they would have been drawn together by their shared compassion, love, and hate, clashing and causing each other suffering.

The king’s maiden recalled the first end she had seen for Sari. After fracturing with her companion and being abandoned, she would have lost her right arm fighting the golden wolf shortly after giving birth to the next maiden.

Yet, even bearing that wound, she would not have cursed her own fate. Thus, this new outcome was nothing more than the fruit of human arrogance.

The king’s maiden forced her dry lips into a smile. “My liege cherishes His Highness Kilis as his sole blood relative, so I wished to save him from his fate. I acted entirely of my own accord when I pulled the strings that caused her original companion and you to become sacrifices.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I can’t say I consider myself to have been sacrificed. It did require a considerable amount of effort to regain authority over my own mind, but this outcome was interesting, in its own way.” Vas tapped his own chest. “It was quite painful, however, to be so completely usurped.”

The maiden smiled broadly at the young nobleman who had become a god. “I am honored to accept your praise. Yet, a sin is a sin. That is why you have come, is it not?”

“Yes, I suppose. My irritation at you manipulating me like a puppet aside, I believed it prudent that someone, at least, should be angry with you.”

“You have my gratitude.”

The king, Xixu, and Sari all could have fulfilled that role. But the maiden was grateful that Vas had chosen to step forth without revealing her to them.

If she did not face the anger that was her due, then the dead would go without just recompense. For there was no doubt that Eid Rukud had loved Sari, and even in this flow of history, he had protected her.

The king's maiden reached down toward her feet, using scent to guide her. The white flower that bloomed there was precious to the king, even among the others. When its bud had first opened, he had told her that it resembled her. To her, the words had been a greater reward than any other.

She knelt and placed a kiss on the flower's smooth petals. After breathing in deep of their sweet scent, she turned up toward Vas.

"What will you do after this?"

"Why ask what you already know? I'll head for the Country of the Open Sea. I'd rather not stay on this continent and have *her* find me."

"I pray for your good fortune in whatever conflicts you may face."

"I feel rather restless having someone who can see the future tell me that..."

She chuckled, taking the joke for what it was, and bowed her head. "Please forgive my impertinence, but I wish to make a request. I would rather not leave a corpse, if possible."

"Very well. I don't mind. I'll make sure not to leave even a drop of blood behind."

Accepting the god's mercy, she obediently straightened her posture and presented him with her pale neck.

Under her breath, she called the king's name.

As she appreciated her own good fortune, her smile never faltered, not until the burning crimson light had reduced her to nothing.



The audience chamber was enclosed by the darkness of night, filled with the scent of flowers. Then, the doors cracked open.

With light at his back and accompanied by his guards, the king peeked inside.

“Belvi? Are you in here? Belvi?”

No one was there to reply.

Beside the throne, white flower petals glowed in the moonlight.

12. Ties

The light drizzle that had set in at early sunset cast a quiet chill over the entire town. But while the gray clouds across the night sky spoke of melancholy, Irede's dazzling colors remained on display, unchanging despite the rain. Red paper lanterns hung from the eaves of buildings, and courtesans lounged by second-floor windows, their pale arms extended outside.

Umbrellas paraded down the main streets. As Xixu listened to the drifting music of some performer's flute, he cut a brisk pace through the crowd wearing only a raincloak. Tied to the hilt of the blade at his waist, the black quartz that signified his position as a shadeslayer clattered softly against the half-moon decorative cord.

Although the state of affairs across most of the continent had settled into relative calm, there were still many places where tensions remained high. Even so, this pleasure town maintained the same otherworldly air it'd had since the distant past.

Irede, the town that was home to a god.

The young man, one of its irreplaceable hearts, stepped off the main street, his destination the old manor in the north. He passed by the bamboo thickets, occasionally observing the dark waters of the canals, and before long, he arrived.

Perhaps because of the light rain, a lantern hung from the usually bare gate, a pale, floating half moon. Xixu passed through, stepping across the wet paving stones. The path leading up to the open entryway resembled a moonlit sea under the reflected illumination from the manor.

Then, he noticed unfamiliar men standing upon the floor of the entryway. They had to be guests. He slowed his pace so as not to disturb them, but the maidservant within caught sight of him. She hurried out of sight to call for someone else.

The proprietress appeared in the entryway, her beauty as bright as though she were lit by moonlight.

Her silver hair was up, pinned in place by an ornate hairpin with affixed pearls. The slender line of her neck continued into a white kimono. The sash was new to him—black—but its front bore the same white half-moon symbol she always wore.

Her attire, which otherwise might have appeared plain, was transformed into the image of a solemn flower by her countenance alone. Clear blue eyes shone with fiery intensity over light pink cheeks. The crimson-painted lips of a beauty drew the eye, resembling a flower that bloomed at night.

Sari smiled sweetly and opened a black-lacquer umbrella, holding it out toward him.

Xixu strode briskly across the paving stones, coming to a stop before her. The men in the entryway paused as they stepped up onto the floor of the manor, looking back with curiosity.

Xixu opened his mouth to apologize for his late return.

“I’m sorry, Saridi. I took longer than—”

A pale finger was pressed to his mouth, and Xixu swallowed his words. Had he done something impolite?

Yet she removed her finger, pointing it at the hanging lantern, and gave him an enchanting smile.

“Welcome to the courtesan house Pale Moon. This is the sole place in Irede where we preserve the old hidden myth.”

Once, upon this continent, a man had summoned a god.

She, after accomplishing the king’s request for salvation, requested a threefold price.

One was wine, to delight her.

One was music, to soothe her.

And the final price was her other half, with whom she would share her nights

and her life.

The woman who was a god smiled, joy dancing in her eyes. “As we follow the old traditions here, the women choose their guests. I hope you will find that acceptable.”

Her graceful hand removed his raincloak. Captivated by her smile and entranced by her voice, it took Xixu a moment to come back to himself and nod.

“Yes...I understand.”

He did indeed. Far more than anyone else.

As he reminisced on their first meeting and other bygone times, he brought a hand to the soft skin of her cheek. Her warmth was the same as his.

“And what of your guest?”

“As the proprietress of this house, I will only ever take a single guest in my lifetime.”

Even should death come for him, her choice would never change. How was it that fate had sought fit to bless him so?

“Then would you do me the honor of choosing me?”

“Gladly.”

The black umbrella fell to the paving stones as he took her into his arms. She was his, and only his.



Such was her softness that he thought he might melt into her. A sweet voice whispered into his chest.

“Don’t leave me. Stay forever.”

“I promise.”

With sincerity he would change her solitude, with love he would support their vow.

To her, he would offer all of his nights. To her, he would give all his life.

Xixu loosened his tight embrace and kissed her.

After releasing a soft sigh, he looked up and finally realized that the men in the entrance were still there, their expressions a mix of blank wonder and envy.

Sari giggled. As Xixu averted his gaze awkwardly, she gestured toward the hallway. “Far more beautiful women than myself await you in the flower room,” she told the lingering men. “Please, go ahead and make their acquaintance.”

“R-Right...”

After the men left, guided by the maidservant, Xixu and Sari once more turned to face one another. She latched onto his right arm.

“Let’s go, Xixu. Since you’re all wet, would you like to take a bath first? Shall we take one together?”

“Not together, please...”

“You’re still being stubborn about that? They call that being a sore loser, you know.”

“Since when was it about winning or losing...?”

Xixu matched the hand that sought his, entwining their fingers. Reaffirming that they were one.

A deed that had taken place since long ago. A love story passed down in this town of the night.

Thus, once more was the moon’s bed whole, and the vow between man and god fulfilled.

Epilogue

1. The Moon's Bed

The journey from Irede, the pleasure town of myth, to the royal capital of Torlonia took a little less than two days on horseback—not too near, yet not too far.

Irede had existed since before the founding of Torlonia, unchanged since the age of myth, though the country it belonged to had shifted with the passage of time. The capital city of each of these countries had always occupied the same location, and Torlonia's was no exception. This was due to a number of reasons: The existing highways allowing for a flow of goods, the distance from the border ensuring a degree of safety from attack, the nearby large river allowing for commercial trade, and so on.

Also one of these vital reasons, in all likelihood, was that Irede was not too far.

Irede was a place where money and humans gathered, sourced from all across the continent. No matter the era, it had never involved itself too deeply in politics beyond maintaining a loose autonomy, but nevertheless, a close relationship with the town was unmistakably beneficial. For one thing, information became easier to obtain. And while Irede disliked countries pursuing their own agendas inside the town's limits, a certain degree of action could be overlooked, within reason.

With all that said, for Xixu, it was just nice that the journey back to the palace was so simple. He had returned to give a report on his future intentions immediately after the two gods who had been the cause of so much anxiety had been defeated, but it was there he heard something unexpected.

"That maiden has disappeared?"

"She has. No one's been able to find her since yesterday. She wasn't seen leaving the palace either; it's like she up and vanished into thin air."

The king sat upon his throne, chin resting on his hand. There was a

despondency to his expression that Xixu had never seen before.

The maiden who they were discussing was not Sari but the king's trusted confidant with the abilities of foresight and far-sight.

Belsevina had been by the king's side since before Xixu had formally become royalty. In fact, it had been her who had identified him as the king's half brother. As the story went, she had originally been kept confined to some noble's estate before said noble had been executed for treason, leading to the king taking her in. Ever since, she had been His Majesty's faithful retainer, supporting her liege's shrewd acumen with her own abilities.

The king had to be keenly feeling her absence. The usual crafted smile that hid his true intentions was gone, substituted with a look of melancholy. His eyes danced around, never remaining in the same place for long.

Standing before his liege, Xixu wore his usual serious look. "Should we assume that someone abducted her?"

"Her personal chambers show signs that she put them in order herself, so we think it's likely she left of her own accord."

"Even so..."

Even so, would her blindness truly allow her to depart on her own? Someone had likely assisted her, and if so, that someone could be investigated. But before Xixu could suggest this, the king cut him off with a casual wave of his hand.

"She knew everything. And coming to my side was a choice she made for herself. Her will is not anyone's right to deny. If she has left us, then it is what she decided. Belvi's capable enough to go anywhere, you know. It was just my good fortune that she stayed with me until now."

The king spoke as though he were trying to convince himself. His words slipped from him like tears in the empty audience chamber—everyone else had been ordered to leave—revealing his true emotions, unadorned. Seeing the dejection in his eyes, Xixu, for the first time, felt the bond of blood between himself and his liege.

The king heaved a heavy sigh and gave Xixu a faint smile. Deliberately

changing his mood, no doubt. His tone was gentle as he addressed the young man who was his little brother and loyal vassal.

“I apologize for making this about myself. Let me hear what you have to say.”

“As you will, Your Majesty.”

It felt awkward to speak of himself in the wake of their discussion, but Xixu nonetheless launched into his report. *“I became Sari’s sacred companion. I’ve left the realm of humanity, so I will not be able to continue acting as your vassal. I am relocating permanently to Irede.”*

Much of his report was declarations after the fact; he had no intention of changing his plans no matter what the king said. However, seeing the state his liege was in, he could no longer bring himself to speak of renouncing his status. He recalled Sari’s words that it would come across as him trying to cut ties—and that would only pour salt on the wound of the king’s loss.

When he finished, his liege’s expression softened. “I see. I’m glad for you.”

“You approve?”

Xixu had considered the possibility that his liege had presented him as a sacred offering to the god in order to purchase her protection, but the intent behind his question lay in a different matter. He was simply surprised that the king was so readily accepting of his relocation to Irede.

Faced with his little brother’s suspicion, the king burst into laughter. “Of course; I don’t mind at all. I’ve always wanted to find a good match for you, remember? Do take good care of her.”

“I...am grateful for your understanding, Your Majesty.”

“One thing, though. I know you feel as though you cannot live up to your own royal status, but I would like for you to keep it, if you are not unwilling.”

It was as though he’d read Xixu’s mind. But perhaps that was only to be expected. The king had long been known for his skill at discerning others’ thoughts, and Xixu had been told by many that he was easy to read.

“I am sorry to burden you with this, but if I am alone, it will cause some to believe that simply killing me will be enough and that they can seize control of

the subsequent chaos. Even if that is not the case, your existence will lure in the greedy and ambitious, meaning I can prepare for them all the better.”

The current order of succession had Xixu second in line to sit upon the throne. This was less immediate as it seemed, given the king’s significant political power and Xixu’s utter lack of involvement in state affairs, but it made him a pursuable option for conspirators seeking to overthrow the current status quo. His very existence could both keep the king’s potential enemies in check and smoke them out.

But although Xixu understood his liege’s intentions, it would be a moot point if it caused trouble for Irede. He could not forget what his priorities were. Placing his feeling of awkwardness to the side for a moment, he spoke.

“I cannot do anything that would place her in danger.”

“Oh, I know. As always, she is your first priority, and you should continue safeguarding her as you have been. However, renouncing your status will not deter those motivated enough to come knocking at your door, for you can never change the truth of your parentage. Choosing to simply remain as royalty will allow me to more easily handle the cleanup of whatever problems you may encounter. Think of it as a mutually beneficial situation. Though, if you are truly against it, the final say is of course yours.”

The wry look in the king’s eyes exposed a timidity Xixu had never seen in him before. Was it due to the absence of his maiden? Or was it that Xixu was simply that significant to him as family?

It would be insolent to attempt to discern that truth, so Xixu simply bowed. “You are too kind. I shall do as you suggest.”

“Mmm. Thank you. And...be happy.”

The tangible emotion in the king’s appended words caused Xixu to finally realize what should have been blindingly obvious.

The man sitting before him was indeed his brother.



Xixu had remained in the capital for several days afterward, assisting with the

search for the missing maiden, visiting his former military academy classmates, explaining his circumstances to his mother, and arranging for the remainder of his belongings in her home to be sent to Irede.

That the errands stretched longer than he'd planned for was no doubt due to the vague cloud over the king's mood. At times he even seemed lost, if one looked hard enough. After a number of days, however, he'd returned to his usual self.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," he'd said with a smile. "You should hurry up and return to her side."

Xixu had departed the royal capital that day.

It would be his first return to Irede since he and Sari had defeated the gods of the sun and moon. With the guest-taking ceremony complete, he'd left Sari behind in the wake of their battle to put his affairs in order as swiftly as he could. He knew how prone to loneliness she was, so perhaps she would be angry with him upon his return, if she wasn't already.

Xixu carried these apprehensions with him when he arrived at Pale Moon, but despite the several-day gap, she seemed happy. And was it his imagination, or had she matured a little?

"I still have some work to see to, so go eat something. Oh, but I suppose a bath comes first—you're all wet. There should be some hot water ready to use."

"Don't mind me. I'm the one who showed up without any warning."

How many times had he been let into the proprietress's room now? Xixu examined the tatami room; it had been decorated with arrangements of white flowers. Unlike the night of the ceremony, everything was back in its usual place. He noticed one difference, however—though it was not with the room—and looked down at the woman he stood by his side.

"Your kimono sash is a different color."

"Hmm? Oh, yes. It's because of you."

"Ah...right."

Xixu might not have known its exact meaning in the words of Irede, but he took that to mean the black sash was a sign she had received her guest.

He dropped his gaze to the decorative cord tied to his sword. The single moon made of two halves—white and black—was a symbol of his pairing with her. His brow drew together in a frown; he felt a restlessness he couldn't quite describe.

Sari's silver eyelashes cast downward as she smiled. "I'll be back later."

Faced with such a charming smile, Xixu found himself with nothing to say. He simply nodded.

It was enough to make Sari's expression break into a grin before she departed down the long hallway without a sound.

The proprietress's room was the only guest room with a window that faced out toward the annex. In all likelihood, it was to allow the man who had been permitted its usage to gaze at where the proprietress resided.

Xixu, who had changed into a *yukata* after washing and drying the rain from his body, opened the paper sliding window to the rear garden after his evening meal had been cleared away. There was a light on the second floor of the annex; had Sari returned already?

He recalled the state of her personal room, adorned in multitudes of small trinkets and decorations. Perhaps it was a reflection of her personality.

If one only examined those parts of her, she would seem to be nothing but an ordinary woman. Of course, as far as he was concerned, she was, even if no one else thought the same.

Xixu held his hand up above his eyes, studying it. The warmth had yet to return.

Eventually, the light in the annex extinguished, and a woman who was a god came to the proprietress's room.

"Sorry I'm late."

She sat kneeling before the sliding door she had just opened, her kimono sash the same black as earlier—except the knot had been done at the front this time.

The implication did not escape Xixu. He held his tongue as Sari shuffled up to him across the tatami. When she reached his side, she looked up at him like a child begging for *konpeito*.

“Xixu.”

“Are you finished with work?”

“Mm-hmm. Everything’s done for the night.”

The night was indeed over—for the proprietress. When Xixu placed a hand against Sari’s smooth cheek, her blue eyes softened into a spellbound smile. The pull of it was difficult to resist; Xixu’s expression became strained on pure reflex.

Then he remembered there was no need to hold back. He kissed her gently, once, and she giggled.

“You’re cold, Xixu.”

“I can’t adjust my body warmth that well.”

“You’ll get used to it soon,” said the woman whose body had the gentle glowing warmth of a lamp at night.

The god who had once pleaded for his warmth was now warming him with a heat of her own. The odd reversal in circumstances caused Xixu to think back upon the path they had trod to arrive where they stood. So much had changed.

Her voice called the name that had become his true name.

“Xixu.”

Slender arms entwined around his neck. She offered him her delicate frame, and he pulled it into an embrace.

Fingers slipped into her hair. They extracted the pearl hairpin, and silver locks unfurled down to her black sash. Trembling breaths spilled forth.

Xixu, who had brought his lips to the soft skin of her neck, looked up when he realized that the core of his thoughts had grown hot enough to burn him up from the inside. At some point, he had pushed Sari to the floor. He felt like giving himself a hard kick in the back.

When her gaze matched his and she saw his sour expression, she removed the hands she was using to hide her scarlet blush and reached for him.

“Carry me.”

Heat and cold, pleasure and serenity—they mixed and intermingled, closing their bed off from the rest of the world, as though separated by a transparent shell.

The man’s partner, held in his gentle embrace, displayed both a girlish shyness and a woman’s allure. He saw her make expressions he had never seen before, and they were so adorable that he told her of them, nipping at her with his words.

Her fingers tasted sweet when he kissed them.

He held her slender body in his embrace, making their warmth one.

Fingers entwined and held each other, making a vow for a lifetime.

As the night melted into sleep, he could swear he dreamed of a stone chamber.

Xixu hadn’t seen this room illuminated by the morning light streaming through the sliding paper windows since the day he’d first arrived in Irede. After stroking the hair of the woman nestled into his side, he rose, quickly washed himself with hot water, and dressed.

Unlike Sari, who was the proprietress of a business that operated at night, Xixu had patrols to make during the day. But when he peeked into the bedroom for one last look on her face before he departed, he was surprised to find her awake—albeit still on her stomach in bed.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

“Mngh. Sorry for not getting up...”

Sari, who was propping her head up with her hands under her chin, looked apologetic, yet also still half asleep. Xixu smiled when he saw the unfocused, sleepy look in her eyes.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s bad for your health to force yourself awake. I’ll be stepping out to see to my duties.”

“Can you come back tonight?”

The question sounded like that of a girl pleading for treats. For a moment, Xixu didn’t know how to respond.

“It would be too much of a burden on your body.”

“No it wouldn’t. I drained vitality from you, so I’m fine. Really.”

“Ah...right.” Then that meant it was...okay?

The morning light danced on red lips as they implored, “Come tonight too.”

After a moment, Xixu acceded. “Okay. I promise.”

Sari smiled happily. Seeing the expression paired with her still bare shoulders, Xixu had to fight down the urge to return to her side. Pushing past his various desires, he placed a hand on the sliding door to close it.

Sari spoke at that exact moment, as though she’d read his mind. “You won’t need to pay the companionship price since you’re my sacred companion. In exchange, come by lots, okay?”

“But I thought that was your bride price.”

“I’ve never heard anyone interpret it like that before...”

“Perhaps that’s because I’m your only guest.”

“Maybe. It’ll be expensive, though.”

“I know.”

He had confirmed the exact amount with a maidservant beforehand. The amount—which was only told to the man who would become the maiden’s guest—had surprised Xixu even though he’d mentally prepared himself. Still, he considered it a pittance if it meant making Sari his wife. Even for an ordinary wedding ceremony, it was common practice to give money or gifts to the partner’s family.

Sari giggled and nodded. “Then I’ll let you spoil me. But just this once, okay?”

“At least let me pay for my meals here...”

Whatever the case, he was now a permanent resident of Irede. He could think of no reasons to use his money in the future apart from for her sake.

Xixu silently closed the sliding door and left the proprietress’s room behind him, walking down the well-polished hallway as a single guest. It gave him both an idle sense of fulfillment and a stirring sense of deep emotion, as though he were looking back at a long, storied history.

Upon alighting the stairs, he found a maidservant awaiting him despite the early hour. The girl performed a polite bow.

“The proprietress asked me to await you here.”

“I’ll pay it. I have Saridi’s approval.”

“I thought you would say that.”

The maidservant smiled prettily. Pale Moon had several live-in maidservants, and all of them were acquainted with Xixu. In fact, he had far more opportunity to talk to them than the courtesans who never left the flower room.

However, the professionalism that had been drilled into them meant they never spoke to him more than was necessary. The maidservant’s response had likely been the greatest compliment she could give.

Xixu paid in the form of precious gems he had prepared in advance. Given the amount, it was easier than carrying so much currency on his person, and he had checked beforehand to make sure it was an acceptable form of payment. The maidservant accepted the gems—which were worth far more than the companionship price Xixu had been told—along with the proof of appraisal document accompanying them, checking them both.

The maidservant saw Xixu off from the well-swept entryway with a deep bow. “Please take good care of the proprietress, Master Xixu.”

“Likewise, I’ll be in your care.”

When he saw the girl raise her head and smile happily, it struck Xixu that Pale Moon truly was Sari’s home, and from today, his visits would consist of a singular purpose: to see her.

2. Dawn and Dusk

In Irede, a half moon decorative cord was representative of the maiden's guest. Once, when circumstances had required Xixu borrow it, he'd drawn the curious gazes of the townspeople. But now, after being present in the town for nearly two years, they'd grown acclimatized to him enough that all the reactions he received were relatively subdued.

In fact, the majority of their thoughts seemed to resemble Thoma's own when he'd seen Xixu once again wearing the cord: *"So they finally worked it out."*

"Miss Pale Moon had a strict upbringing," said the proprietress of a teahouse Xixu frequented, smiling. "I'm glad her guest is someone like you, Master Shadeslayer."

The teahouse, tucked away in a small corner of Irede, was rarely used by nonlocals, and the topic of conversation was often town affairs. Xixu, who had stopped by during a break in his patrolling, sipped from his teacup. He was the only customer in the store.

"By 'strict,' do you mean...?"

"I suspect part of it's because her mother wasn't around. Her education started before she was old enough to understand her surroundings. I don't recall her ever playing with others of her age. You could see her from time to time, standing alone at the front gate, but the town's children were too intimidated to speak to the daughter of Pale Moon. I wonder if she was lonely. It's impressive that she grew up into the fine young woman she is today."

"A fine young woman...? Is that how she appears?"

Some would say that, as her husband, that particular point was the absolute last thing he should be questioning. However, rather than being a comment on the virtue of Sari's character, Xixu had taken the compliment as referring to how she was a well-mannered young lady who was perfect in her work as the proprietress.

In fairness, Sari had indeed grown to be a capable proprietress. With an upbringing like hers, it was hardly any wonder that she'd had no one to play with except her brother and older childhood friend. Not to mention the time she'd spent in the royal capital at her family's estate, receiving lessons all the time while being unable to venture out into the city. It must have been quite restrictive—though Xixu supposed the silver lining was that she didn't really consider her childhood to be a difficult one.

Still, if he wasn't mistaken, it had left her bearing a loneliness she still carried today.

"May I presume you'll be staying around permanently from now, Master Shadeslayer? That'd be for the best, certainly."

"Yes. I've promised her that I will."

Xixu recalled the first time he'd asked Sari why she'd picked him; she'd given him a look of disbelief. And when he'd asked again the previous night, she'd only revealed a single thing more.

"There are a lot of reasons, but one is that you think it's only natural for us to be together our whole lives."

As far as Xixu was concerned, that was only obvious, but apparently the very fact he possessed that way of thinking had been a strong shock to Sari, like waking up when she hadn't known she was asleep. She'd poked fun at him afterward, saying, "Also, it was pretty funny that you cleaned up the bathtub after yourself. Ah, do remember that you don't have to do that anymore, okay?" but even her saying that revealed that she'd had a fond impression of him from the very beginning.

Xixu dearly wanted to believe the reason he hadn't noticed was because Sari was fundamentally kind to everybody, and not something else.

Finishing the last of his tea—which was just as delicious as the rest—he thanked the proprietress and paid his bill. Before he left the teahouse proper, she commented, "Ah, Master Shadeslayer. A word of advice, if it isn't too forward. Try to avoid leaving Miss Pale Moon alone in public too often."

"Hmm? I certainly won't be negligent, but what...?"

Was there some issue with Sari being in public? She often went shopping in town on her own, though sometimes she was accompanied by a maidservant. Had some kind of change happened in Irede due to the snake's disappearance, perhaps?

The teahouse proprietress smiled. "Courtesans like Miss Pale Moon only continue to shine all the brighter once they've taken a guest, especially if he also has her love. And beautiful flowers are tempting targets for unpleasant insects."

Xixu did not reply.

Now *that* was a headache of a problem. Even though Sari would never take another guest, he didn't particularly revel in the idea of other men swarming around her.

Gratefully accepting the advice, Xixu returned to his rounds.

Then, at sunset, after completing his work with an even greater degree of diligence than usual, he turned toward Pale Moon.



Xixu had assumed that, like the previous evening, Sari would not come to him until it came time for Pale Moon's lantern to be extinguished, but that proved not to be the case. Evidently, that had only been because of his sudden arrival.

Today, perhaps because of their promise that morning, Sari ran to him delightedly from the entryway as soon as she saw him, leaving the remainder of her duties to the maidservant. They took the room tag and headed for the proprietress's room.

"You don't have to see to your work?" Xixu asked as they walked side by side.

"Being a courtesan is one of my duties too. From now on, I should only need to prioritize my formal duties once every three days or so. I might have to make you wait when that happens, though, so I'm sorry in advance."

"It's fine. I'd rather you prioritize your own affairs."

If anything, it had been Xixu's assumption that they would wait for each other's work to finish before meeting, like yesterday. Yet because of the

teahouse proprietress's warning earlier, he was feeling restless. It hadn't just been her either; he'd received numerous warnings around town afterward to not let other men draw close to Sari.

It had caused him to arrive earlier than their promised meeting time, but in truth, he was glad he'd come.

"Xixu?" Sari looked up at him quizzically as she opened the door. "Is something the matter?"

"It's nothing."

Her beauty was radiant. Long silver eyelashes that caught the moonlight and held it in place hung over a pair of eyes that resembled crushed gemstones scattered across the bottom of a transparent spring. The red of her lip rouge seemed even more vivid than usual, and the sight of it was enough to make Xixu feel like his thoughts would spill from his hands.

Sari had always appeared to be the embodiment of beauty, but he felt now that the air about her that fascinated others had intensified a level, as though a great flower had opened its petals, thickening its aroma. He couldn't find the words to describe it, so when he entered the room, he decided to just be direct.

"You've become more beautiful."

"Huh? In one day?"

"Maybe it's just my imagination..."

"You can't pull back *there*, Xixu!"

Sari giggled happily. She hung up the jacket he passed to her, then spun around and nestled up close to him. The eyes that fascinated him so much adopted a darker shade as she pushed herself up with the tips of her toes.

"If I appear more beautiful, it can only be because you tend to me with such affection, husband," she whispered.

The words were as sweet as poison. Feeling his thoughts come apart at the seams, Xixu took his newlywed wife into his arms. She happily reciprocated, nuzzling her cheek into his embrace.

The warmth he felt from her skin was even closer to his own than yesterday.

Pale Moon's evening meals were provided at different hours depending on the wishes of the guests. Tonight's meal, centered around white-fleshed fish simmered in soy sauce and a small chicken stewed in a clay pot with vegetables, had evidently been delivered at some point while they had been in the bathroom. When he saw that the room had been perfectly prepared and the meal laid out, Xixu turned his eyes pleadingly toward the ceiling.

"What's that reaction supposed to mean?"

"Saridi... I said this on my first day too, but I would be grateful if you treated me more normally."

"First day? Oh, when you first arrived in Irede? Well, you weren't a guest back then."

The first day he'd met Sari, Xixu had requested that she not treat him like a guest of her establishment, as it made him feel restless. With its history of myth and tradition, Pale Moon's hospitality was flawless even among courtesan houses. It had been overwhelming enough when he'd just been borrowing a room for the night; experiencing what it was like to be the guest of a courtesan was an intimidating prospect.

"I can see to my own needs. I'll even pick up my dinner from the kitchen myself."

"You'll fluster the maidservants if you do that. Our kitchen's barred to outsiders."

"Is it?"

"We can't have anyone pretending to be one of our suppliers and rooting around inside. I take your point, though. I'll tell them to leave your meals by the door."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. We have other guests who ask for the same. Oh, and you can stop by after we're closed too, if that's the only time you can make it. You can just come directly to the annex. Dinner will be over, but I can give you

the regular food that we staff eat.”

Faced with Sari’s smile, Xixu held his tongue before he could say, “*I’d rather have that all the time.*” Sari’s personal room in the annex was not meant for receiving others beside herself, so he’d likely be making more work for her by visiting it. He would have to ensure he wouldn’t be causing undue trouble first.

As the contents of the claypot stewed over a small flame, they ate their meal, telling one another of what had happened while Xixu had been away—the topic hadn’t been touched upon the previous evening. Sari received the news that the king’s maiden had vanished and that Xixu had retained his royal status interestedly, but without surprise.

“Did you perhaps expect her to vanish?”

“Huh? Not at all. I did think that she would have to pay a debt one day, though, if she hadn’t already. Her power was too much for a human.”

“So that debt is what led her to disappear?”

“I can’t say that for sure. I share His Majesty’s opinion, though. She likely left of her own volition. With potent foresight like hers, nothing could’ve happened that she didn’t accept.”

“I see...”

The ability of the king’s maiden to see the future still hadn’t quite sunk in for Xixu, as he’d never witnessed an example himself. But if she truly could see what was to come, then she would indeed be able to avoid any danger. Beings such as Sari who were beyond the scope of her foresight were the exception, but to Xixu’s knowledge, the gods had all been concentrated in Irede at the time of her disappearance. Perhaps, given that the strife across the continent had been resolved, she had decided that her role had come to an end.

If that was the case, then there was a chance she would return one day. Xixu hoped she would, recalling the sight of his liege in low spirits. The maiden’s presence had been greater support for the king than her power had ever been.

“It’s fine that you had to keep your royal status because of it too. I suspected you would anyway.”

“Sorry for the burden.”

“It’s not, really. Second in line is rather high, though. More than enough to be a lure, that’s for certain. What are the others in line for the throne like?”

As they sat side by side, eating their evening meal, Sari looked up at her husband with curiosity in her eyes. Xixu hunted through his vague memories.

“There are currently five or six individuals, if memory serves. I’ve never met them, however. Some are still children, and others live away from the capital.”

“Ah, then Fyra probably knows more. I’m interested in how they might act in the future, so I’ll make sure to ask her when I get the chance.”

Sari’s cousin Fyra managed the noble Werrilocia family in the royal capital and was well-informed about the country’s domestic affairs. Xixu was somewhat afraid to ask exactly *how* she was so well-informed, but since she acted for the sake of Pale Moon, he could only obediently defer to her expertise.

The Werrilocia family was descended from the bloodline of the king of an ancient nation. Although the maiden’s sacred offerings were not within its purview, it still worked to support the god their ancestor had summoned. The fact that it had survived the fall of so many nations through history and maintained its noble status was a testament to its influence and ability.

“But you know, if you’d like a child who can inherit your right of succession, I could give birth to them as Everie.”

Everie was Sari’s formal name as the head of the Werrilocia family—the name of the princess who had the blood of an ancient nation in her veins.

Xixu shook his head. “No, that’s fine. I’ve no intention of giving the child to the kingdom.”

“He’ll probably be human, though, if he’s a boy. But you’re right. You’re not human either, so that seems unlikely.”

“That wasn’t what I was getting at, but I suppose it *is* another reason...”

In Xixu’s opinion, it was already the height of good fortune that Sari had chosen him. It would be wrong to use her to seek advantages outside of Irede. Even the loss of his humanity had only been for the purpose of protecting her.

He could never mistake that purpose. Because Sari could never change her companion.

They chatted pleasantly for a while afterward. After cleaning up their meal and returning to the bedroom, Sari sat hugging her knees to her chest.

“I’ve been looking out for signs of shades, but I don’t think they’ll manifest for a while yet. They only take physical form in Irede because of the snake, and it probably won’t return to normal for another twenty years or so.”

“Two decades...”

“And even if it does return, it’ll be a lot smaller. I think the foundational layer of earth it assimilated with might become a little looser, though. My power can’t really do anything about that, so we can only hope that it doesn’t cause any problems.”

“Okay. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Also...”

Sari cut herself off and moved onto Xixu’s lap, facing him. She leaned forward, kissed him on the cheek, and blushed.

As he smiled, she continued, “This is somewhat related to what we were talking about earlier, but it might be a while before I conceive a child.”

“Meaning...?”

“Mmm... Pale Moon’s maiden doesn’t have a human body, so chances of conception are low. The guest-taking ceremony is supposed to mitigate that, but we missed that chance, and since you’re not human anymore either, it might take even longer.”

“Ah, I understand.”

Thoma had mentioned that it was easy for the maiden to conceive on the night of the guest-taking ceremony, but in truth, that was perhaps better phrased as “on other nights, conception is difficult.” The fact it would take some time for the next generation to be born was a matter of some concern for the three sacred houses, but the circumstances had meant that Sari’s level of power needed to be prioritized. It was what it was.

“Don’t worry about it. We can plan for the long term.”

A smile flashed onto Sari’s face, and she threw herself at him. “Then you’d better come by lots, okay?”

“You’re bringing this back to that...?”

“Do you not want to?”

When he was faced with that look in her eyes, he couldn’t say no. After a brief moment’s hesitation, Xixu finally settled on a response.

“If you’re okay with me.”

“Who else is there?!”

3. The Traveler

The scent of incense settled heavily in the room. This was by the design of the room's mistress. While seated, the modest scent could be enjoyed. Come time to take oneself to bed, the potent aroma could numb one's thoughts.

This space was the modest place of repose the girl had crafted.

As she sipped from her tea, she listened to her uninvited visitor speak.

"He's in Irede. It should be easy to tell him apart, as he's nobility."

Ever since his arrival, the man had been saying whatever he pleased.

It was always like this. Yet she had to listen. If there was a good reason for that, she did not know it. All she did know was that the man considered it a promise between them—one she never remembered agreeing to. If she broke it, he would make her suffer.

No matter where she went, she felt caged. In the past, she had sought to obtain the key to her prison, but at some point, there was no longer any key to be found. Some things were lost with the passage of time. No, perhaps there had never been a key. Perhaps it was only something she had convinced herself existed.

The man who had once plucked the key from her hand placed several documents upon the table. "Dispose of them after you read them. Depart at once. I will contact you again once you arrive."

The woman looked at the window listlessly. The shutters were closed.

"There is no man you cannot ensnare," the man said, as though to remind her. "Simply do as you always do."

Ah, she thought. I'd very much like to see the ocean.



"This is Irede?"

Alighting from her small coach before the great vermilion-lacquered bridge, the girl lifted her veil—worn to protect her skin from the sunlight—and looked up at the town's tall gates.

The view of the gates and townscape oozed a sense of history, yet each nook and cranny was so carefully maintained that there was no impression of anything having aged poorly. Illuminated by the afternoon sun, the main street was lively but not boisterous, and the audible sounds of music invoked a mild sense of nostalgia.

This was a town of memories. A place one only saw in books.

The girl with vivid red hair stood motionless for a while, captivated by scenery no other country possessed. Innocent longing shone in her jade-green eyes, but reality soon returned. She cleared her throat and scowled at the gently arched bridge.

"You could have just taken me inside."

"My lady Riko... Coaches are not permitted on the bridge. It is also forbidden to ride horseback within the gates."

"What an antiquated town."

The expression of the girl's male attendant turned troubled.

Riko Roloris—the girl was sixteen as of this year, and was the daughter of a lord of the southern region of Torlonia who was eleventh in line for the throne. However, her father, the previous king's elder cousin, had relinquished his right to inherit, not wanting to participate in any struggles over power. He had two daughters: The elder was married, but the younger, Riko, was not, and no arrangements had been made in that regard.

"Father is too weak-willed. Opportunities must be seized when they arise."

"But my lady, if His Majesty or your father were to find out about this..."

"They wouldn't do a thing. I only came to this town to enjoy myself. Whoever I might happen to run into and marry, they'll have no right to rebuke me."

That was why she had come to Irede, bringing only Cykado, her attendant of many years, along with her. She wasn't *doing* anything, so how could others

find fault with her because of it?

Knowing his mistress would not listen, Cykado held back a deep sigh. “Very well, my lady. Is your intention to begin today?”

The girl cocked her head slightly. The curls of her red hair shone against the backdrop of her finery. “Our lodgings are already reserved, correct?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Then we’ll stop by there and then look around town. I wish to know why His Highness found this town so appealing that he left the capital behind for it.”

Cykado followed his mistress with his head hung as she strode toward the town’s gates, curiosity on bare display. She had taken the lead despite not knowing where their lodgings even were.

“As for you, head to the courtesan house as I instructed,” she said to her attendant. “If money is enough to settle the matter, then all the better for everyone involved.”

“As you wish, my lady. But if you are going to look around town, please return to the lodgings before sunset. Do not forget that Irede is a town of the night.”

“I know.”

The girl who was clearly nobility from her appearance, paired with her attendant, were drawing curious gazes from the militiamen stationed at the gate. But Riko ignored them as she stepped onto the main street, releasing a silent cheer of joy.

“The town of myth. How delightful.”

There was no small amount of poetry and literature that told of Irede. The sights, businesses, and master musicians—she wanted to know if they all truly existed.

After confirming the location of their lodgings and brushing off Cykado’s worrying, Riko immediately set about exploring the town, her spirits high.

The attendant she left behind, powerless in the face of his mistress’s whims, had a different destination: Pale Moon, the courtesan house to the north.

“May I inquire as to your business today?”

In Irede, the businesses that belonged to the night indicated when they were ready to receive customers by the use of a hanging lantern at their gates or entryways. This also meant that when there was no lantern, any visitors could not be customers, and thus it would not be strange if they were turned away.

Still, when the woman who was Pale Moon’s proprietress had heard Cykado’s request to speak to her, she had accepted his impolite visit, inviting him into a parlor to talk.

She appeared older than Riko by two years or so. The woman—who was also said to be Irede’s only maiden—resembled a large-petaled flower blooming under the moon. Her bearing was perfection, gently refined and yet holding a womanly allure. Cykado found it difficult to believe that his mistress would become like her in a mere two years. If this was what all women of Irede were like, then it was a terrifying town indeed.

But though he found the woman somewhat intimidating, his mistress’s orders took absolute precedence. Cykado launched into the main topic at hand without delay.

“I have heard that there is a woman in this establishment that His Highness the prince is close with.”

“Oh, is that so?”

The proprietress—she had introduced herself as Sari—smiled sweetly. Her shrewd bearing did not reveal anything, but Cykado had expected as much. Careful to maintain his courtesy, he placed the cloth bundle he had brought with him upon the table.

“The validity of that information is something we will be able to confirm with some investigation.”

“Indeed? On my part, I am afraid that we cannot divulge the personal information of our guests.”

“Yes, I am aware. As such, this will simply be a one-sided request from our party. Please forgive our forwardness.”

“A request?”

Cykado could not read the thoughts that lay behind Sari’s eyes and smile. All he knew for certain was that her conduct was polite—nothing else.

Experiencing the suffocating feeling of oppression that came from his opponent’s hand of cards being entirely hidden, Cykado unwrapped the bundle.

The cloth came apart to reveal a large pile of hard currency. Such was the amount that it would be sufficient to buy out the contracts of several well renowned courtesans. It had given Cykado stomach pains to carry such wealth for the entire trip since they had departed their home estate, but Riko had declared it to be the fairest price, and so he had not been able to object. He was truly grateful that they had not encountered any brigands along the way.

Even as Cykado experienced a slight release in the tension he was feeling, he continued to speak his piece. “Our request is as follows: We wish to provide this as compensation for the aforementioned woman to sever relations with His Highness.”

Simple and concise, the statement left no room for misunderstandings. The man who had served the Roloris family for many years had made the request with honesty. He understood that it was both an abrupt and rude request to make, but common reason suggested that to a courtesan, guaranteed assets were preferable to relying on the whims of the rich and powerful.

Nevertheless, it pained Cykado to do this. He considered himself fortunate that he was negotiating with the courtesan house’s proprietress rather than the courtesan herself. He didn’t know if his conscience would have been able to take it if his request had made the woman in question cry in front of him. The proprietress, however, would be more open to talk, keeping in mind the benefit to her business.

Cykado waited for her reaction. Eventually, he lost his nerve and turned his gaze down, but looked back up when he sensed her smile.

He froze.

Sari was holding her hand over her mouth as she shook with laughter, though she made no sound.

It was the first expression of emotion Cykado had seen the young proprietress display; a charming adorableness befitting her age. There was a strong draw to it that pulled all who saw it in, and above all, it was terrifying.

When Sari stopped laughing, she tilted her head slightly to the side. Her gentle voice caressed the inner part of Cykado's ears.

"I understand the nature of your request. Unfortunately, however, this amount would not be sufficient for even a single night of her companionship."

"I beg your par...?"

The blood immediately drained from his face. He'd heard that Pale Moon was a courtesan house of myth and tradition, but he did not know the prices would be so different. If she spoke the truth, then he had heaped ignorant rudeness atop conscious rudeness. It was an unthinkable gaffe.

"Y-You have my deepest apologies..."

"It's quite all right. You were honest enough to give the name of the house you serve. It was why I chose to speak with you; I wanted to know what you had to say. You have indeed been impolite, but I appreciate your good conscience."

"Th-Then..."

"Please take that with you and make your return. You may inform whom you serve that methods such as these will bear no fruit."

Sari stood with elegant grace, clearly marking the end of the conversation. Cykado hurriedly returned to himself, wrapped up the currency, and stood also. He would have to discuss this with Riko. Perhaps their only option left was to negotiate directly with the courtesan herself.

Whatever the case, any further hope of dealing with Pale Moon was likely dead in the water. The oldest courtesan house in Irede had a broad range of connections within the country. While they would have to pursue a different route now, it was fortunate that they had been let off with only a gentle warning.

Cykado took his leave, bowing frequently in deference as he went. Before he departed, the young proprietress told him one last thing.

“Incidentally, the courtesan you spoke of is me.”

“Wha—”

He had heard that the king’s younger brother was a devoted vassal and straitlaced person, so he had wondered why he’d run off to a courtesan. Now, half of him felt as though he knew, and the other half was even more confused. By the time Cykado had shaken off his stupefaction, Pale Moon was behind him, as though he’d run away.

Before he’d realized it, Irede’s sky was already being dyed a pale indigo.

At twilight, Irede was a place where reality and fiction mixed. The music shifted toward a more relaxed tune, and lights bloomed into life here and there along the streets.

The brightness that remained in the sky though the sun had set became a thin silk veil thrown across the town, shifting in the wind. People dressed in kimono passed by visitors looking around with curiosity in their eyes, their flow becoming a river that circulated the town’s streets. Round and round it went, birthing more light in the places it touched, each one illuminating the lives and work of humanity.

The mix of people and music resembled the roar of the sea, and each step along the streets felt like advancing further into myth. Had the people who welcomed the god who had once alighted upon this land seen these same sights? As they stirred Riko’s imagination toward such thoughts, she felt her heart sing in excitement.

This town was delightful.

It was full of things she had never seen before, yet all of it invoked a sense of nostalgia. She felt as though she had gotten lost in the landscapes belonging to her childhood dreams. People said of Irede that it was a place everyone should visit at least once before they died. That it was a place one should visit when death was near, because you would not want to leave.

To the sixteen-year-old Riko, it was plenty captivating. Dinnertime had arrived in a flash as she’d been exploring the town, and now she was walking briskly

back to her lodgings, checking the way using the map in her hand.

“Hmm? That’s strange...”

Had she taken a wrong turn somewhere? She looked at the dark laneway before her, running parallel to a wide canal. Irede was abundant in water, and she had enjoyed observing the sparkling clarity of the canals, but this one was clearly not intended for sightseeing purposes. There were no shops to the left nor right, and the only illumination that chased away the darkness of night was what little spilled out from within the buildings.

Checking her map again by the faint moonlight, Riko retraced her steps to return to her original route. However, the act of suddenly turning around in the middle of the path almost caused her to collide with a person coming from behind. She hurriedly made to avoid them, only to collide with them anyway when they evaded in the same direction.

“P-Pardon me.”

“No, it was my fault. My apologies.”

The voice belonged to a young man, and Riko realized he was wearing the uniform of the militia. She knew that since Irede enjoyed a sort of autonomy, any problems that arose could be taken to the militia to handle. Without any particular hesitation, she showed the man her map.

“This is wonderful timing. Would you be able to provide me with directions? I’d like to go here.”

“I’ll see you there.”

After the immediate reply, the young man took the lead and began walking, the lack of hesitation in his stride resembling the local townspeople. She followed behind him, and soon they were before her inn. The sight of the lantern hanging shyly from the latticework gate and familiar storefront was relieving to see.

“Thank you for showing me the way.”

“Don’t mention it. I would recommend not walking the back alleys alone at night. You never know who you might run into.”

“I appreciate the warning.”

It prickled to be spoken to like a child, but she let it pass in consideration of his assistance.

Then her eyes widened upon her first good look at him from the front. Tall, handsome, with black hair. She had seen him before.

It had only been once at the royal court, but he had stood by the king's side in the uniform of a senior officer. She remembered him well, because while his handsome features resembled the current king's, they lacked a certain something. Nobleness, perhaps, because he was an illegitimate child?

She had known that he had left the king for Irede, but why was he in the uniform of a militia member? Fighting off her not-insignificant confusion, Riko called out after him before he could leave.

“Your Highness.”

He twitched and turned around, revealing a strained expression on his face. He had to have recognized from Riko's attire that she was a person of high status, and he seemed to not know what to say. She pinched the hem of her dress in a curtsy.

“I am Riko, the youngest child of the Roloris family. I have come because I have a matter I wish to discuss with Your Highness.”

This wasn't the shape she'd planned for her actions to take, but he was her main objective. Besides, he had not received a royal upbringing, so roundabout methods would likely have the opposite effect from what she desired. From her investigations, she'd heard of a number of young noblewomen he'd turned away who'd tried similar approaches.

So while this was slipshod, that was fine. She'd simply be direct.

“I need influence if I am to protect my family.”

Her older sister had married into a scholar's family, so if anything unforeseen were to occur, she would not have enough power to help. Additionally, her father was good-natured, but an easy mark. Riko was concerned that he would rely too much upon his relatives in the future, resulting in them taking

everything from him piece by piece.

That was why she needed the influence to stabilize her house, and this was one of her plans to achieve that. She chose not to mince words.

“Will you marry me, Your Highness? I guarantee you it will not be to your disadvantage.”

His expression only grew more strained, and the answer he gave was perhaps the most mundane refusal he could have made.

“I apologize, but I am already married.”

※

When Xixu entered Pale Moon from the rear gate to visit Sari in the annex where she lived, it was after the lantern at the front was no longer lit.

He tried to avoid making visits like this—it made him feel like a criminal of some sort—but the front gate was closed at this hour, and he had the key for the rear one. There was no actual issue with this method aside from the fact that someone who spotted him might think him to be a suspicious character.

Sari had returned to her room in the annex by now, and she lay on her bed as she listened to Xixu’s recount of today’s events, laughing herself to the point of tears. He fixed her with an incredulous look.

“Is it really that funny, Saridi?”

“I mean, isn’t that just far too direct? It’s so honest I can’t help but laugh.”

Since her work was over, Sari wore a *yukata* and her hair was down, making her look like a young girl as she convulsed with laughter. Xixu sat down at the edge of her bed.

“If I recall correctly, the head of the Roloris family renounced his right of succession and only has daughters.”

“So since she’s concerned about the survival of her house, she wants to prop it up by marrying someone of superior status who *does* have the right of succession. I admire her initiative. She probably falls into the category of people who His Majesty wished you to be bait for.”

Xixu's true identity was kept a secret, including from the residents of Irede, but it was entirely possible for those who knew of him from his time in the capital to track him to this town with enough investigation. This open secret ensured that he could fulfill the role of bait for the type of people willing to go to the effort to find him—in other words, the type of people who wished to use him to their own ends.

“I'd rather keep out of matters like these...though it's more preferable that they come for me rather than you.”

“Oh, someone came to me too.”

“What?”

Xixu half rose to his feet and turned to Sari. She lay on her stomach on the bed, resting the weight of her head on her hands.

“Her attendant came to Pale Moon with a pile of money and asked me to separate from you. That happens with courtesans sometimes, but I never thought it'd happen to me. It was quite funny.”

“It's not funny...” Xixu sighed deeply and made to leave the room.

Sari leaped up. “Huh? Wait, stop. I'm sorry. Are you mad?”

“Not at you. But I can't overlook such a severe breach of propriety. Someone making that request of you isn't something I'll allow.”

“It's fine! It happens all the time! I'm sorry for playing around, okay?”

Sari clung to him desperately. Seeing her like that cooled his head somewhat, and he let go of the door and returned to the bed. As Sari fidgeted timidly, he explained himself.

“I am one of the sacred offerings given to you. To come in, ignorant and out of nowhere, attempting to interfere... That is the height of rudeness—especially when trying to reduce it to something as outrageous as a monetary transaction.”

Sari made a flustered noise, as though unsure how to react to his irritation. Yet, she *was* this town's mistress and god. She would not forgive acts of rudeness that crossed the line, and this most certainly did. As Xixu worked

through his irritation, she smiled.

“Thank you. Just you thinking that is enough for me.”

“But—”

“It’s fine, really. I’m living as a human, so experiencing such things occasionally is a good thing. Even in Irede, I’m treated in many different ways.”

That was indeed true. From the heads of the three sacred houses who revered Sari as a god, to the shadeslayer Tagi who saw her only as a simple courtesan, she was someone different to every person in Irede.

Still, the common thread was that she was their young princess, and not someone they would allow outsiders to make light of. Xixu understood how allowances could be made for the other party’s ignorance of the matter, but he had no intention of remaining silent and allowing them to walk all over her.

Eventually, however, he regained a degree of calm. It was because he noticed that, sitting at his side, Sari was looking up at him as though examining something amusing.

“What is it, Saridi...? Did I do something strange?”

“No. I just didn’t realize that when someone serious like you becomes a sacred companion, they turn into such an extremist.”

“Extremist...”

“Sorry, that was a bad way of putting it. Thank you for cherishing me.”

Sari’s apology seemed somewhat hurried, but perhaps that was because he’d let his expression show that he was upset. Xixu closed his eyes and rubbed his brow with his fingers, loosening his frown. Perhaps the news that someone had come to Sari because of him while he’d been unaware had gotten him a little too heated.

Sari crossed her slender legs. Her pale toes became dyed in the faintest of crimsons by the light of the lamp on the table.

“Still, it’s funny how they were so honest about their identities and objectives, isn’t it? Most people who try to pay compensation money to separate a courtesan from their lover say it’s because it’s better for the guest’s future.”

“Ah...is that how it is?”

“Mm-hmm. This time, though, they’re saying it’s for their own sake, right? It makes me think she grew up in an environment where communication was rather open. Her father and sister are probably good people.”

“I could see that.”

Riko had also spoken of how her father and sister were kindhearted to the extent that they weren’t particularly mindful of preserving their status or wealth, and that was what made them unable to protect themselves or those who served their family. That she was able to say as much so openly gave Xixu the impression she had been raised quite honestly. No wonder her father had renounced his right of succession.

“Their house won’t go into decline anytime soon, but anybody looking toward them with malicious intent might put them on unsteady ground.”

“It’s good that she’s wary of the future and willing to take action, but I can’t say much about her methods.” Sari rested her arms on her legs and her chin on her hands, her blue eyes narrowing slightly as she smiled. “It’s so clumsy that it’s cute.”

While her smile with its mix of fondness and mischief belonged to her, it did not belong to a human. Her gaze gave the impression she were admiring an animal instead of a human, like a person watching a dog.

Xixu felt some unease at how those eyes drew a line between her and humanity. Perhaps she noticed that his breath had caught, because she looked up at him.

“Xixu? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar. You want to say something, right? Go on, tell me.”

“It’s nothing...”

His weak attempt at resistance proved futile in the face of Sari’s hounding. After several more insistences that he tell her, he gave in.

“It’s just...I was wondering if that was how you used to see me too.”

For her, someone who had been raised in a pleasure town, everything about Xixu's conduct had to seem clumsy. It made him feel slightly pathetic to think that she might have looked at him with the same fondness, thinking him cute.

However, Sari's eyes widened. "I've never thought of you as cute, Xixu."

"That...makes me feel complicated in a different way."

"Huh? Of all the responses... What are you, some needy lover?"

That was harsh, but not something he could exactly deny. It dampened his spirits to think that she might have looked at him like a pet, but it was also a little disappointing to think that she hadn't thought anything of him at all. As he began to feel more pathetic over his own words, Sari moved herself onto his lap. She nestled in close and pushed his drooping head up from below with her own.

"I've always thought of you as gallant, Xixu. From the very start."

Xixu remained silent.

"Though you were funny on occasion too."

"You've told me that many times. Thoma as well..."

"I'm sorry, okay?"

From her position snugly in the gap between his legs, he couldn't see his wife's expression. He could tell from her tone of voice that she was smiling mischievously, though.

Sari leaned back and wound her arms around his neck. "I think she's cute because of how direct she's being. But no matter what she offers, I'm not handing you over!"

"I appreciate that."

"And if you ever feel like running, come talk to me first."

"I won't run."

Obviously, he wouldn't. He had become her partner because he knew his feelings would not ever change.

As his wife exclaimed in delight, he adjusted his embrace before she could fall

from the bed. Then he noticed a pair of letters fall from the table, having no doubt been tossed onto it casually in the first place. One of them fluttered open as it fell to the floor.

Xixu picked his wife up and plopped her to the side, then stood to retrieve the letters, folding them while being careful not to peek.

Sari informed him of their contents regardless. “They’re warning letters that were passed around to all the courtesan houses in Irede, instructing us not to be fooled in case any human traffickers come by.”

“Human traffickers? What?”

“It’s exactly as it sounds. There are people who kidnap women to sell them to courtesan houses. I think a number of courtesans in the capital are recruited that way. But Irede’s courtesan houses require the woman’s consent for her to enter, and dealing with traffickers is prohibited.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

When he had been an officer in the capital, Xixu had been involved in several cases to do with the hidden slave trade, but he had never given much thought to their methods and operations. To him, it had simply been a matter of seizing the culprits once they were uncovered.

“Does Irede not arrest human traffickers?”

“Mmm... If the women ask us to help them we do, but most of them don’t reveal their circumstances because they’re being threatened. If there’s room for doubt, we generally don’t act first. We don’t want to face the opposite party’s criticism if we’re wrong, and Irede doesn’t possess the necessary armed strength to enforce things either... I’m sorry we’re so vague about it.”

The addition of that final apology was no doubt because she understood what kind of man her husband was.

Xixu indeed disliked the idea of overlooking suspicious individuals, but he could not ask for the impossible to satisfy his personal fixations. If Irede had chosen to take the passive approach of not purchasing from human traffickers, then he had to act within those limits so as to not burden the town.

As though she were reading his thoughts, Sari continued, “Although, it’s my understanding that Tagi kills them in secret when he finds them.”

“That’s...certainly decisive.”

“He collects evidence to make sure first. I think. Since no corpses ever turn up, we can’t exactly reprimand him.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

Since Irede could not dispose of human traffickers without irrefutable evidence, it could not punish the townspeople who *dealt* with those human traffickers without irrefutable evidence either. In this case, the unwritten rules worked well.

“Tagi cherishes courtesans and takes good care of them, so he has no mercy on people like that. One of our maidservants is actually someone he rescued from human traffickers. She stayed because she said she had nowhere to go back to.”

“I see...”

Indeed, Pale Moon’s maidservants were less courtesans-in-training and more housekeepers-cum-secretaries. Xixu had never paid much mind to their origins before, but they likely had their own sets of personal circumstances.

“Essentially, it’s like an open secret,” Sari added with a beautiful smile. “So if you’re going to do it too, Xixu, just be subtle, okay?”

“Subtle, huh? Okay. I think I get the idea.”

At her sacred companion’s answer, the woman who was a god nodded, satisfied.

As he returned the letters to the table, Xixu glanced at the clock. “Sorry, Saridi. It’s gotten quite late.”

“It’s fine. Shall we take a bath, though? We can continue the conversation there.”

“You should go in first.” Xixu said after several moments of silence.

His attempt at resistance was met with a smile from Sari that brooked no

argument. Her voice called out to him like the ringing of a bell.

“Let’s go in together, husband. I will answer all that you wish to know.”

“Saridi...”

“We’re going, and that’s final! I want to remove my makeup. Why is bathing together the only thing you always try to resist?!”

“I can’t shake the feeling that I’m doing something wrong...”

“But I have so much fun washing your back. Is it the brightness that’s the problem? Should I extinguish the lights?”

“I think that would only make it worse.”

“Oh, whatever. Then just kneel in the bathtub and pretend it’s something formal!”

Just as always, Sari’s momentum was fierce to behold.

As he caught his wife as she leaped at him, Xixu thought of her the same as he always had, from the first day they’d met. She was adorable.

4. Reminiscence

Although Riko'd had her marriage proposal rejected, it didn't manage to sour the delicious taste of the dinner provided by her lodgings.

After hearing Cykado's summary of events, the empty dishes from her meal were taken away, and she sat deep in thought.

"It sounds like this will be rather difficult."

"My lady, let us give up and return home."

"But we just got here. I've barely seen anything yet."

"You mean the town, don't you...?"

Her attendant's sighs were not enough to damper Riko's fascination with this foreign place she had come to. Once she was married, she might never get another opportunity to visit Irede. She wanted to see more while she still had the chance.

She had wanted to see the various stores open at nighttime too, but Cykado had put his foot down. Riko was well aware that Irede was a pleasure town and a place of courtesans, but she was tired of having her actions restricted simply because she was a young noblewoman.

Of course, she understood how blessed she was to have been born into such status too. That was why she had to be serious about her own life and future—all the more so because there were some who would deny her even that.

"I heard that there's going to be a festival in town this month."

"Is that so? I feel as though the atmosphere here is festive enough as it is."

"Yes, though I understand it's more of a divine ritual than a spectacle for tourists. Nevertheless, it will still have night stalls and performances. We're here anyway, so I'd like to at least see it before we return home."

Riko sat cross-legged at the low table in the spacious tatami room, watching for her attendant's reaction. Although Cykado, who stood by the sliding door,

wore a reluctant expression, her mention of returning home seemed to have relieved him. After several seconds, he gave his assent.

“Very well, my lady. But in that case, it may be best to change our lodgings. His Highness knows we are staying at this one now, does he not?”

“I don’t think anything bad will come of that. If he changes his mind, he might even come to negotiate,” Riko replied, tone cheerful as she began to note down all the stores and things for sale she’d seen that day.

Though Irede gave a marked impression of age, that was to maintain the character of the town; the infrastructure that provided access to water was well constructed, and the paved roads were carefully maintained so as to not inconvenience guests and residents. In addition, many stores sold accessories or other small goods boasting new designs one couldn’t see in other towns, and visitors appraised them highly because of the meticulous expertise poured into their creation.

Riko and her father resided in the southeastern region of Torlonia, where the Roloris family held a small territory. As such, whenever she visited the capital, she would tour the city to see what was in demand by current society. Irede trended in an entirely different direction from the capital, but it was no less fascinating.

As Riko jotted down her findings, Cykado looked at her uneasily. “Even if such a thing were to occur, I can’t imagine his courtesan companion will remain silent on the matter,” he noted.

“She’s a holy courtesan, right? That makes sense if she’s a companion to royalty. But it also means her methods won’t involve any violence. You said she was a proprietress too, right?” Riko stopped writing and looked up at her attendant. “I wonder if she would accept me marrying His Highness in name only, just to have it on paper.”

“No. I can say with absolute certainty that she wouldn’t.”

“Oh. That’s that option gone, then.”

Like her father, the king’s half brother had no interest in the struggle over the right of succession. Perhaps that was why he’d come to Irede and joined the

militia. But whatever the case, that type of person would not be of help to her family outside of marrying into it. She needed to think of another way...but while she was here, she might as well indulge her curiosity and see more of Irede too.

“Whatever her objections are, I’m sure we can at least discuss them. Perhaps I should go tomorrow to apologize? I’d like to see what a holy courtesan’s house looks like.”

“My lady! Please reconsider!”

“Why? You said she was an understanding person, didn’t you?”

“Which is exactly why we should withdraw while she’s still willing to be...”

Riko shrugged as Cykado’s expression paled. He’d always had a worrier’s disposition. She would give up on going to Pale Moon, though—it wasn’t her intention to cause him distress.

Still, she wouldn’t change their lodgings. It wasn’t as though His Highness couldn’t quickly discover their new ones if he so wished. While her proposal had been rather absurd, she *had* backed down after being refused, so expressly avoiding him more than necessary would appear strange.

Riko put down her pen after reaching a good stopping point and rose to her feet, making her way to the window. Her lodgings were two streets away from the main street, but the countless lights around were still enough to warm the night sky.

This was a beautiful town. One with an air of ethereal mystery far deeper at night than during the day.

The view of the townscape was enough to explain why the kingdom made no attempt to involve itself any further than it did. Any addition of clumsy human hands would soon change Irede’s beauty into something counterfeit.

Riko appreciated the beauty of this town of mystery and all the curiosities it had to offer, but she knew she could never be a part of it, nor one who preserved its otherworldly air. She suspected she had neither the nature nor the knowledge to follow Irede’s unspoken rules and tacit understandings.

Nevertheless, that was precisely why she wanted to see as much as she could see. As a member of nobility, she was in a position where she governed over people with lives far different from hers. With how many visitors came from all over the continent to Irede, there ought to be a wide array of personal values gathered here, and she wanted to see how they interacted and coexisted.

“I’ll think about my next marriage candidate while I’m sightseeing. We’ll stop by the capital on the way home so that I can put in an appearance with everybody.”

“Understood, my lady.”

Just as Riko smiled and began to move away from the window, a sudden movement flashed across the corner of her vision.

“Oh. A shade.”

Flying over the roof several buildings down was the shadowy figure of a bird with its wings spread. Riko’s excellent eyesight allowed her to see that the bird’s eyes were a glowing red. Cykado had peered outside too upon hearing her words, but he could not see shades.

Since shades manifested wherever human desires were thick, Riko had seen more than her fair share in the capital, but thinking about it, this was the first one she’d seen in Irede. Was that because it had fewer shades than one might expect of a pleasure town, or because its shadeslayers were skilled?

“Today has tired me out. I’ll be going to bed early.”

While shades were said to lead humans astray, Riko was not particularly afraid of them. The entities slipped into the gaps present in human hearts. So long as she didn’t waver and acted with absolute confidence—in this case, decisively going to sleep—she would be fine.

Thus, she closed the glass window, admiring how transparent it was, and went to sleep.

That night, she dreamed of a small boat rocking on a lake under the moonlight.

Irede had three festivals a year, as per the seasons, and each one was a celebratory dedication to its god.

As time drew closer to a festival day, stages built from wood enclosed in white cord were constructed in several locations around the town. Carpenters readied altars for the purpose of holding sacred wine, while teahouses and restaurants prepared dishes to be served at the nighttime stalls.

As for the courtesans, they were occupied selecting the clothing they were going to wear on the day. It was a period where the entire town gained an air of slight restlessness as everyone found their hands full with their tasks. And while the festival was not for the sake of outsiders, visitors knowledgeable about Irede saw it as an opportunity to see a different side of the town not usually on display.

What was more, this time, the maiden would dance.

“She’s going to dance?”

“What, you didn’t know? Aren’t you her husband?”

As Tagi shot him an incredulous look, Xixu maintained his silence.

The pair were walking down the main street that ran from Irede’s north to south. It was just past midday and there was slightly more foot traffic than usual. They passed a newly constructed stage at a street corner, examining it curiously as they went—not that these sights were new to Xixu. He had toured the town together with Sari before.

“There was no maiden dance last year.”

“The young miss didn’t have a guest back then. She might’ve been a proprietress, but she wasn’t being treated as fully fledged yet.”

“Ah, so that’s why.”

“Though if you ask me, the sooner the better when it comes to her dancing. It’s a good draw for tourists.”

“Sorry...”

Apparently, as the most unique courtesan in town, the divine rituals changed depending on whether Sari had a guest or not. In consideration of Irede’s

economy, Xixu was indeed sorry that he had caused Sari to take so long in choosing her guest. However, not rushing her had been his priority, so his apologies were more for his own benefit.

Tagi's stride was light as he deftly weaved through the crowd. He snorted out a laugh. "Don't take everything others say with such deadly sincerity. The fact you're even apologizing tells me she's made you lose your edge. And here I told you to be careful too."

"I *am* careful..."

Not long after he'd become Sari's guest, Tagi had told him, "The young miss is a dyed-in-the-wool courtesan. Don't let yourself drown in indulgence." Xixu had taken that as a warning to not make Sari overwork herself. However, if he didn't visit Pale Moon for several days despite not being busy, she would come to him, so they more or less saw each other every night. If that meant he was losing his edge, he supposed he couldn't exactly deny it.

"Ill-natured women like her are troublesome to deal with. They think they deserve to be the first priority of their men as a matter of course."

Tagi was strict on Sari and often spoke ill of her, but she never seemed to mind—perhaps because she simply wrote it off as all of Irede's shadeslayers having their own quirks. This matter in particular was dear to Xixu's heart, however, so he attempted to correct the man.

"I consider her my wife. It's only natural that I'd put her first."

"There's no helping you, is there? Well, I suppose if sacrificing you is enough to get the young miss to settle down, it's worth it. It'll make her happy too, no doubt."

As always, it was impossible to read Tagi's true thoughts from his casually spoken words. Xixu glanced at the man to his side. It seemed that his expression was softer than usual, but that could have also just been his imagination.

It was still just under a fortnight until the night of the festival, but the town's atmosphere was already a bit out of step with that of its everyday routine. The blue sky was draped in a mantle dyed a faint pink, and colorful silk fabrics hung from strings passing above the streets, fluttering in the breeze.

Xixu recalled how his wife had enjoyed such sights when she'd been a child. "It gets my heart racing in anticipation," she'd told him. "I love that feeling." At the end of the day, the festivals were for her enjoyment. In that sense, everything was proceeding correctly.

As he looked up at the colorful sheets decorating the sky, Xixu noticed a black shadow flying beyond them.

"A shade."

Tagi appeared to have noticed more or less when he had. The man stopped and gazed at the soaring bird silhouette. "Why have they been the same as shades in other towns lately? I haven't seen any with physical forms, nor human ones. It's made them a pain to chase down."

"They probably don't have enough strength to hold physical forms. I'll take this one."

"All yours."

The shades that didn't possess human forms could slip through walls, and some could even fly, depending on what animal they mimicked. The vast difference to how they usually were made them more troublesome prey for Tagi and the others.

However, that was not the case for Xixu. Up until he'd come here from the capital, this was how shades had always been. Furthermore—

"There you are."

Turning a corner and running down an alleyway, Xixu spotted the shade in the sky. He swiftly pulled off his right glove and formed a long needle of cold essence in his hand. Taking aim, he threw it at the shadowy bird leisurely gliding up above.

When the needle hit, the shade released a soundless scream before scattering to nothingness.

"Done."

After confirming that he'd eliminated the shade, Xixu pulled his glove back over his now ice-cold hand.

Having received a god's power, his current self was a part of that very god. Hunting shades now proved to be no particular effort. Rather, he even felt somewhat guilty for mixing in with the other regular shadeslayers and claiming that he was "working."

With the snake gone, Irede only saw the occasional manifestation of ordinary shades. Since these shades were birthed from the ill essence that clung to people, eliminating them entirely would prove to be difficult. Still, this town was Sari's domain, so the rate of shade manifestations was low considering Irede's size and nature. Additionally, the upcoming maiden dance should disperse the lingering essence that had yet to form into shades.

"It's a good thing for guard duty to be easy, but humans were always the bigger problem anyway."

People led astray by shades often enacted violence or caused other problems, but people also did things out of malice without external influences. Since such affairs were so much harder to discover, it made dealing with them more difficult too.

Xixu frowned, recalling the girl who'd proposed marriage to him the other day. Riko Roloris hadn't made contact with him ever since, but her bearing and character made him concerned that she might fall prey to some wicked adult's scam.

Then his frown grew deeper when he remembered that people had worried about him in the exact same way when *he'd* just arrived in Irede.



After watching Xixu depart in pursuit of the shade, Tagi returned to the rolling tide of passersby.

He appreciated how having such a diligent colleague meant he could often take things easy. The fact that said colleague was the maiden's man was only the cherry on top. It meant he would remain dedicated to his work until they split apart, at least. And with his personality, it seemed surprisingly likely that that wouldn't be for a long time yet.

To Tagi, who had known Sari since she was a child, the woman was a true

courtesan. Her eye for men was selective and her judgment was rational and based on realism, yet she still harbored fanciful dreams about love. She was unbending when it came to her core principles and hated being restrained, yet wanted her partner to be the one to make the approach.

When he'd called women like her ill-natured, it was because they hid those true feelings and never exposed them to the light. She manipulated others like puppets as easily as breathing. A single gaze from her was enough to lure a person in, whom she would reject with a look of utter apathy.

Men who sought to purchase her company were fumbling in the dark for an answer they didn't know the question to, and were cut off immediately if she didn't take a liking to them. Her upbringing had raised her into a troublesome, burdensome woman. Even if she was the proprietress of Pale Moon, Tagi had to doubt the intentions of the relatives who had raised her.

Yet the guest she had picked was a better fit than he'd ever expected. That he was selfless enough to accept Sari's troublesome side without considering it a burden was a testament to what an honest upbringing he must have had. That made it all the more pity he'd been ensnared by one of Irede's most bothersome courtesans, but the matter had nothing to do with Tagi, so it was none of his concern. Xixu bore the responsibility of choosing her on his own back. If he came to regret his decision, he could simply leave.

Such were Tagi's thoughts as he headed for a courtesan house he frequented regularly. In general, while he resided at courtesan houses, he never paid the courtesans' companionship fees, instead providing bodyguard services or a strong pair of hands where necessary, among other bothersome requests. There were several courtesan houses in town with which he had such an agreement, and he tended to enter such establishments from the rear entrance.

Just as he was about to do so at one such courtesan house, Tagi noticed an unfamiliar woman in the rear entryway. She turned and smiled.

"Oh. Good afternoon."

Her voice was gentle and somewhat subdued. She had the appearance of a courtesan, with full-bodied golden hair and a kimono of rindo-flower violet tied

by a red sash. She was attractive, but not so beautiful that it would elicit wonder. However, the mole below her left eye gave her a striking appearance, and the difference in size between her eyes lent her both seductiveness and fragility.

In terms of age, she appeared to be in her mid-twenties. As she smiled, the proprietress came out to receive her. The older woman—who was Tagi's mother's age—waved casually when she noticed the shadeslayer.

"Come in, but don't get in the way. I need to introduce her to everyone in the house."

"Is she a new courtesan? She's not from Irede."

"I've come from the royal capital. I was hoping to receive the pleasure of this house taking me into its care."

The woman sent Tagi a glance with upturned eyes below a pair of long eyelashes. It was enough to turn his suspicion into conviction.

"Give up on her," he told the proprietress, an acquaintance of his. "It won't turn out well."

The would-be courtesan's eyes were clay red, and they widened upon hearing his frank declaration. The expression she made was enough to suggest her true emotions—perhaps the surprise had been enough to make her slip.

The proprietress sighed heavily. "That's a shame. She seems like she would've been popular. If you're saying it, though..." She turned to the would-be courtesan. "I'm sorry, but it looks like this isn't going to work."

"Pardon? But we haven't even discussed anything yet."

"It's unfortunate for us too. But there's no doubting this man's eye for courtesans. If he says you won't work out, then that's that. It won't end well."

"But..."

The woman looked at Tagi, distress in her eyes. The imploring look seemed to exert a silent pressure, as if pleading her innocence—it was exactly as he'd expected. He loosely scratched the back of his head.

"I can see through women who are putting up an act. Not that that's a

problem in itself, since Irede's courtesans don't show their true selves to men. But you're no good. My guess is that you were a high-class courtesan back in the capital, right? You were the type who intentionally tried to ruin her customers. I can tell just by looking at you."

The woman gave no response.

"You're free to do as you wish, so long as it's elsewhere. But we don't take women like you in Irede. This town was established as an act of repayment to delight a god. It's a fool's yarn, sure, but being here means living by its ways. Trying to ruin customers like you do is the opposite of what we want. Do it somewhere else."

"You're making some rather bold claims." The woman's small lips curled in a pout.

Even such gestures were but calculated acts. Tagi smiled cynically. But just as he opened his mouth to speak, the proprietress sighed.

"He might be a loudmouth, but he's right. A courtesan of your caliber should be able to make a living anywhere. Since you've gone to the trouble of coming here, though, you may as well see the sights before you leave."

She retrieved a small cloth wrapping from her breast pocket and handed it to the woman: the money which would have served as the initial deposit for the would-be courtesan's contract, offered as an apology. Upon recognizing it, the light vanished from the woman's eyes, and her voice grew cold.

"Not as warm a welcome as I'd hoped for."

"It is what it is," Tagi replied. "But one woman like you is enough for this town, and the one we've already got is the worst of the worst."

"Already got?"

Tagi simply smiled and didn't reply. The proprietress seemed to understand who he was referring to, because her expression was sour, as though she'd just bitten down on an insect.

The woman inclined her head suspiciously, but her smile quickly returned, and she bowed. "If you'll excuse me."

After she was gone from sight, Tagi spoke to the proprietress. “Get the word out to the other houses if you can, so that they don’t take her in. Oh, but don’t tell Pale Moon.”

“Don’t give me orders.” The proprietress paused for a moment. “Why don’t you want to let the princess know?”

“The young miss’s curiosity will get the better of her. She’ll sniff the woman out to try to see for herself what kind of person she is. It’ll stir up more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Ahh...” The proprietress took a breath, convinced. She knew what Sari was like.

“Working outside of my job description tires me out,” Tagi grumbled as he removed his thonged sandals and moved inside.

“You barely did anything!”



Selaria’s attempt at settling into the town had failed at the very first step. In an empty pathway by a canal, she sat on a wooden crate with her sandals off, idly kicking her feet.

“What a strange town...”

She’d heard about Irede before, but truth was odder than hearsay in this case. Despite its friendly exterior, if one took a single step behind that facade, they would find themselves faced with an exclusionary mentality strict toward outsiders.

Then again, perhaps Selaria had only been refused because she was who she was.

It was an awful thing to be called a woman who intentionally tried to ruin her customers. Of course, the most awful thing of all was that it was true.

Selaria had her reasons too, though. She hadn’t chosen this path in life for herself. It was always those around her who had forced her into the circumstances she found herself in.

The flowing water’s surface glittered under the direct rays of the afternoon

sun. The canals here were wide in consideration of the nearby mountain, and Selaria recalled that good wine was made in Irede due to its abundance of spring water. She had no doubt that the people who had been born here had never known true thirst.

Yet even the endless mountain springs here were but trickles compared to the oceans at the distant ends of the world. As Selaria watched the sparkling water's surface, a terribly nostalgic landscape made itself known in the depths of her memory.

"I want to see the ocean..."

"The ocean?" came a young woman's voice from her blind spot.

Selaria's absent-minded mood had prevented her from noticing the newcomer, but she didn't let her surprise show as she turned casually. She was well practiced in the art of hiding her emotions, and so she kept her astonishment hidden even when she saw that the newcomer was a girl of such beauty that one would suspect she'd received a god's favor.

The woman's attire—a white kimono with a black sash dyed with the pattern of a half-moon—was remarkably vivid, and from her facial features, she couldn't yet have reached twenty. She was accompanied by a girl who appeared to be a maidservant.

The woman cocked her head slightly as she studied Selaria. "You're not from Irede."

"Do the people of this town know every courtesan by face?"

The earlier events had caused Selaria's tongue to slip, but she hadn't intentionally put any steel into her remark. Nevertheless, the woman in the white kimono smiled concededly and dipped her head.

"Pardon my forwardness. I can't say I recall everyone, no, but I believe I would have remembered someone as striking as you."

Selaria was used to hearing similar words from men, but she also knew that they were not just flattery, but the truth. She was someone who stood out.

The woman who'd spoken to her turned her gaze to the canal. "Do you like

the ocean?”

“Not particularly. I was born near it, so I just get nostalgic sometimes.”

“You’ve traveled quite the distance to come here, then.”

She held back from saying that it hadn’t been by choice. It wasn’t something to be said to a stranger—and a younger one, no less. She reserved it for men who she’d already met several times and were smitten with her.

Instead, Selaria said something she had never revealed to anybody.

“The truth is, I’ve always wanted to return. I’ve just never had the chance.”

“You must be quite busy. I can’t say I know how homesickness feels, but I imagine it’s a difficult thing to forget.”

The woman’s voice seemed to melt with the flowing water, soothing to the ears.

Difficult to forget. How perfectly fitting.

Perhaps that was always how it had been. Holding vague desires of wanting to see the ocean, but never turning her feet toward the coast. Would her life end without her ever again hearing the roar of the sea?

The sense of fatigue that washed over Selaria weighed down on her heart more than her body. In order to turn her thoughts away from herself, she asked a question of the woman standing next to her.

“Were you born in this town?”

“I wasn’t. But I will spend all my life here, until the end.”

The frank answer should have come as a heavy thing, but it sounded light.

So there are women like her here too.

A strange town, and a woman who would meet her end there. It sounded like a fairy tale—something beautiful, despite her life being one of prostitution. It was a lovely way of painting over the truth.

The woman smiled as though she’d read Selaria’s thoughts. “However, I have no complaints with such a life. Everything I want is here, and I am content.”

“You’ve lived a blessed life, then.”

“Yes.”

The woman’s agreement lacked any hesitation. Perhaps it was because she was young, but she was quite good-natured for a courtesan. She was likely treasured by those around her. To think how different they were, though they were both women who sold their nights...

The woman in the white kimono watched the clear spring water flowing through the channel. “This water will one day reach the ocean. Perhaps just like it, you’re simply in the middle of your journey to return to your hometown.”

“Me? Return to my hometown?”

Now that was certainly a fairy tale. She had come a very long way from the ocean in the last decade and change. Selaria unintentionally let a hollow smile slip.

The woman in the white kimono bowed. “I apologize for my rudeness. I only spoke thus because that is how I wish for the people of this town to be able to live.”

“To be able to return home?”

Did Irede have a lot of residents who had migrated from elsewhere? Selaria wondered what reasons they could have had for wanting to settle down here. She chuckled; she herself had been refused before she could become a courtesan.

However, the woman shook her head. “To be able to be free.”

Free.

That word alone, spoken in the woman’s soft voice, was jagged to Selaria’s ears.

This was Selaria’s first day in Irede.

Later on that evening, she would catch the eye of a guest on the street and join a small courtesan house.

5. Vicissitude

The second floor of Pale Moon's annex was Sari's living space, while the first floor was unused.

Originally, her grandmother, the previous proprietress, had lived there, but now it was simply for storage. Recently, Sari had been cleaning it little by little along with her own room, disposing of unneeded items, sorting the ones to keep, and putting them away to make space.

"That should do it, I think."

Sari, who had tucked up the sleeves of her kimono with a *tasuki* sash while she was tidying up a large paulownia wood cabinet, straightened up and stretched.

Once the cabinet was carried to the storehouse, the major tidying work would be over. There was still a laundry list of minor tasks that needed to be seen to, but the first floor was now almost vacant and the second was neat and tidy. She looked over the room; the windows were open, as she'd wanted to air it out. There was still some time until the lantern lighting, but with the festival so close, there was much to do. The day of would see the manor and flower room fully decorated, meaning the storehouse was open for use. It was the perfect time to do some cleaning.

While Sari was sorting through an array of miscellanea, a maidservant arrived.

"Miss Proprietress, is now a good time? The jewelers have arrived."

"I'll be right there. Let them into the parlor."

"As you wish."

After the maidservant bowed and departed, Sari hurried to her room and readied herself. Once her appearance was that of the proprietress, she went to the parlor.

"My apologies for the wait."

The two men, who had been captivated by her graceful bow, hurriedly rose to their feet and returned the gesture. Sari sat herself across the table from them, and negotiations began without delay.

Her goal today was mainly to sell the precious metals and gems Xixu had paid for her companionship fee. According to him, she could liquidate them as she wished because that was what they were for. Even to her eyes, she could tell he'd selected them at random. All told, she was grateful for the influx of income.

As Sari watched the two jewelers appraise the metals and gems using a reference book, she took back several small stones that seemed relatively usable and placed them near her.

One of the jewelers looked at her apologetically. "Was the price not to your agreement?"

"Not at all. I was thinking of having these worked and giving them to the maidservants. They've been quite good to my husband."

The maidservants were happy for Sari that she'd picked Xixu as her guest, and they always assisted him with various daily living needs. She thought they would be delighted to receive the gems he had provided.

The jewelers indicated their understanding and submitted the final sum for her consideration. She smiled when she saw that it far surpassed her companionship fee—that was just like him.

Xixu had only paid the companionship fee for the first night, as Sari had stopped him from continuing the practice, saying she didn't need it. However, each time he used the proprietress's room these days, he paid for his meals and lodgings. She personally thought that was unnecessary, but that was simply his nature. It was another reason she had begun cleaning the annex: If he was able to live there, they wouldn't need to use the proprietress's room.

"Thank you very much. I look forward to doing business with you again in the future."

Once the formalities were seen to, Sari saw the two jewelers off at the entryway. After they had gone past the gate and out of sight, she turned to the

maidservant present and requested that she add the transaction to the ledger.

After the maidservant accepted, she broached a subject of her own, seeming quite hesitant. “Miss Proprietress. I’m afraid this might be unpleasant, but may I have a word?”

“Of course. What is it?”

“It’s about the woman we met the other day by the canal. I understand that she has become a courtesan of some repute in town.”

“Oh, is that so? I can see that. She certainly had the appeal.”

Sari could generally grasp what made a courtesan popular simply by speaking to her. The woman in question had possessed a dangerous sort of charm, but many men were attracted to such a thing, much like how a light trap lured in insects.

The maidservant’s eyes wavered, but she continued unhesitatingly, “However, I also understand that initially, she was refused by multiple courtesan houses.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Master Tagi, he...”

“Ahh.”

The woman did indeed seem like the type Tagi would be wary of. When it came to having a discerning eye for courtesans, he stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Even Sari, proprietress of her own establishment, couldn’t match him. She suspected the reason he was so hard on her was because he thought she wasn’t a good match for being a courtesan.

If Tagi had told courtesan houses not to take the woman in, then it would be reason enough on its own for them to refuse her. As Sari nodded in understanding, the maidservant looked at her worriedly.

“I was wondering if perhaps she was like me.”

“Like you...? Ahh.”

There, Sari’s beautiful features drew into a frown. The maidservant hung her

head, having caused her employer's displeasure. However, Sari's voice was confident as she spoke.

"Take pride in yourself. You have nothing to be ashamed about, and neither do that woman's affairs reflect anything upon you."

The maidservant's breath hitched. "Y-Yes, of course. Thank you."

"Why bring this up all of a sudden, though?"

Pale Moon's maidservants were not the type to enjoy irresponsible gossip, much less mention it to their employer. The maidservant chewed her lip. She looked at Sari uneasily.

"It's about the human traffickers who went around to the courtesan houses the other day. Apparently, they're still in town."

"Huh? They are?"

The maidservant nodded, her expression still clouded. Sari fell into thought, in a grim mood.

As a seller, there was no point staying in a town where there were no buyers. So why were they still here? Surely it wasn't because of something as frivolous as wanting to see the festival?

She withdrew from her thoughts when she noticed the maidservant's uneasy expression and smiled. "Don't worry. I'll talk to Xixu about it."

"Thank you. I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It's okay. It's part of my job to make sure you have nothing to worry about."

It was honestly rarer for nothing to be wrong. She couldn't allow herself too much undue stress about it while she was working on the concerns of those around her.

Sari dismissed the maidservant and headed for the storehouse. Along the way, Isha stopped her in the hallway.

"Do you have a moment, Sari?"

"Of course. You're up early."

Usually, the courtesan who was Sari's surrogate older sister wasn't awake

until slightly later, but today she was fully dressed. The hallway they shared was empty of other people.

“I’m sorry to burden you with my personal affairs, but I’m thinking of buying out my contract soon.”

Unconsciously, Sari took a breath. “Oh.”

While Isha was a courtesan of Pale Moon, she took no guests other than Thoma, Sari’s brother. In essence, she was his lover. Sari had known that she would become his wife one day, but had refrained from ever broaching the topic.

Being so busy with her own affairs had left her no time to think about it, but she realized that Isha bringing it up now meant that she had likely been waiting for Sari to take a guest and for things to settle down. The older courtesan had always watched over the young proprietress from within Pale Moon’s walls.

Sari gave her an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry for making you wait so long.”

“I should be thanking you for letting me stay here. I owe you so much. The reason I still have my life is because of Pale Moon and all of you.”

Isha smiled with all the warmth of the sun. Having chosen to come to Pale Moon because of the downfall of her family, she had surely experienced much hardship. But while that loneliness peeked through sometimes, she had continued to be a gentle, soothing existence, like a warm sunspot. It was no wonder Thoma had fallen for her, or how much solace she had provided Sari.

The young proprietress placed her hands in front of her and bowed deeply. “Thank you for staying by my side.”

“I did it because I wanted to. Besides, it’s not like I’ll be leaving right away. Let me stay around for a little longer, okay?”

The preparations for a courtesan having her contract bought out varied depending on the person, but in place of a dowry, Pale Moon provided the courtesan leaving with a measure of kimono material, a sash, and an accessory such as a hairpin or sash fastener. Sari resolved in her heart to pick the perfect selection of items for her sister.

After explaining that Thoma would eventually come by to make the offer, Isha smiled and returned down the hallway.

To Sari, the graceful figure she cast as she departed had for a long time represented what a courtesan should be. From hereon, she would instead embody the proprietress she herself thought she should be. It was her wish for every resident of Irede: to be free to pursue their own ideal image of themselves.

“I’ll have to work hard...”

Straightening her back and shaking off her mood, Sari returned to her work, suddenly recalling the words she had exchanged with the woman by the canal.



Living in Irede, Xixu occasionally heard the idea that popular courtesans were recognizable on sight, but he had never been able to tell himself. Pale Moon as a business was not overly concerned with revenue, and each courtesan house had its own way of doing things.

In the first place, it wasn’t the militia’s domain to tread, so he had little contact with courtesan houses outside of when they requested aid. It meant he rarely talked to the courtesans of Irede, despite living there, but on this particular day, things were slightly different.

“Isn’t it tiring when they come every day?”

“Definitely. I’m thankful when they do, but it’s so draining.”

Since a few minutes ago, the sounds of girlish laughter and giggling conversation had been making Xixu’s stomach hurt.

Just as he’d come to his usual teahouse during his break and made his order, two young courtesans had arrived to sit at a table farther in, past a partitioning screen. Since tourists did not come to this teahouse, they had been open about their various opinions as they giggled to each other, paying no mind at all to Xixu as they talked about the kinds of guests they hated or things they disliked doing in the bedroom.

Several of the things they mentioned...hit rather close to home. He’d never

realized, however, because Sari had never shown signs of protest.

He wanted to stop listening, but the courtesans weren't being reserved about their grumbling, and since he had already made his order, he was stuck there waiting for it. By the time the blood had entirely drained from his face, the teahouse's proprietress finally arrived with a tray bearing his tea.

"You shouldn't take what women say to heart when they get into such conversations," the former courtesan said as she placed his teacup in front of him. "They aren't your companion either, Master Shadeslayer."

"That's true, but...it makes me realize how ignorant I've been."

He considered the idea of confirming with Sari tonight, but recalling the courtesans' complaint of guests coming every day made his hand holding the teacup shudder. The proprietress was looking at him with a mixture of pity and amusement. Eventually, the courtesans' conversation turned to other matters.

"The new courtesan who came to town recently is already really popular."

"I heard a rumor that a number of houses rejected her, though."

"There have been a lot of guests recently who just check the prices and leave."

"The people around recently seem a little different than usual. Is it because there's more of them here for the festival?"

While they were conversing, Xixu drained his tea thrice as fast as usual and left his payment at the counter.

"Thank you. I'll come by again."

"Truly, you shouldn't pay too much mind to it."

"I'll do my best to improve."

He couldn't talk about this kind of matter with anybody except Sari, and he had the suspicion that she might gloss over it. To begin with, she had never once told him she disliked something since he had become her guest. While he had thought that was simply because he hadn't done anything she found objection with, perhaps the truth was that her generosity was allowing her to overlook it, or that she'd never had another guest, so she didn't know. He ought

to tell Sari of the outside opinions he'd heard and have her weigh judgment.

Swallowing down a sigh, Xixu headed for the main street to continue his patrol. Recently, there had been an influx of visitors due to the oncoming festival, and for better or worse, the mood was abuzz. No major problems had sprung up, but it was best he was rigorous about his patrols.

As Xixu took a shortcut through a narrow alleyway, he encountered a courtesan, who gave him a gentle smile when she noticed him. That he reflexively turned to check behind him was because it seemed the sort of smile reserved for intimate guests.

However, there was no one there. He turned to face the unfamiliar courtesan again and performed a slight bow, thinking perhaps the smile had been a gentle way of conveying that he was in the way.

"My apologies," he murmured, making to pass by her, even as she gave him a look of surprise. As her eyes—of different sizes—widened, Xixu noticed her mole for the first time. He recalled that Sari had no such marks on her body at all. Was that because she wasn't human? Such were his thoughts as he exited onto the main street.

Behind him, the woman stared at his back with lecherous intent.

"You don't have to worry about any of that."

That evening in the proprietress's room, Sari's answer was frank.

"If I don't like something, I'll say it. If I don't say it, it's okay."

She sat at the low table, having been asked by Xixu if he could ask her several questions, and seemed slightly peeved at the space and obstruction between them. He also seemed to have invoked her displeasure by asking if he'd done anything to invoke her displeasure.

Still, the silver lining was that he could sense no lie from her expression or tone. Of course, there was every chance he wouldn't be able to tell if she truly did want to hide something from him, but he didn't *think* she was lying. Probably.

“Then it’s fine. I shouldn’t have let it get to me. Sorry.”

“No, thank you for checking with me before it became anything complicated. I do have things I don’t like, so I’ll make sure to say so if they happen.”

“For example?”

“Hmm... Mmm...”

As he listened to Sari list several such things while working her neck from side to side, Xixu felt like cradling his head in his hands.

“I wouldn’t do those things. I’ve never even thought about them...”

“So you have nothing to worry about! Jeez!”

Sari placed her own fingers on her reddened cheeks to cool them down. It was rare for her to display such a reaction. The more Xixu thought about it, the more he realized how scandalous his question had been. Even if they were husband and wife and she had been raised as a courtesan with all the bedroom knowledge that entailed, there were many things in this world that were better left unasked. He was only just discovering this now.

Xixu lowered his head enough to touch the low table. “I’m sorry. I’ve been inexcusably rude.”

“This takes me back. It’s like how you were when you first came to Irede. Don’t let it get to you after all this time. You know, you’ve always been really direct about these topics, though you only bring them up occasionally. Is it because you went through the military academy?”

“What?”

The remark came as such a shock to Xixu that he froze. It wasn’t something he’d been aware of at all. It was true that after he’d enlisted in the military academy at fifteen, all of his peers had been male and had often not held back about certain topics, but he’d never participated in such conversations. Rather, he’d always thought he’d been the one to ground his friends in reality, pointing out when they were being absurd.

Xixu covered his mouth with a hand. “Really?”

“Yes, but I don’t mind. It’s like having someone give a serious answer to a joke

about romance.”

“So all I’ve ever been doing is digging myself into an even deeper hole...?”

In other words, did that mean he’d treated Sari like his peers at the military academy? He thought he’d been courteous with her from the start, but evidently he’d gone astray at some point.

“I’m telling you not to worry about it!” Sari added hurriedly as he considered that idea, his face blank. “In a pleasure town, it’d be more of a bother if you hated that kind of joke!”

“If I’ve been rude out of ignorance this entire time, I have to fix it.”

“But you *haven’t* been rude! Just don’t do it with other courtesans! I don’t want them thinking they can make you their guest if they just push hard enough!”

“I’ll do my best, despite my failings.”

It was a difficult request, given his lack of self-awareness, but the residents of Irede knew he was Sari’s guest. They wouldn’t intentionally stir up that much trouble. When he was out of town was when he really had to be careful.

Sari fixed her posture and smiled wryly. “You’re not the only one who’s worried if they’re doing something wrong, though. And that applies to more than just what we were talking about. It’s just that you’re not at all picky when it comes to me.”

“You think...?”

He thought it was rather because she’d also received a young noblewoman’s upbringing, so she didn’t engage in behavior that others would consider rude. The only times he found her actions troubling were the times she charged ahead with no concern for herself, but even that was within her rights to do—she was a free woman. As long as he kept her safe, it was fine.

Sari rose to her feet. Although Xixu thought it was to come over to him, she went to retrieve the hot water a maidservant had brought by instead. Her returning with the tray was enough to make Xixu’s eyes widen in surprise.

The maidservants did not come to the proprietress’s room when not

requested. That meant that Sari must have been planning to brew tea and discuss something with him before he'd asked her.

"How is the town?" she asked as she brewed the tea with practiced movements.

"There've been no changes, though there's more activity than usual because of the upcoming festival."

"That's good. The truth is, the human traffickers I mentioned the other day are apparently still in town. One of the maidservants is nervous about it, so I wanted to tell you to be careful."

"I will."

No talk of human traffickers had reached the militia. Likely because it was just a warning going around the courtesan houses. Still, with uninvited guests around, it was best to remain on one's toes.

Sari placed a teacup in front of Xixu. "We can't leave Irede, so it feels like problems from the outside always come knocking first. Sorry we're always one step behind."

"That's only natural. It's not something you should be concerned about."

It was a matter of course that the town's mistress protected her domain. In fact, it could be argued that the security of Irede should be maintained by the humans who lived there. Regardless, Sari was meticulous in her watch. As her sacred companion, he simply could not be dissatisfied.

Sari's smile was as striking as the contrast between light and dark birthed by moonlight. "In that case, Xixu. This town is my precious garden. Will you protect it?"

"Yes. I promise."

"Thank you."

She smiled happily. It was the sacred companion's privilege to be able to see such a smile. But before Xixu could lose his thoughts to sentimentality, he recalled a matter he needed to report.

"Come to think of it, the young lady from the Roloris family is still in town."

She's been visiting all the shops and making appearances at the playhouses."

"Oh, I've heard about that too. She wants to sell House Radi wine in her own territory." Sari sipped from her tea and exhaled a warm breath. "It seems as though she's taken quite a liking to Irede. I wonder if she'll become a regular."

There were many influential patrons across the continent who fell in love with the ways of Irede and lent it their support. It was rare for one of them to be a young noblewoman, however. Most such individuals led a confined life where they played a leading role in matters of their own family, and few stepped out of that to travel as far as Irede, much less engage in trade with it.

It seemed that the news of one such girl had piqued Sari's interest, because she appeared to be in a good mood. Xixu produced a sealed letter from his breast pocket.

"I have a missive from the royal palace regarding her, but—"

"Huh? When did you get that? So you told His Majesty, then?"

"I am bait for this purpose, after all. She isn't anyone harmful, though, so evidently it's fine if we leave her be so long as she doesn't cause us trouble. The Roloris family territory isn't in financial distress or anything like that. It appears she made her proposal because she's worried about the future."

"Ah, I get it. She seems like she'd make a shrewd businesswoman. Although she worries, she's proactive and looks ahead."

As a matter of fact, Riko had a good reputation among the daytime businesspeople of Irede. She paid well, had respect for the culture and craftsmen, and had an eye for beauty. The perfect customer.

"She brought a lot of money with her, so it's generous of her to use it up here. Safer than taking it all back with her too."

"In regard to the initial reason she brought it, however..."

"Money itself isn't good or wicked. It's an important factor of life."

There was a weight to those words when said by a proprietress. Xixu nodded and sipped at his clear tea. There had been a period when Sari had purchased different leaves each time for him, but perhaps because she had grasped his

preferences, recently it had been a ratio of one new discovery—or some particular leaf he felt like drinking once in a blue moon—to four he was familiar with.

Today, the tea was one of his familiar favorites, perfect for drinking over a conversation. Sari must have prepared it in order to talk about the maidservant's concerns.

Incidentally, it was almost unheard of for Xixu to be served wine at Pale Moon. They would provide it to him if requested, but were aware that he didn't have a particular fondness for alcohol.

"Oh, and about the festival. Will you come to see my dance?"

Xixu's eyes widened; the subject had caught him by surprise.

The last time Sari had danced, he had been occupied elsewhere and unable to watch. He'd thought it would be the same this time, since the festival meant he'd have to be diligent about his patrols. In his mind, it was the militia's duty to keep the town safe, and his time spent with Sari fell under the categories of reward and leisure. It was why he hadn't even considered the idea of prioritizing himself and watching the maiden's dance over playing the guard when the town needed it the most.

But when he looked at Sari, he saw that she was staring at him hopefully. The passionate expression she wore betrayed a slight nervousness, her emotions so bare that it seemed he could reach out and touch them.

Such was the true face of the woman Saridi. Profound affection and heavy warmth. She was a lonely being separate from humanity, which was precisely why she loved and protected it and this town.

To Xixu, her way of existence was beautiful. He wanted to be a part of it, to cherish it. That he wanted to kiss her and make her his alone was surely foolish human desire—something he could never speak of to her.

Xixu cast his gaze downward; her heat had spread to him. "I would be glad to see it. I'll ask the militia to schedule my break for your dance."

"Thank you! Sorry for pushing the matter."

“No, I’m glad you brought it up. I’m sorry for not being thoughtful enough to.”

“I can tell from you saying that that you weren’t going to watch it!”

“I have no excuse.”

“Good, because you don’t need one!” Sari stood, and this time she rounded the table to sit at her husband’s side, leaning against him. “Oh, and just so you’re aware, you know how I’m limited when it comes to the power I can use against humans?”

“Yes.”

It was part of an old contract she’d made with humanity—a restriction she’d laid upon herself and her manifestations. Though she could break it whenever she so wished, she refrained from doing so and lived alongside humans. It placed her in positions of danger from time to time, but that was why Xixu was here.

“I don’t think you have the same limitation, so be careful when you fight. You could break someone into tiny pieces, just like that.”

Xixu did not reply. That was a terrifying thought.

Perhaps Sari’s words had left an impression on him, because that night, Xixu dreamed of himself breaking people into pieces.

He was relieved when he jolted awake and saw his wife sleeping next to him. At the same time, it once again struck him that he was no longer human.

6. Festival Night

Irede's festivals had no names, for names were labels given by humans for human purposes.

The gravitas of this concept was somewhat ruined by Sari's declaration that she wished they *had* been given names, as the lack made preparing for one more trouble than necessary, but as a matter of fact, many people called the three festivals that happened each year the first, second, and third festivals for convenience's sake.

According to said nomenclature, the one being held today was the second festival.

Under the cloudless sky, lanterns decorated with the work of goldsmiths hung from the eaves of stores facing the main streets. Today, even courtesan houses were open during the morning hours. Courtesans toured the town with guests they were close with, or entertained them with wine and confectionaries indoors. Today, they would not sell their nights. For today was the god's and god's alone.

As such, the second floor of the courtesan house overlooking the stage for the maiden's dance was being rented out as audience seats. However, they had sold out by the time Xixu discovered this. Regardless, he felt as though watching from audience seating would make him restless, so it was his intention to watch from the back of the crowd. Such were his thoughts as he did a round of the town during his patrol.

"Nothing seems out of place..."

There were arguments and minor disputes on account of the increase in people, but the human traffickers must be blending in perfectly, because he could spot no suspicious individuals or anyone hiding any ill intent.

Nevertheless, the militia did not patrol indoors, so he couldn't be certain. He had visited the dining house the human traffickers apparently frequented—

information he'd received from the maidservant through Sari—several times already, but had only ever seen ordinary customers.

Perhaps Tagi knew something, but recently the elusive shadeslayer was nowhere to be seen.

As for Ironblade, he hadn't even known there *were* rumors about human traffickers, so evidently the information was not being shared across Irede. That, or perhaps it was being carefully managed so that overly inquisitive militia members didn't make the visitors feel unable to relax.

Xixu returned to the center of town. The stage for the maiden's dance had been erected at the intersection of the main streets.

Rows of backless chairs for audience use surrounded the stage, which was encircled by white cord, and people had already begun to take seats. There were still four hours or so to go until the maiden's dance, but expectations seemed to be high, as this would be the first festival to host a maiden dance in several decades.

With a glance at the spectators who were astir, Xixu entered the nearby courtesan house. The old establishment possessed a waiting room for the maiden's dance, though he was given instructions to enter a tatami room farther inside.

The woman facing the dressing table clad in a kimono undergarment turned when she noticed the door opening. "Oh, you came!"

"I received word that you wanted me to help with your makeup... Did I hear that correctly?"

"You did."

Sari held out a brush and a dish of face powder. When Xixu took them, she turned her back to her husband and opened her undergarment, revealing her pale skin down to her waist. Xixu's breath caught briefly in his throat.

"Could you cover the back of my neck down to just under my shoulder blades? It'll stand out if you apply it too thick, so make sure it's even! I can do the front on my own."

“Ah...right.”

Rousing from his surprise, Xixu sat down behind his wife. Sari’s long silver hair had been held up by a simple hairpin, leaving her pale nape bare. He should have been used to seeing the smooth skin of her back by now, but he found himself restless, perhaps because they were in an unfamiliar location. Nevertheless, Xixu did as he’d been told, gently tracing the brush across her skin and making sure he stayed within the areas she’d instructed.

It took very little time for Sari to begin shrieking. “Th-That tickles! You’re being too gentle!”

“I’m not sure what you want me to do. I can’t be rough with you...”

“Do it like you’re painting a wall.”

“I can’t even picture that...”

He had been careful since he’d been working on a divine maiden’s skin; to be told to treat it like a common wall left him with no small amount of whiplash. Still, he’d delay her preparations at this rate. Xixu once again began applying the powder—which had been dissolved in water—to his wife’s back with careful force, ensuring he was not being too gentle or too vigorous.

In the meantime, Sari was spreading some kind of liquid over her face using the mirror. “The maidservant who was supposed to help me today suddenly came down with a fever. I told her I could manage on my own, but I forgot I needed to do my back too. Sorry to get in the way of your work.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

The reason she couldn’t ask anyone else’s help in the first place was because she’d taken a guest.

After Pale Moon’s proprietress took a guest, only girls of the age fifteen and under were permitted to assist her in matters that involved touching her skin. It was likely originally because the guest-taking process unified her with her divinity to make her a god in entirety, limiting those who could touch her to her direct attendants. That had little bearing on Sari, as she’d integrated with her divinity before she’d taken her guest, but during the festival, many eyes were upon her. As such, the only one who could touch her was her sacred

companion. Since Xixu had learned of this, he had become able to assist her with such matters.

Xixu felt like looking pleadingly at the ceiling when he noticed the marks he himself had left on her shoulders, but he couldn't stay that way forever. He painstakingly began to layer the power over it—enough that Sari took notice.

“Won't that spot be a different shade to the rest?”

“It is. I'm trying to fix it.”

Sari held out a different dish of white powder. “Put this on your finger and spread it. Then go over it with the brush again.”

“Got it.”

Xixu applied the slightly thicker solution of liquid white powder over the mark with his finger, then once again ran the brush over it.

Perhaps because of his inherent nature, Xixu quickly found himself fully concentrated on the task of uniformly applying the makeup. After some time, Sari spoke up apprehensively.

“Um, Xixu? You don't have to go that low...”

“Ah.”

In his concentration, he'd inadvertently painted down almost to her waist. Having regained his senses, he returned the dish and brush to his wife, who thanked him and took them.

“How is it? Did you manage?”

“I feel bad about saying this, but I think your bare skin looks more beautiful.”

Sari's cheeks reddened. To distract herself from her embarrassment, she placed a hand over her mouth.

“It's stage makeup, so it needs to be thick and showy. Otherwise it'll be hard for the audience to see by firelight.”

“That makes sense.”

Stage performers did indeed tend to wear their makeup differently. It appeared that tonight, Sari would be among their number. Xixu observed his

wife and her incomplete makeup in the mirror.

“I apologize if this is wrong of me to say, but applying it has made me wonder. Don’t you think perhaps that down past your shoulder blades is too revealing...?”

Ordinarily, as a proprietress, Sari didn’t even adjust the collar hem of her kimono. Hardly any of her skin was visible at all.

Xixu was hesitant to weigh in on the traditions and culture of Irede, but it still bothered him somewhat. The kagura dance meant only for him had been performed in a raiment composed of layers of silk that was open from the knees downward. Perhaps it was late of him to be bringing it up now, but he felt some resistance at the idea that others would see Sari in a similar garment.

Sari smiled at her husband’s modest objection. “More of my neck will be visible than usual, but my back won’t be. It’s just that it’ll seem strange if it’s applied only to the parts people can see, so I wanted it spread a little further. Sorry.”

“Ah, I see. And no, I overstepped by saying that. I apologize.”

“Mm-mmm. I’m happy. It’s rare for you to say things like that.”

The Sari in the mirror gave him a beautiful smile. Because of personal principles, Xixu did his best not to reveal his feelings of possessiveness, but evidently Sari enjoyed the occasions when they leaked out. Nevertheless, she was the town’s god and everyone’s princess. He couldn’t let himself lose to the desire to have her only for himself.

“Is there anything else you need help with?”

“I’m fine for now. Thank you. You were a big help.”

In the mirror, Sari’s reflection lowered its head as she began to apply the powder from her chin downward, going lower than her collarbone to where the graceful curves of her chest began. Xixu couldn’t help himself from wishing she’d cover up more, but he wasn’t about to retread the same ground.

Sari cocked her head slightly when she noticed her husband’s gaze. “Would you like to do the front too?”

“No.”

The longer he stayed here, the more likely she'd begin to suspect him of something strange. But as he made to leave, Sari called out to stop him.

“Oh, right. The chairman told me to ask you if he should prepare a seat for you at the front.”

“I'm thankful, but he should prioritize the guests. I can see just fine standing.”

“You are tall.”

Sari looked pleased as she giggled to herself. Xixu wasn't sure if something he'd said had struck a chord with her or something similar, but it was fine so long as she was happy.

Eventually, Sari reined in her smile and her blue eyes narrowed. “Incidentally, Xixu, has a courtesan with a mole under her eye approached you recently?”

“A mole under her eye?” Xixu sifted through his memories, but nothing jumped out at him. “I can't recall.”

“Hmm. Then maybe you're not the one she's after. Thanks.”

“What's this about?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned with. I'm not giving you to anyone, okay?”

“Seriously, what is going on?”

He would never abandon Sari, but would she ever abandon him, given the right circumstances?

The incoherent, foolish fear was still enough to cause Xixu stomach pain as he returned to his patrol.

When he completed his circuit and returned to the stage, the sky was in the process of changing color from the silk mantle of twilight to the dark of night, lit by the dazzling moon.

Ting, ting, came the sound of bells. They echoed across the nighttime stage, gently repainting the air of Irede—the pleasure town bustling with the activity

of a festival subtly shifted, becoming a town that belonged to a god where divine rituals took place.

The throngs of people grew conscious of themselves, straightening their posture and creating a sacred atmosphere in the place they had gathered.

The plain wood stage was illuminated at its four corners by fires in iron braziers, and the Midiridos Troupe's master musicians waited just below, holding flat taiko drums and stringed instruments. It was one such individual that sounded the bells.

The air was solemn. Every person seated in the audience held their breath, waiting. Tension and elation melded together to provide them with heat.

As Xixu watched the teeming crowd from the outer edge, he was surprised by how popular the event had ended up becoming. Where had all of these people even come from? There were a multitude of men and women, young and old, and fully half seemed to be visitors from outside of town. Seating had been erected on raised platforms in front of the establishments within viewing range of the stage, and regular customers sat around tables or watched from second-floor rooms, eagerly awaiting the start of the maiden's dance.

The festivals Xixu had witnessed until now had been much more alive with activity. It was a surprise to see that so much could change simply because of the addition of a single dance. The problem was how he was going to watch it.

"There are more people than I thought there'd be. What do I do now...?"

The crowd was as deep as a queue of people was long. He would still be able to see the stage from this distance, but it seemed somewhat of a shame, and he felt bad for Sari, who had so looked forward to him watching.

As he crossed his arms and considered the problem, a voice spoke up from the side.

"Pardon me, Master Xixu."

Nobody called him that aside from the maidservants of Pale Moon. He was used to being addressed with similar respect in the royal capital too, but nobody there was aware of his new true name.

As such, he was surprised to hear it spoken in a man's voice.

When he looked, he saw a tall man in an attendant's formal attire. From his appearance, he was likely a servant of an upper-class family. He didn't look like someone who could fight—what business could he have?

The man spoke before Xixu could ask. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Cykado, servant to Riko Roloris. I must extend my deepest apologies for the other day."

"Ah... Right."

So this was the servant of the Roloris family who had gone to Pale Moon. Reflexively, Xixu's brow almost drew into a frown, but he recognized that the man had begun with an apology. He pulled himself together and reigned his emotions into something more neutral.

"I heard about you from my wife. Do you have business with me?"

Cykado bowed and indicated toward the audience seats diagonal to the stage with his hand, where a platform had been erected for guests to drink tea while they watched the maiden's dance.

A single girl stood before one of the tables at the edge. When Xixu's gaze fell on her, she bent lightly at the knees and performed a curtsy.

"We saw you and wondered if you had not yet decided on a place from where to view the dance. As an apology for the other day, we would like to extend you an invitation to watch with us."

"I must decline, I'm afraid."

The pair from the Roloris family hadn't seemed to leave a bad impression with Sari, but after refusing her offer of a seat, accepting here didn't seem right.

Cykado seemed quick to pick up on his discomfort. "If sitting with us is not to your preference, then my mistress requests that you please make use of the table while she watches from elsewhere. While she purchased it to observe the maiden's dance, she also stated that she would like to immerse herself in the atmosphere of those closer to the stage."

"I wouldn't recommend that she join the crowd. She wouldn't be able to see

anything at her height.”

Purchasing those specific seats required not only a significant sum of money, but a reputation as an excellent customer of an influential business. It suggested that the young Roloris girl’s efforts to learn more about Irede had been welcomed by the town’s residents. Xixu decided that he could not let her feelings of guilt toward him spoil that.

“Very well. I gratefully accept your offer. Just allow me to inform my wife first. I hadn’t decided on where to watch her dance from.”

“Of course.”

Leaving Cykado to wait, Xixu approached the courtesan house with the waiting room, asking the musician there to pass along the message that he’d been invited to watch the dance with the Roloris family. He then headed toward the seats, seeing that Riko had remained standing as she waited for him.

She bowed deeply when he arrived. “You have my deepest apologies for my rudeness the other day. I have reflected thoroughly upon my actions.”

It was sometimes said that servants resembled their masters. That Sari hadn’t minded Cykado’s rude proposal was likely because of the same inherent sincerity that Xixu was seeing now. Part of him feeling admiration, he stopped her apology.

“You’ve apologized enough, so don’t worry about it anymore. More importantly, thank you for inviting me here. I refused a special seat offered to me as family, but once I saw the size of the crowd I was at a loss for what to do.”

“I take some solace in the fact that I’m able to be of assistance.” Riko smiled, though guilt was still evident in her expression.

Cykado pulled out a chair. “Please, have a seat.”

The stage where the maiden’s dance would be held could be seen from all four directions, and this set of seating was on the east side, across a narrow channel. It had been erected by several businesses instead of just a singular one, and the table where Xixu and Riko were seated was placed at the northern end. Though Cykado tried to remain standing, his mistress admonished him,

saying that he would be an obstruction to the people behind him, so he hesitantly seated himself at an angle behind her.

The ringing of bells continued.

Xixu remained silent, not having anything in particular to talk about, but Riko used the courtesans serving them tea as an opportunity to make a brief remark.

“This town seems like something out of a fantasy, doesn’t it?”

Many visitors said the same thing. That Irede was like something out of a dream, a memory glimpsed through the cracks in the dark of night as a child. Such was the atmosphere that it made one nostalgic, even upon one’s first visit. Some even called it the town of nostalgia.

Riko’s gaze was fond, as though she was witnessing a dream as she smiled out upon the town which had retained vestiges of the age of myth. “Everything I see is new, and so many things I want to attempt doing myself keep popping up.”

The words made Xixu turn his eyes from the empty stage to her. Riko responded to his shift in attention with a look of earnest seriousness.

“Several businesses have been kind enough to offer me advice. I know there’s a chance I’ll experience failure, but I want to try and follow through on some of my ideas. If even one succeeds, my people will still have a means of commerce, even if my family’s position becomes unstable.”

Her straightened posture was a testament to the quality of her upbringing. She was a daughter who had been blessed with love, freedom, and wealth in abundance. To her, that was a matter of course, and so she sought to pass what she’d received to others in turn. Perhaps that was too pure a disposition for a member of nobility, but it was the ideal figure the wealthy should cast. Maybe Sari’s liking of the girl was because she had seen through to her true nature.

As for Xixu, who was estranged from matters of trade, he wasn’t quite sure how to respond. He pondered for a moment before eventually settling on being his direct, unrefined self.

“I’m grateful to hear that. Your work would be beneficial to Irede too.”

Riko smiled broadly. “You’ve truly become a resident of this town, haven’t you?”

“That was my intention. I married Irede’s princess, after all.”

Ting, the bells rang, louder this time. It was their last note; they stopped there.

Those who noticed quietened themselves first, silence rippling through the gathered spectators like a wave. The crackling of firewood within the braziers was the only sound that could be heard.

The moonlight was bright, the earth fresh.

Midiridos musicians appeared from the courtesan house opposite the stage, bearing stringed instruments and flutes. A woman clad in a silken veil of pure white was among them, and all knew that she was the maiden.

The procession ascended the stage and took their positions. A musician removed Sari’s veil, revealing her form.

Irede’s only maiden. Inheritor of myth and the offering of warmth.

She stood in the stage’s center, blue eyes cast downward, resembling a large-petaled flower formed from crystal.

Transparent, pure, brilliant.

Her beauty, more delicate than anything, paired with the ethereal air in which she was clad, overwhelmed everything around her, causing the breath of all who saw her to catch.

Her dancing raiment was a white kimono of thin, layered silk, under which she wore a *hakama* over her lower body. Wondrously, the bells sewn to the cuffs and hems of her garment had not yet made a single sound.

Her silver hair, which had been bound up with three ornate hairpins each embellished with a singular large bead, was so sleek that it could have been mistaken for silken thread, causing one to wonder if perhaps she herself was a product of a craftsman’s hand. It was a testament to how lacking she was in human presence.

As Irede’s heart entranced all present, only Xixu’s shifted from present to

past. He recalled how Sari had been when they'd first met. How among a crowd of people, she alone had appeared to be illuminated by moonlight.

The girl he had once thought beautiful was now his wife. It was enough to make him ruminate on the twists and turns of fate, and how dizzying they could be.

Taking no notice of the atmosphere, Sari extended her right arm forward. Then she spun one full rotation, appearing as though she were weightless, and smiled like a blossoming flower.

The hanging tension vanished, and sighs of admiration could be heard from all around.

Their sound delayed, the bells on her raiment rung, and the musicians began their performance.

And the maiden began her dance.

Though the stage was lit by firelight, the moonlight was far brighter. The woman who danced beneath the moon, her raiment, her hands—all of it caught the light and scattered it in every direction.

Music and atmosphere spread with her as the core. Her arms that stretched toward heaven, the hems of her clothing and sash that trailed through the air—all of it traced lines of beauty in their wake.



People watched, rapturous, as her small figure seemed to gain more presence with each circuit it made. The silent mania surged around the stage like a whirlpool, diffusing through the entire town. Fire burned in the spectators' eyes with each graceful arc of her outstretched arms and pale fingers.

It was as though everything were balanced upon the palm of her hand. Even knowing this, one desired the moment to continue forever.

"It's as though she stepped down from the heavens..."

Upon hearing the impassioned murmur slip from beside him, Xixu glanced at Riko. Only then did she seem to realize she'd spoken, quickly covering her mouth.

"My apologies. She seemed so ethereal that I..."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

It was inevitable that Sari appeared inhuman. After all, that was what she was.

All who were gathered here likely believed this to be a maiden's dance, dedicated to the god. But the truth was different. This dance was the god's message to humanity, that she had accepted her sacred offerings and that the old contract would be continued. That was why it only took place after Pale Moon's proprietress had taken her guest.

Sari danced, her pale feet using god's music as footing.

As though happy. As though expressing her love. As though she were a girl still possessing her innocence. As though she were a woman who knew and saw all.

These were the emotions the god gifted to humanity. Her boundless love rained upon the town like the moon shining in the sky.

"Beautiful..."

This maiden dance would be performed once a year until the daughter Irede's maiden birthed reached ten years of age.

In other words, each generation only saw approximately ten of these dances.

It was likely that period would be longer for the current generation, as Sari had mentioned it would take some time for her to conceive a child, but surely that would not extend to a second or third decade.

Thus, Xixu had to etch into his memory each and every one of her dances—because they themselves were her love.

What Xixu felt as he watched the maiden's dance was more akin to a comfortable ardor than intoxication, and eventually, he realized that the sound of music was gradually abating. One by one, the flutes, strings, and drums quietened and vanished.

All that was left were the bells sewn onto the maiden's raiment. And when Sari spun, stopped, and bent lightly at the knees, they, too, made their final sound.

Utter silence returned to the audience, and the tension of a divine ritual returned.

Yet Sari placed her right hand to her chest and extended her left out wide, eyes opening as she gave a brilliant smile. The audience was in immediate uproar, cheers of acclamation shaking the air.

Amidst the storm of applause, Sari performed a bow in each direction, finally looking toward Xixu in the east. She extended the right hand over her chest toward him, the love in her eyes plain for all to see.

All eyes followed the address meant only for her spouse, and whispers broke out everywhere. Now the target of smiles and gazes of curiosity and envy, Xixu held a hand over his mouth.

“How can I not feel embarrassment after that...?”

Sari's signal to him and him alone—completely bypassing the eyes of the audience—had been far too cute. It was as though she was asking him to praise her.

As he hid his unbidden smile, Sari waved her hand and descended from the stage. She and the musicians departed to thunderous praise.

Even after she was gone from sight, the interest of the audience members failed to cool, each turning to those nearby to exchange their thoughts of the performance. So thick was the enthusiasm that it seemed to choke the night air.

Xixu stood from his seat, intent on returning to his patrols. That was finally when he noticed the state Riko was in—and was surprised.

“Are you all right?”

At some point, her face had become pale, and she was holding her stomach. She must have noticed the maiden had made her departure, because she then folded over as though to protect her chest.

“I’m...fine. I just feel a little...under the weather...”

She looked anything but fine; there was a sheen of cold sweat upon her forehead. For a moment, Xixu wondered if it was because of his wife, but Sari wouldn’t do something like that.

Cykado looked flustered over the state of his mistress, but a serving courtesan promptly stopped by, having noticed. “It must have been the tension in the air,” she pronounced. “Come, this way. I’ll take you somewhere you can lie down.”

Riko staggered to her feet, taking the courtesan’s hand. She gave Xixu a weak smile. “I apologize for the unsightly display... The dance was wonderful to watch.”

“Thank you for inviting me to sit with you. Please take care of yourself.”

The girl smiled and nodded, then departed, supported by the courtesan. As Cykado hurriedly followed after them, the courtesan glanced back at Xixu. She wore more makeup than most courtesans—perhaps because she had been serving?—and the sight of her face triggered the faintest sense of déjà vu in him.

The courtesan gave Xixu a slight bow, and then the trio soon alighted the platform and vanished out of sight. Left behind amidst the excitement of the surrounding crowd, Xixu searched his memory for the source of the vague recollection the woman had triggered. Abruptly, he remembered the words his wife had said in the waiting room.

“Incidentally, Xixu, has a courtesan with a mole under her eye approached you recently?”

“Was that her just now...?”

Sari had also mentioned that he wasn't the one the woman was after, since he had no recollection of her. But what had driven her to ask such a question in the first place?

Xixu turned toward the courtesan house that held the waiting room. If he asked her, would Sari give him the details?

After a moment's indecision, he jumped off the platform and broke into a run.

7. Cage

Toward the end of the maiden's dance, Riko had suddenly begun to find breathing difficult.

Conscious of those around her, she had remained in her seat, but the farewell she'd given to His Highness before she'd made her departure had been a rushed one.

After that, she could recall as far as borrowing the hand of the woman who'd noticed her condition and entering a building.

But that was where her memories cut off.

"I wonder where I am..."

After waking, Riko examined her surroundings. She was in an empty, pitch-black room, dusty enough to almost make her cough. She realized that the suffocating pressure on her chest had completely vanished.

That was all well and good, but from the sensation, she was lying on bare wood. Why was she in a place like this?

"Cykado?"

No response. That was when Riko first noticed the cold weight around her left ankle. Groping around, she discerned that it was some manner of metal anklet.

"Now, what is this...?"

A chain appeared to be attached to the anklet, connecting it to a stake in the floor. It was about as long as Riko's arm, allowing her enough slack to stand, but not walk anywhere.

As she puzzled over her circumstances, a door opened and several men entered with a lamp. She could see their faces by its light, and none belonged to anybody she recognized. Their expressions were stern and unreadable, and the odd atmosphere caused Riko to freeze on the verge of opening her mouth.

One of the men held the lamp out toward Riko and examined her. "Yeah,

she's the girl."

Those words alone were enough for her to grasp her situation.

She had been abducted.

It was a common occurrence among those of the upper class, but Riko had never expected it to happen to her. She also hadn't revealed her identity to anybody in Irede except those she trusted, though given the current circumstances, if she were to be accused of being careless, she would have no reply to give.

Finally managing to curl her frozen fingers together, Riko asked in a fragile voice, "Is my attendant safe?"

She clenched her fists as the possibility of the worst flashed through her mind.

One of the men crouched beside Riko and set about unlocking her restraints. "We dumped him somewhere along the way," he stated. "It'll take him some time to get to town, but he probably won't die."

The man's answer provided Riko a measure of relief, along with two separate realizations.

Firstly, Cykado was safe. Secondly, she was no longer in Irede. She must have been carried somewhere while she was unconscious. In other words, salvation likely wasn't imminent.

The next important bit of information to figure out was whether or not her father would agree to the ransom demanded of him, but Riko had no doubt he would relinquish any amount for the sake of his daughter. She bit down hard on her lip.

She had wanted to be of help to her family and those who relied upon them, and yet she'd instead ended up becoming a burden. No amount of apology would be enough.

While Riko hung her head, one of the men removed her chain. After binding her arms behind her back, he grabbed them, forcing her to stand.

"All right. Time to go."

Riko exited the room surrounded by the three men—one in front and two to

her sides. They brought her through a short hallway and into a sizable room that resembled a storehouse. The several workbenches on the verge of decay standing at the edges of the space and a broken spinning wheel suggested this place was formerly a spinning mill.

There were another dozen or so men inside the room who appeared to be her captors' compatriots, as well as a number of girls bound like Riko and made to sit on old carpets placed away from the workbenches and spinning wheel. From their attire, they all seemed to be maidservants or employees of Irede's teahouses or courtesan houses.

"What? Why are they here...?" Kidnapping was an extremely risky crime for the perpetrators. It seemed absurd that they had also abducted several other girls besides herself.

As Riko stared, dumbfounded, the conversation of some of the men reached her ears.

"Aren't we still missing too many of us?"

"We can't get in contact with them. Time's up. We've no choice but to leave them behind."

"I suppose so... Oh, and the noble girl—is it okay to sell her off immediately?"

"No, I'm told she needs to be seen first. Then we'll sell her off in a country as far away as possible afterward."

Riko looked at the men in surprise. "Your objective isn't my ransom?"

She doubted a young girl like her would fetch much of a price. It would be far more profitable to ransom her as the relative of a man who had right of succession to the throne. At least, that had been what she'd believed until now.

The men exchanged glances. They neither laughed nor jeered at her, which belatedly made her begin to feel afraid.

"Usually, we only buy and sell," one of the men replied dispassionately. "We kidnapped you by request. What we do with you afterward is apparently at our discretion."

"Wh-What...?"

Human trafficking—it was a world unknown to Riko. She'd never even heard of such a thing happening among her family or people. When she spoke, her voice came out lifeless.

“But people can't just sell other people...”

“Sounds like you've lived a pretty blessed life, then.”

There was pity in the man's voice as he grabbed her arm and dragged her along, tossing her light form among the other girls—several of whom shrieked when Riko collided with them. After a brief apology, she shouted at the men, who had begun some manner of discussion.

“W-Wait! We can negotiate!”

Many of the young girls who worked in Irede had no family. They had come to the pleasure town each with their own set of circumstances, and most had no person they could turn to outside of Irede. Riko had learned this during her stay.

As such, she had to save them, no matter what it took.

“H-How much will you sell them for?” she asked desperately. “Could I buy them?”

“Young lady. Do you not understand the position you're in?”

As more of the men smiled, Riko went pale. She needed to think of what to do—to find a way out of this. But as she racked her brain, she suddenly heard a familiar voice from close by.

“Those who pervert good sense should not ridicule those who seek to stand by it.”

The voice had a sour note to it, and it came from beyond the door, which had been left cracked open.

Riko blanched. “Don't come! You can't!”

He had a higher place in the line of succession than she did. It would be a disaster if he were used to ill ends. Worse, he was the king's younger brother by blood. If anything happened to him, the king would surely grieve.

But despite Riko's warning, the door opened from the other side. A young man with a military sword at his hip entered the spacious room, his stride casual. He surveyed the interior and frowned.

"There are a lot of you."

No doubt he was referring to the men in the room. And was it any wonder? There were roughly twenty of them, and he was alone. Riko had heard that he was of considerable skill, and that some called him the sword that safeguarded the king, but even she knew enough of combat to know how difficult it was to overcome a disadvantage in numbers. While some of the girls around her looked relieved to see him, others looked worried.

However, the young man showed no sign of withdrawing. He simply breathed a deep sigh.

"I'd heard that human traffickers were staying in town, but now I see that the distinction between such individuals and kidnappers is but a matter of perspective." Xixu spit the words as though they were loathsome in his mouth, then looked over to Riko. "I'm sorry I'm late. I gave Cykado my horse so that he could return quicker."

"Th-Thank you!"

She supposed that Xixu had noticed her abduction and pursued her, only being delayed because he'd helped Cykado. As far as Riko was concerned, though, that was far more preferable. She had caused her attendant to come to harm because of her own rashness.

Xixu turned to the other men. "I suggest you release the girls and surrender yourselves."

"You'd be one of Irede's militiamen, then? Well, *we'd* suggest turning around and heading home. This isn't Irede, and you've nothing to gain by risking your life."

Lazily the men began to take up weapons. Fighting didn't seem to be their trade, but they exhibited no sign that they'd hesitate to hurt a person. The blood drained from Riko's face. She attempted to plead with Xixu to change his mind one more time.

“Um, please put your own safety first...”

“I see. You’re right. This isn’t Irede.”

“Are you witless?”

“No, I was simply told that when dealing with human traffickers in Irede, I wasn’t to leave any bodies, so there being so many of you was rather problematic. But now I’ve realized that likely won’t be an issue, since we aren’t in Irede.”

As the young man pondered to himself with a hand to his chin, he displayed no indication that he was joking. Still, the contents of his musings were so absurd that the men appeared dumbfounded. After several moments, they broke out into dry laughter.

“Ridiculous. Are you sane?”

“I would say so.”

The same moment he spoke, Xixu drew his sword.

The movement was so fast that the sound of clashing blades was already ringing in the air before Riko realized he had the weapon in hand. A kimono-clad man had appeared from the doorway and sliced his own sword downward toward Xixu, but the young man had swiftly turned and caught the blow. But then the newcomer recognized who he was fighting, and casually withdrew his blade.

“What, it’s just you?” he scoffed.

“In the future, I’d recommend confirming the identity of your opponent before swinging at them.”

“Any man in a place like this is no one anybody would miss. Did you leave the young miss behind?”

“I left her a message, but she’ll show no mercy for people like these, so I was hoping to clean up before she arrived.”

“I’ll agree with that sentiment. Her hands should be kept clean of dirty work.”

Riko watched the relaxed conversation between the pair—were they friends?

—in disbelief. Her thoughts couldn't keep up with what was happening. She could merely tell the atmosphere had shifted through the way the air felt against her skin.

The traffickers must have sensed the change in mood as well, because they seemed to briefly hesitate. But one soon drew his sword.

“Who are you two?”

The speaker of the question hadn't been able to conceal his intimidation. The newcomer smiled scornfully.

“Shadeslayers of the town of myth. It's been boring lately, since there've barely been any shades around. You'll do your best to entertain us, won't you?”

What followed could hardly even be called a battle.

The men they were facing off against made their livings by abducting people and selling them off. Given their occupation, they seemed familiar with combat, but they were still no match for shadeslayers of Irede. Xixu and Tagi cut them down as they came, dividing the work.

“I haven't seen you around recently,” Xixu remarked as they fought. “Were you pursuing these men?”

“Wouldn't go that far. Just thought the appearance of regular shades meant there were a group of ill-natured folks around. Had trouble getting them to show their true colors, though.”

“They laid in wait for the festival?”

“With things busier than usual, a maidservant disappearing wouldn't stir up a fuss right away. I figured if they were going to do something, it would be today. I asked where their meeting place was as I worked through them one by one.”

Tagi flicked back a sword being swung at him and kicked the man in the pit of his stomach. He slammed into another man behind him and crumpled to the ground. The shadeslayer then stepped forward and cut down the man still staggering from the collision. As fresh blood scattered throughout the dark storehouse, Xixu turned his thoughts toward the eyes of the captured girls.

That he'd been able to pursue them this far was entirely thanks to Cykado. Though he'd been quick to chase after Riko after she'd fallen ill, he'd just as quickly lost her. But when he'd heard that a person he suspected was Cykado had hurriedly purchased a horse and left town, he'd followed after him.

The attendant had pursued the human traffickers' carriage, but had been badly beaten and left by the roadside. He had, however, mustered enough awareness to track the direction the carriage had departed in. After Xixu had discovered him, he'd gone searching for the carriage—which had gone off the highway—and eventually arrived at this abandoned workshop. His experience as an officer had told him that human traffickers often used places such as these as rendezvous points.

As he and Tagi fought, Riko was calling out instructions to the other girls and getting them all to huddle together—a testament to her courage. She was likely trying to save the girls from seeing the gruesome slaughter. Remaining huddled where they were was also far safer than drawing their abductors' attention with a clumsy attempt at escape or by freeing themselves from their restraints. He and Tagi could rescue them once the traffickers were all dead.

While the fight had proceeded, however, their opponents had evidently realized that they weren't going to be able to brute force the issue with numbers. Now down to roughly half their original number, they backed off and exchanged looks, breaking out into whispered conversation.

"Hey. What do we do?"

"Our contact should arrive at the prearranged time. Along with guards."

"Your contact?" Xixu called out.

Riko was quick to explain. "They told me someone hired them to abduct me! That's probably who they mean!"

"Ah, I see."

So they weren't simply kidnappers, but hired hands too. And if their employer had guards, they had to be someone of some influence.

As Xixu checked over the girls again, his eyes widened in surprise. His wife had touched against his extended senses. With no delay, he turned to Tagi.

“How many more do we have to kill before you can handle the rest alone?”

“You can leave now if you want. Stop the young miss, would you? Otherwise this’ll get bothersome.”

“While I’d like to agree with that, I’m afraid I’m weak when it comes to her. I probably won’t be able to.”

“Show *some* willingness to take the reins, won’t you? At this rate, you’ll make me think you actually *want* to be with her for life.”

“I can try to stop her, but it’s her right to walk past me if she wishes.”

Riko and the other girls were to the left side of the room from where Xixu was standing. If he and Tagi could position themselves so they had their backs to them, the latter would likely be able to handle the rest.

Suddenly, one of the men broke into a dash toward the girls. Evidently, he planned on taking a hostage. But before his outstretched hand could reach anyone, it was pierced by Tagi’s throwing knife. At the same time, Xixu’s needle penetrated the man’s right eye.

“*Gah!*”

Once Tagi witnessed the way the man screamed and flinched, he shot Xixu an incredulous look. “That’s some accuracy.”

“I used to practice so I could hit flying shades.” And now, he was capable of so much more. Xixu gestured toward the men standing at a distance. “I’ll cut those ones down, from left to right. I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

In place of an answer, Xixu took a large stride forward. He’d still need to take a dozen more until he reached the men—but he had no need to close the distance.

He ran divine power along his sword.

The sharpened blade crackled with the sound of frozen essence. The path it drew through the air could even have been described as beautiful, and the power it released...

It became a blade of its own, flashing out and cutting through the workshop along with the flesh of those before him.



Selaria had wanted to see the ocean for a long time. Up until she was seventeen, it had been her constant desire.

She'd been born and raised in a town by the seaside. But before she'd even turned ten, she'd been abducted. Ever since, she'd struggled to survive each day, always wanting to go home.

Though she had been sold to a courtesan house at fourteen, Selaria had considered it a relatively fair place. If she pleased the customers, the amount she earned for herself increased. It was only when she'd learned that she could buy herself out for the amount the courtesan house had paid for her that the notion of returning home first began to seem real.

Thus Selaria had learned how to smile, studied culture, and begun to observe those around her.

Her effort had been rewarded with results. The amount of customers who'd sought her out had steadily increased, and so, too, had her savings.

Eventually, she'd become a fully-fledged courtesan of the house, with customers making reservations three months in advance to see her. Her name had become well-known in the area, and she had seen more customers of status. She'd also been met with envy and harassment from other courtesans, but she'd paid them no mind at all.

A little more, and she would be able to purchase her freedom. She would be able to go home. She would once again be able to see the ocean.

Just as she had begun to think that, a certain nobleman purchased her from the courtesan house. What was more, it had been for a price that her seventeen-year-old self would never be able to save, no matter how hard she tried.

That was when Selaria had broken. So utterly that she no longer clung to wishes such as wanting to see the ocean.

That was why she only remembered it occasionally now, like bubbles floating up from the deep-sea floor.

The smothering scent of the tide.

The place where the sunlight was scorching during the day and the waves roared thunderously during the night.

Her hometown, now so far away. How dearly she wanted to see it again, just once more.

The abandoned spinning mill in the woods had the remnants of a children's play area in the clearing to the rear.

A large spinning wheel, wooden bench, and stone table for spinning tops sat covered in the dust of disuse. Children must have once played there while their parents were at work.

As Selaria sat upon the rotting wooden bench beneath the moonlight, she wondered if the children who had been raised here held this scenery in the depths of their memory.

Where had she played, when she'd been a child? Had it been by the rock pools, where the ocean met stone?

She broke from her absent-minded reminiscence at the sound of multiple footsteps approaching.

A nobleman she knew well—her *owner*—stopped at the other side of the hedge with four guards in tow.

"Selaria. Is the job done?"

She nodded lethargically.

Hand Riko Roloris, the girl who had come to Irede for leisure, over to the human traffickers—that had been the job she'd been tasked with.

She'd been told to make it seem as natural as possible, as though it were nothing more than a young noblewoman disappearing after losing herself to debauchery. Thus, when Selaria had learned that Riko had purchased seats to the maiden's dance, she'd decided to act on the day of the festival. Through her

connections with several guests, she had gained herself a position as a server in the same area.

She had then drugged Riko's tea and led her away when it had taken effect. It had been that easy. Part of her wondered why she had been chosen for such a simple task, but that was likely because of the additional objective.

"What about the king's brother?"

"It couldn't be done," Selaria said, speaking the words as though casting them away.

The secondary reason she'd been chosen for the task of Riko's abduction was so she could ensnare the king's younger brother, but the shadeslayer had not—and would not—even spare her a glance. Selaria had realized that after meeting him just once. He'd had no openings she could take advantage of.

What was more, he was apparently the guest of the town's sole maiden. Pursuing him too persistently held the possibility of drawing the ire of all of Irede. So she had given up as easily as that, deciding to leave once Riko had been abducted.

Disappointment flashed in the man's eyes. "I had hoped for better."

"The drug didn't work. What else could I have done?"

The shadeslayer had consumed the same drugged tea Riko had, but it had had no effect, leaving Selaria with no cards left to play. Besides, she had accomplished her main objective, hadn't she?

"It's finished now, isn't it? I'm going back."

Not to the ocean, but to the capital. There, her cage—ever so small—awaited. One with no key.

As she rose to her feet, the man pierced her with a cold look. "Do you think I'll overlook that attitude of yours? Surely you know who your owner is. Or do you want to be sold off again?"

Selaria's breath caught in her throat. The words sent ice through her heart.

After the man had bought her, she had ceased to be a simple courtesan. She had been used to trap political opponents, crush competitors, and win favor

with influential allies. Each time, she had produced better results than expected of her. The number of those that she had helped to ruin was by no means small.

While part of her wondered if she deserved such a harsh reprimand for a single lackluster result, Selaria's withered heart and fatigue won out over her will to rebel.

"No, I don't..."

Selaria cast her gaze down. Her eyes fell upon the hem of her own light purple kimono. It had been a gift from a guest; he'd told her he'd thought it would suit her. He'd embarrassedly admitted that it wasn't expensive in the slightest, but she'd thought the butterflies embroidered in silver thread were beautiful.

Now that she was thinking about it, Irede truly was a strange town. From the proprietors of the businesses, to the courtesans and even the customers, there was a gentle air about its people, something that felt relaxing to be around, yet refreshing. They did not pry when it came to the circumstances of others and sought not to control or be controlled, but to enjoy conversation with like-minded partners with whom they could share a bed. If that was freedom, then perhaps the woman she'd met by the canal had been right.

Selaria felt irritated that she had come to accept such an atmosphere as a matter of course simply by spending time in the town. It angered her that it, too, was a place that sold the nights of women, yet was so different from her own cage.

It was why she'd decided to return. To the cage that protected her, where the light did not shine and the scents were cloying.

As she remained silent and still, the man seemed to lose interest. "Return to the carriage. We're leaving once I've confirmed it's her."

"As you wish."

Gaze still downcast, Selaria made to leave the clearing. Then, a third voice made itself known.

"And what right do you have, to speak to a courtesan of Irede as though she were your possession?"

The voice resembled a shard of ice tucked in silk, and from the words, was directed at the nobleman. He turned, scowling, to see that a single woman had at some point appeared from amidst the trees.

She wore a plain, white *yukata*, and her silver hair was down. Though she possessed no lamp, she appeared as though clad in soft moonlight, and her heavy stage makeup made her identity immediately apparent. Belatedly, Selaria realized that the woman she had spoken to by the canal and the maiden who'd performed the dance were the same person.

The nobleman examined the maiden with suspicion. "That attire—are you a resident of Irede? Why are you here? Did you escape from the traffickers?"

Selaria knew that she had not. She hadn't been one of the girls who were taken.

The maiden of the town of myth, purveyor of the sacred offering of warmth, inclined her head slightly to the side. "I'm asking the questions."

Her voice was quiet. Yet it harbored an authority that would quell any who heard it.

Selaria could sense that the nobleman was afraid. But the response he gave was full of the pretense that he had no fear.

"This woman *is* my possession."

"Yours?"

Delicate lips shifted into a smile. The maiden replied to the man's words with faint scorn and disdain. He seemed to understand this, because his expression became harsher.

"What is it you're trying to say, little girl?"

"It appears this conversation is beyond you. I shall ask another."

The maiden's gaze moved to Selaria.

Those blue eyes—this marked the second time they had looked at her. They were piercing, as though they could shine a light into one's deepest crevices and read the thoughts that lay there.

“Why would a courtesan of Irede side with such a rude outsider?” asked the woman whom the eyes belonged to.

The question descended as though from a lofty existence on high, seeking an answer from something small and unmoving on the ground. It held no condemnation or censure, simply a lack of understanding.

How could she respond to such purity?

Selaria’s mouth opened, but she was still searching for the words. She could hear the man’s angered voice, but his words didn’t register in her mind. It was as though the maiden’s existence was preventing all unnecessary noise from reaching her.

After some hesitation, the answer she found was simple.

“Because...he’ll reward me.”

Yes. If nothing else, she was always rewarded. Enough that she could purchase anything she wanted.

That was the loosely fitting collar the man had fitted her with. She could do whatever she wanted, so long it was within her cage.

There was no other reason for her to actively obey the man’s commands. And so Selaria embellished the only one she had found.

“I’m doing it for the money. I’m not like you people of Irede. There are some things only hard currency can buy.”

Once, those things had included Selaria herself.

But...did that statement truly still apply to her? She had long since collected more than the first price she had been bought for. The price she had been sold for at seventeen too.

So why was she still in her cage?

It was simple. Because she knew she would never be free.

Someone of Irede wouldn’t be able to understand. Not them, not the women who were allowed to be free.

However, the maiden easily agreed with her answer, as though it were a

matter of course. “I see. Money *is* important.”

Selaria’s breath hitched. The simple agreement sent blood rushing to her head. Heat stuck in her throat and became words.

“Wh-What would you know?!” She had not raised her voice so loudly in years. Even she recognized how tight it was. Nevertheless, she disregarded it and continued, “How could a person of Irede ever understand?! You’re free to live as you please!”

“Irede’s courtesans are the same. Money is the main reason most of them do what they do.”

“Then... Then why—?!”

Then why was she the only one who suffered? The only one who was not saved?

Hope had been a companion to Selaria more than once, ever since she’d been abducted. But it had always vanished just as she thought she might reach it. Stolen away.

So didn’t that mean there was nothing else she could do? That a life in her cage was her only choice?

Her legs shook. She wanted to say something, but she couldn’t.

She clenched her fist...and was assaulted by a wave of fatigue she couldn’t fight off. The strength drained from her body, and she became unable to face forward. Her head drooped and she stared at her feet. Dimly, she was aware of the hem of the kimono she liked in the field of her vision. Her movements stilled, as though she were a broken doll.

The maiden loosed a deep sigh. “Perhaps you don’t understand since it hasn’t been long since you came to Irede, but every courtesan is there because they are after something they desire, whether that be money, love, or reputation. They are no different at all from you.”

Selaria did not reply.

“All of them are Irede’s flowers, as well as its light. That is why I wish for them to be free. Because as long as they are, the town can show me the beauty of the

world of man.”

The maiden’s resonant voice pierced cleanly through Selaria’s ears.

She did not raise her head. Neither did she move.

There had been something she’d wanted, once. Now, she didn’t know. There was no point in thinking about it.

Because even though she wanted to see the ocean, as the person she was now, she would never be able to be a part of that scenery again.

After Selaria had fallen silent and unmoving, the nobleman scoffed coldly.

“What an utter farce. Seize her.”

As his guards began to move, Sari examined them with emotionless eyes. “And what will you do once they’ve seized me?”

“Sell you to whatever buyer wants you. If you want to return to Irede, you can earn your way back with your own body.”

“Was that what you said to her too?”

The man’s lack of response was equal to an affirmation.

Sari knew that there were people who sought to control others like the man had done. They dangled the hope of freedom over their victims and manipulated them using their desperation, stealing that which they desired most away once it was before their very eyes. Then they repeated the process in order to crush their victim’s hearts, instilling obedience in them akin to that which developed in a repeatedly beaten child until they’d extinguished any hope they’d had of escaping.

It was a detestable methodology.

As Sari watched the guards draw closer, she exhaled a frozen breath. “Unfortunately, I’ve come here in pursuit of my husband.”

“What nonsense are you spouting?”

“As such, I suspect it will be impossible for you to lay a finger on me.”

The same moment she spoke those words, the workshop behind the men was

blown in half.

Sari had told Xixu that he was capable of easily breaking a person into tiny pieces, but experiencing the truth for himself was still rather gruesome.

He had intended to hold back so as to not leave the remains of his opponents diced too fine, but he'd ended up blowing away half of the workshop from wall to ceiling.

Xixu dashed away, leaving the rest to Tagi without sparing the other shadeslayer a glance, and spotted the men behind the workshop beyond the former wall. As they turned in shock, he saw Sari standing beyond them. She smiled and waved at him.

"Sorry I'm late. I had to take off my dancing raiment."

"I didn't expect you to get here so fast..."

"But I can hop over just like that. You know I can, especially when it's close to you."

That was indeed right, but Xixu had hoped she would remain quietly in town and not make a fuss. He ran between the men, ignoring them, and turned, putting his wife at his back.

"So you're the employer?"

Standing before him was a man in expensive-seeming attire and four guards. Upon seeing Xixu's face, the man clicked his tongue, as though to say the circumstances had only now become troublesome for him. At the same time, Xixu recognized who he was.

"Duke Marborough."

"Someone you know?"

"He's in line for the throne too, though he's farther away from it than Young Lady Roloris."

"Ahh. So he had her abducted to sell her off and take her out of the picture."

"I drank the same tea she did, but it had no effect."

“That’s because it was a drug meant for humans.”

“I see. Makes sense.”

Xixu had thought that perhaps only Riko’s tea had been drugged, but evidently what he’d drunk had just proven ineffective.

The duke, his identity revealed, grimaced cynically—though there was an air of tension about him too. “I appreciate you coming here of your own volition. I was just thinking I had business with you.”

“Is it better if we leave him alive, Xixu?” Sari asked, ignoring the man.

Xixu considered it for a moment. “I don’t think there’d be any issue with killing him, but it’s not my place to make such political judgments.”

“Right. I figured as much.”

“Still, a person who engages in activities such as these is likely to do so again if left alone. It would be best to dispose of him now.”

“I love that merciless part of you.”

Hearing that striking statement from his wife made Xixu question his own principles for a moment, but leaving a man such as this alive and in possession of power would only result in more victims. Disposing of him would be a boon to His Majesty too; lessening the amount of domestic strife was surely a good thing.

Behind him, Sari giggled. “Meeting with the traffickers in a place like this must mean he didn’t want any record of him visiting Irede. It’s convenient for us too. We can have him disappear somewhere with no connection to us.”

The man’s face stiffened at the gently delivered proclamation. “Violent, as befitting of a former military man. In that case, I shall have to respond appropriately.”

“Huh? The methods you’ve used have been more than enough already. All that’s left now is for us to pay you back.”

“Please step back, Saridi.”

Sari retreated several steps in reply as Xixu advanced, parrying the guard’s

sword that had come at him to the side. He used the man's staggering form as a shield as he evaded the second guard's blade, then slammed his elbow into the first guard's solar plexus.

He left the man to crumble and advanced again.

The third guard had a considerable degree of skill. Xixu caught his sharp, irregular thrust on the guard of his blade. He locked his opponent's sword with his hilt and pulled it closer.

Having been thrown off-balance, the man stumbled, leaving an opening—an action equal to discarding his life.

The fourth guard watched, dumbfounded as Xixu cut down the second and third guards in succession. Now the only one remaining, he shot his employer a single glance before turning tail and fleeing into the trees.

Sari pointed at his retreating figure.

“Bind.”

The man released a short scream and crumpled.

His guards gone, the nobleman looked to the workshop behind him as though to seek aid. But nobody emerged. Selaria remained still where she stood.

Sari's deep crimson lips drew into a smile. “It seems you're operating under a misunderstanding, so allow me to tell you one last thing.”

Beneath the moonlight, the woman who was a god whispered in a voice that carried both arrogance and beauty. The earth beneath her feet began to crackle and freeze over. It spread in an area around her, seizing the man from underfoot.

From toes to feet, from thighs to waist, the man stared down at the frost creeping up his body in dismay. “Wh-What is this?!”

He struggled as though to escape, but his frozen legs were no longer capable of moving. Sari's bearing was gentle as she made her proclamation.

“Irede's courtesans are not yours to own. Everything in that town belongs to me.”

Selaria jerked and looked up at Sari.

The words were a rebuke for human impudence. But they were not a lesson, for there would be no second opportunity.

“H-Help m—”

As the man froze over, the god’s final words were wreathed in an ethereal beauty.

“So don’t be so quick to lay a hand on them, ignorant fool.”

His death throes lacked any screams.

The thin layer of ice closed around the man’s body, its position still twisted as though attempting to flee.

It was a showier way of using her power than usual, but that was likely evidence for how greatly the man had angered her. Xixu approached the ice sculpture, sword still in hand. Likely because of the limitation on Sari’s power, the man was still faintly breathing within the ice, but it would only be a matter of time before he died.

Having discerned that, Xixu thrust his sword into the man’s chest. The blade, clad in the same power, passed through the thin ice smoothly and formed a blossoming flower the color of blood. Yet that, too, froze before it could spread.

Sari closed her luminescent blue eyes and smiled wryly.

“Sorry, Xixu. Thanks.”

“It’s always been my job.”

Xixu turned to the courtesan, who still stood frozen in place.

Despite the otherworldly circumstances, Selaria’s eyes were not focused on the man who had become an ice sculpture, but on Sari, gazing at her in wonderment.

It was as though she had found a single light in a world of boundless darkness.

They were the eyes of a lost girl who was a long way from home.

8. Ties

The majority of the cleanup consisted of the disposal of the trafficker's corpses.

After being rescued by Xixu, Cykado had gone to the militia to report what had happened, and an escort for the abducted girls had arrived posthaste. As such, after they had been left to the militia, the bodies were all that remained.

"Are we not going to bury them?"

"The thing with corpses is that you have to bury them deep, or animals will dig them up. Are you planning on making an entire cemetery, with this many on our hands? That's some energy you've got."

Standing before the collection of over twenty corpses, Tagi sounded incredulous. Sari affixed the shadeslayer with a cool look.

"You were just as enthusiastic when it came to killing them. I hope you didn't leave any corpses lying around town."

"It's fine, I made arrangements. There are some people in this world who have a need of dead bodies."

Tagi spoke no lie; as the militia departed, two mysterious men arrived in a large carriage. After silently stuffing the corpses into bags and piling them into their carriage, they departed.

"See? What did I tell you?" Tagi said, puffing his chest out in pride.

"Do keep it in moderation," Sari warned.

"I don't want to hear that from *you*."

The one corpse that could not be given over had been dealt with by Sari before Tagi had seen it. She'd simply shattered it to powder on the spot. The nobleman would be regarded as a missing person, and the truth would only be shared with the king.

Xixu had pondered over what to do with the two surviving guards, but had

settled on handing them over to Thoma, who'd come late. The man sent them to the Werrilocia, stating that since the affair had involved a conflict over the right of succession, Fyra would do a clean job of disposing of them. Xixu considered the hidden depths of his wife's blood family rather terrifying.

Evidently, the Werrilocia family's continued status as nobility throughout the rise and fall of the nations it had belonged to was a result of its manipulation of information and activities carried out from behind closed doors. Perhaps the disappeared nobleman's possessions and assets would find themselves gradually absorbed into the Werrilocia family in the future.

Once everything was taken care of, there was still the festival cleanup to see to, so they finally returned to Irede.

Xixu assisted with the disassembling of the stage as a member of the militia, and by the time he returned to the annex in which his wife resided, it was past midnight. She must have been exhausted, as she appeared to have fallen asleep while waiting for him. There was peace in her sleeping expression, however, and Xixu hoped that she had enjoyed the day's festival, even if only a little.

Irede was her precious garden, and it was his duty to safeguard it.



"You have my sincerest apologies for the trouble I've caused."

Such were the words out of Riko's mouth as she bowed deeply after having stopped by Pale Moon the next morning.

Xixu and Sari faced her in the parlor. Though the latter was the proprietress, she had ceded the lead of this matter to her husband, so she simply smiled and said, "Don't worry about it."

Xixu performed a bow of his own. "I only acted as befitting of my duties. Rather, I should be apologizing for causing a guest to suffer such an unpleasant experience."

"No, it was due to my own carelessness. It seems I let myself get too carried away despite not having any guards with me. From hereon, I will take care to act in a manner more appropriate to my position."

“That is reassuring to hear. Regarding the employer of the men who abducted you—”

“I don’t know a thing. I’m sure they just found themselves attracted to a debauched young lady who was too free with her money.”

Xixu had been about to request her silence, but upon hearing her unhesitating answer, simply nodded.

While some matters were best brought to light, others were best kept a secret—and the latter could be dealt with simply and quietly. That which was left in the dark often faced a harsher response, which was why it would do humanity good to remember their fear. For this town belonged to a god.

“You may already be aware, but I intend on maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with Irede after I return home.”

“I’m grateful to hear that.”

Unable to think of any pleasantries to say, Xixu simply settled on what came to mind. Perhaps it had been odd, because beside him, his wife’s expression softened. Riko had described Sari’s beauty as heavenly during the maiden’s dance, and that otherworldly air seemed to be drawing her attention even at this moment.

Having noticed, Sari graced Riko with a smile. Her lips parted, each small gesture she made radiant. “I understand you have a good eye for things of beauty. We look forward to your continued patronage. Partners such as yourself are an irreplaceable source of aid for Irede, and it is our intention to fully repay your kindness in turn.”

After inhaling a small breath, Riko bowed. “Thank you.”

In other words, Irede had chosen to establish ties with Riko, bringing to the table the many connections it possessed. In exchange, it would expect her to continue to be a good patron, making use of her aesthetic sense. It was a rather strict condition, but Riko certainly had the mettle to meet the challenge.

The girl and her attendant departed after repeated expressions of their gratitude, stating that they would return in a year for the next maiden’s dance.

As Xixu saw them off from Pale Moon's front gate, he asked a question of his wife by his side.

"What happened to that courtesan?"

He was referring to the woman who had assimilated herself into the town under orders from the nobleman who had been involved in Riko's abduction. From what he'd heard, she had left Irede after exchanging farewells with her courtesan house and guests. Tagi hadn't raised any complaints about that, which was a surprise. Did Sari know what her destination was?

The sun was still high in the sky. Sari looked up at her husband as though he was dazzling to her eyes. "I couldn't say. I wonder where she went too."

"So you don't know either?"

"Mmm. I suspect she doesn't know herself. She didn't seem accustomed to freedom."

When suddenly given freedom, what would the woman who had always been somebody's possession do? Where would she go?

Xixu didn't know. Neither did he attempt to guess; he hardly knew the woman.

Instead, he thought of the wife with whom he would spend his life in this town.

"Incidentally, Saridi. Is there anywhere far away you'd like to go?"

"Huh? Me?"

Blue eyes widened. The question must have taken her by surprise, because she tilted her head from side to side. The gesture was adorable; it resembled that of a little girl. Xixu felt himself smile at the sight, but he hid it with his hand.

After some thought, Sari smiled slightly. "I can't really think of anywhere. I love this town, after all."

"I see."

"And you're here with me too."

She nestled against him happily, her unadorned love proudly on display.

There was no trace of falsehood in her—just sincerity.

Once, after he had met her for the first time, Xixu had asked her if her way of life, bound by this town and her duty, was but a one-sided sacrifice on her part. Though she had still been a girl, she had told him that she still didn't know herself, so she had never been envious of others. She had given him the truth, no doubt, but now Xixu thought that it was he that hadn't known her.

Sari's love for this town of myth was overflowing in its depth. If she had the entirety of existence at her fingertips, she would still choose to be here. It was a testament to how much she cherished humanity.

The princess who resided in god's garden clapped her hands together, innocence in her eyes. "Oh, but if there's anywhere you want to go, I'll come along. Would you like to see the ocean?"

"I already have once, when I was on a mission."

Perhaps it was because he'd gone as part of his duties, but it hadn't left any particular impression on him. For those who had grown up by the ocean, though, he imagined the powerful scent of the tides and howling roar of the sea would remain a foundational memory throughout their entire lives.

As he reflected on such thoughts, Sari took his hand. "You always come first, my husband. So please stay by my side forever, okay?"

The hand with which she held his so tightly was itself an expression of her affection. She cherished this town more than anybody else. And beyond all of that, she loved him.

It was a greater blessing than he deserved. In a town adorned with all manner of flowers and delights, she was the only flower he loved.

He would live the rest of his life for her sake. This, he could declare with confidence.

Xixu returned her delicate grip on his hand. "Don't worry. I won't ever leave you alone."

Even if the time he offered her were to extend to eternity, he would continue to be by her side. That was the only emotion he could give her. Sincerely,

earnestly, unchanging.

His simple answer caused Sari to exclaim in delight and throw herself at him. His wife, so full of life as always, was in high spirits as she spoke.

“Come to think of it, how was my dance? I haven’t asked your thoughts yet.”

“It was wonderful. You were lovely to watch.”

“Really?! Thank you! I’ll do my best next year too!”

“I look forward to it.”

Next year and the year after that, until the day death did them part.

It was his dearest wish that such a day would not be until far into the future.

For this love of his was worth the offering of his entire life.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up *A Pale Moon Reverie* Volume 3. This is Kuji Furumiya.

This volume marks the conclusion to the tale of marriage between two worlds, set upon the stage of a town of myth. You have my sincerest gratitude for accompanying me along this detour-filled story of a courtesan receiving her guest. Given the natures of our two leads, I'm sure they'll find themselves dragged into more trouble—or even become the source of it—in the future, but I would be happy if you considered their story to be at a period of peace, for the time being.

This volume contained the Fifth Tale, depicting the final guest-taking ceremony, but you may have noticed that I filled the remaining half with new material. I would be glad if you found enjoyment in the goings-on of the town during peaceful times.

Furthermore, DRE COMICS is currently publishing the manga version of *A Pale Moon Reverie* online. It's a wonderful opportunity to see Mishiro Orishima-sensei's detailed depictions of the story's charm—as well as the characters' airheaded moments! Please check it out! The first volume of the manga is slated to release just after this third volume.

Now, to express my gratitude.

To my editor, I am deeply grateful to you for keeping me company throughout this exceedingly difficult to work on series since the first day you reached out to me about it. Words cannot express the extent of my gratitude for the fact that you never abandoned me and worked together with me to create this story. Thank you. I'm sorry for starting out with such an outrageous publication manuscript and continuously requesting unreasonable things. I would like to repay all the virtuous goodwill you've accumulated with me at the next opportunity I get. Please call me if you ever need another pair of hands for anything.

Next, to Teruko Arai-sensei, thank you for the gorgeous book cover design. I recall requesting while working on the first volume for the character designs to include the transformation of the heroine from a sixteen-year-old girl to an adult on the verge of eighteen, but seeing this third volume fills me with gratitude at seeing how above and beyond you went in crafting the beauty of that depiction. The book cover design is something straight out of myth, and I am so lucky to have received it. Thank you.

To everyone involved in the sales, marketing, production, distribution, and more, thank you. It's thanks to you that this book is able to get to the readers! I am truly in your debt!

Finally, to the readers, I thank you sincerely for the favor you've shown to the town of myth.

I would be overjoyed if this tale of marriage was able to add a little color to your hearts.

Until we meet again, in some other time, in some other place.

Thank you very much!

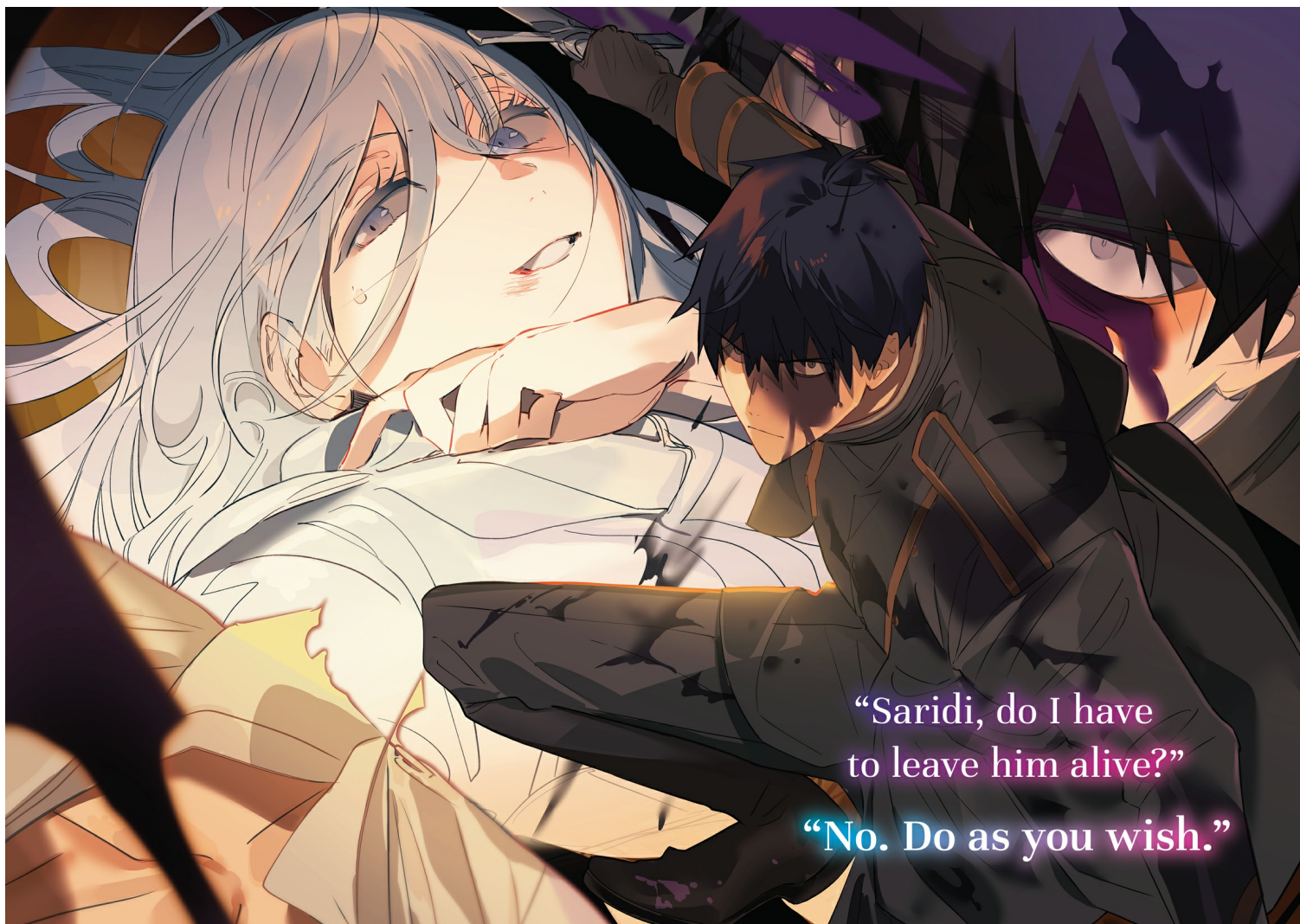
Kuji Furumiya



A Pale Moon Reverie

3

KUJI FURUMIYA
Illustration: TERUKO ARAI



“Saridi, do I have
to leave him alive?”

“No. Do as you wish.”



Her delicate form rose and she smoothly took one step forward, her feet bare. She made no sound. All that accompanied her movements were the bells.

Then, she began her dance—a dance for one man alone.







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A Pale Moon Reverie: Volume 3

by Kuji Furumiya

Translated by Jason Li Edited by Stacy Stiles

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