

Moonlight Rendezvous:

A Xiaolumi Digital Zine



Table of Contents

<i>Invitation to Mundane Life</i> • littledewdrops	6
<i>Through Gold and Flowers</i> • Lacryimosa	17
<i>Say You'll Remember Me</i> • luminyas	24
<i>Falling Asleep</i> • SucreLune	32
<i>Where I Cannot Follow</i> • Liliputianbelle	41
<i>Only the Night</i> • Berry	47
<i>A Cup of Moon</i> • ahocrowregi	53
<i>Kaua'i 'ō'ō</i> • Mythicamagic	60
<i>Truths Carried in the Wind</i> • MusaStyle	69
<i>Bewitched</i> • Noelle_1230	76
<i>Dawn</i> • youraquari	84
<i>Of Dreams and Sleepless Nights</i> • Shay Altair	90

Kathiemnq	4
Gizelle	5
Reganight	12
Fau	16
Hydra_glenn	22
Mitcheu	23
Crolynx	30
Chromic7sky	37
Yenii Huenii	38
Scifur	40
Nym	46
Savberries	51
Peatchoune	52
Krisi Chiki	59
Vanillart_	66
Giupear	68
Meiji	74
Peatchoune (cover)	81
Starmvenus	82
Zeetingdraws	83
Mouyiyiyiyi	88
Shirotama	89





Invitation to Mundane Life

By littledewdrops

IT WAS MOMENTS LIKE THESE when she had a temporary reprieve to the life of a wanderer constantly in search of truths, of any clues about her brother's whereabouts.

Lost between the light of the moon illuminating Xiao's features and the golden leaves that brushed past them against the roof of Wangshu Inn, she had almost forgotten about the reason for her journey; forgotten that she was in search of something because there was someone else by her side that made her feel content.

But there was a difference between contentment and satisfaction.

The bliss of clarity for one.

And perhaps, like any truth seeker, it was that very thing that drove her to tread lines they've never ventured.

In the wake of the festivities, when the noise under the Inn below them had gradually died down, when there was nothing but the light of the Xiao Lanterns and evening breeze to keep them company, Lumine spent the most intimate hours with Xiao.

The illuminated beast laid beside her with his eyes closed, looking every bit as ethereal as the ancient paintings of Liyue, and yet, she knew that this air of tranquility was rather volatile, easily destroyed by the first sound of danger among Guili Plains. After all, Xiao was always up on guard, ready to strike and purge as if it were something of his nature.

But up here, beside her, he breathed slow and deep. Her mere presence vanquished the karma that he carried.

If Zhongli were here, he would tell her to make the most out of this moment, that it's a rarity for the Conqueror of Demons to look like a picture of serenity. She wondered if in hearing that, Xiao would return to his usual rigid self, either bashful, unused to such remarks, or cold; because he's always been so quick to draw the line between them, careful of tainting her light with the blood on his hands and the curse that he carries.

She also wondered if he knew that she didn't normally sit this close to a person. That despite how everyone had the tendency to gravitate towards the Traveler, she'd never truly *pulled* them into her orbit, threatening a collision among worlds and a light so bright it puts supernovas to shame.

If she moved barely an inch, their fingers would brush against each other. She could convey things that could only be translated through warmth. And yet by some unspoken rule, it was a distance neither of them had ever trespassed.

She traveled countries, climbed mountains, crossed seas—

'How silly,' Lumine chided herself. For her to stop at this. For this small of a distance to be the very place she cannot explore.

And yet, she dared to.

Lumine reached out to pick up the leaf sticking out from his hair —*golden and out of place, much like her*— and brought it to her lips like a silent prayer, before tearing her eyes away from his figure, lest it affect the small burst of courage that pushed her to speak.

“Xiao,” she called his name and she wondered if he liked the sound of it in her voice as much as she yearned to hear her name escape his lips.

His eyes fluttered open.

Like a butterfly's wings, somewhere within her chest, there was destruction in its wake. Though perhaps she was the true harbinger, for she continued to speak nonetheless, breaking the fragile comfort found in their silence, if only to ask—

“What if I'm in love with you?”

The mere question struck him like a whip. Lumine had seen it in the way he jolted forward, shoulders tensed, eyebrows furrowed. There were a million of emotions she couldn't dare to comprehend flickering through his eyes.

Something lodged itself in his throat, and he only managed to cough it out, voice throaty and low, “What do you mean by that?”

It's a genuine question but Xiao was looking at her as if she had just sent him off to battle dead gods and lingering ghosts.

She was familiar with the mask he wore. It was of a warrior ready for battle. Pupils morphed into slits, amber eyes observing and reading through their opponent's movement.

She used to think she only caught a glimpse of this side of him whenever they spar—a memory of those days when he refused to let her get any closer than she has, flickered through her head— but his gaze is even more intense in this moment.

He looked like a beast that could devour her whole, rip through her chest and shred the remnants of her fragile heart.

But she liked to think she knew Xiao well enough by now.

That for all his jagged edges, there was something unbearably tender lying beneath. Xiao had vowed to be there in light of the most fearsome battles, even when she refused to call him for anything but the silly little things.

And so, with the same courage she mustered when she fought against dragons, when she challenged the Electro Archon, when she had experienced those many, *many* discords with the Fatui Harbingers and lived to tell the tale, she stood her ground,

stubborn and unyielding.

"It is what it is," the Traveler murmured quietly, but spoke as if it were a confession instead of a query. "What if I'm in love with you?"

Xiao didn't dare look her in the eye, but he responded nonetheless as if he couldn't ever bear to let her down.

"Is that not a fleeting emotion among mere mortals?" he countered with another question, voice low and almost hollow as he recalled all that he'd witnessed in the thousands of years he's lived.

He remembered the comrades he lost in battle, the passing customers at the Inn, and all the coming and goings of strangers from a distance. The inevitability of change and the transience of life had always weighed heavily upon the Adepti. And yet, it happened regardless, and even the mightiest were made to fall on their knees.

"That's—" Lumine immediately attempted to explain, barely having registered the thought that Xiao may have never even fathomed the feelings that she had hinted at. That what she saw as *endearment*, he recognized as *weakness*; an escape from the lonesome life of a Yaksha born to perish in battle.

"What I meant by love is—"

She tried to speak, tried to correct that notion, but he easily beat her to it.

"Grand declarations and hefty oaths that amount to nothing in the hands of death. It's a custom humans seem to adore."

"No, that's *not* it," the Traveler grumbled, frustrated by her inability to find the right words.

"It's about the little things... How even the mundane can feel special," Lumine told him. Her words came across as vague and cryptic, much like what Rex Lapis had been trying to convey to him nowadays. Xiao still failed to truly comprehend how basking in the festivities of mortals would grant him a peace of mind, but the Traveler had always taken it upon herself to be the one to show him.

Likewise, she must have taken the bemused expression on his face as a sign to continue, for she spoke, "Like going out of your way to see them, making plans, keeping promises."

"...Oaths?"

Had he not made her one before? Keeping it was easier than breathing.

"It doesn't have to be a serious promise, you know. You don't have to promise something that'd last *forever*. Obligation doesn't necessarily equate to love. You simply do things because you care for them... because you want to be with them," her eyes softened as her gaze momentarily met his. And in truth, it was then that he had come to realize that the promise he made for her was not born out of duty but rather... *affection*.

"That's why it can be something as ordinary as meeting each other after every Lantern Rite," Lumine suggested.

'Or finding excuses to call your name,' she didn't dare to say.

“If I were to spend the Lantern Rite with someone—” *Like we do right now.* “We could watch fireworks near the city, or fly lanterns by the countryside.” *Where you wouldn’t have to worry about the effects of your karma on humans.*

Lumine wondered if she was laying it on thick but Xiao moved closer beside her, and electro crackled through her veins, thoughts easily forgotten. When she looked at the distant expression on his face, she began to doubt that he noticed—that he did it on purpose—and she faltered just as quickly as she held onto that small hope.

Unbeknownst to her, Xiao thought back to nights like this, how under the light of the moon there were no prying eyes, no hungry faerie to disturb them. They had been at peace with one another, much more than he’d ever find anywhere else. She had often told him stories of her journey, of lands he could not visit, and he listened attentively, as if every word she spoke was a hymn of the gods.

“Tell me more,” Xiao prodded gently, much like he had before, and she smiled subtly like the light of dawn gracing the horizon.

“If I were in love with... Well, *someone*,” Lumine cleared her throat, playing it safe by leaving out his name, “I would think of them throughout my journey, and find them in everyday things.”

She’s reminded of Paimon’s silly idea for her to borrow Xiao’s mask to fend off hilichurls. Of how she wanted to ask Nahida about the inner workings of a dream. Of how he always came to mind for every plate of Almond Tofu she makes.

He thought back to all those moments he spent at the borders of Nantianmen, hoping to catch a mere glimpse of her figure as she explored Sumeru’s forests. Of how he yearned to hear her voice past the sea when she was in Inazuma, going as far as to gather Starconches by the shore of Guyun Stone Forest. Of how the wind shifted in her direction whenever she set foot in Liyue, and how he was helplessly drawn to her light like a moth to a burning flame.

“I’d love to exchange letters or little gifts,” Lumine broke him out of his thoughts, lost in her own. “Even if I can find those things anywhere else, receiving it from them is enough to make it special.”

Like Crystalflies and Starconches. Like that butterfly Adeptus charm made of Sycamore leaves she’d always keep in her pocket.

“Like Almond Tofu and Mint Jelly,” he recognized the special recipes she made just for him, and Lumine sucked in a breath.

The mere fact that he *thought* of her, was enough to set her chest at the brink of an explosion, but the way he looked at her then was enough to set it off.

The Yaksha eyed her intently as if he had caught onto her little mind games.

“We’ve been doing all of those things you’ve mentioned, have we not?” he stated rather frankly, and Lumine immediately avoided his prying gaze, finding the view of the marsh a lot more enticing compared to breaching the subject and destroying the very foundation of their status quo.

And though she finally decided to stop talking after that, her silence was more telling of a response, as if to say...

'Yes, because I am irrevocably in love with you.'

She almost broke her facade, tempted to laugh mirthlessly at the voice in her mind as she recalled the dinner they had last night. Zhongli's words before they parted still lingered. And if Xiangling's knowing smiles and Hu Tao's suggestive glances were anything to go by, it was unlikely she succeeded in keeping her feelings for him a secret.

But neither of them dared to speak of it.

They never conversed their innermost thoughts with mere words anyway; because while the Traveler was reserved, Xiao had always taken silence to a whole other level—

And yet, he surprised her when she felt the fabric of his glove graze against her skin.

Xiao brought a hand to lift her face, fingers trailing against her neck, tracing her jaw and brushing against her cheek. The gesture forced her to finally look at him, forced her to speak the words she tried to suppress, because for all his prowess in battle, his crass words, his natural scowls— he held her like she's *precious*, like he's never held someone so dear in his life.

And Lumine wanted to cry because for all her strength and bravado, she was so very weak against him.

"If I were in love with you..." she shut her eyes, and her voice quivered, so soft that it was nearly unnoticeable if not for his beast-like senses.

He pressed their foreheads together, goading —*begging*— her to continue.

"If I were, I'd have a place to return to; a reason to stay in this world."

Because she had already forgotten what it was like to explore universes in search of a *home*.

Because for all she knew, she'd already found one in the form of the Yaksha in front of her.

"Lumine," Xiao breathed out, soft and tender. She nearly keened at the sound as it rolled past his lips, and she understood then why he kept asking her to call him. How it beckoned her in a heartbeat.

She dared to steal a glance of him, and his eyes were still on her, unwavering as he spoke.

"What if I'm in love with you?"

He returned the very same question, albeit it sounded much more like a statement —like an *answer*— because that's precisely what it was.

Xiao had witnessed the transience of life in the wake of each battle, and knew first hand what it's like to convey things too late. He'd be damned if he let her slip past his fingers.

"What then?" he asked her, and yet expected no response that can be expressed with mere words.

'What now?' he dared her to act, pushing her to make the most of that courage, to drown in the hope she'd been trying to stifle.

His breath was warm against her cheek, and her senses were overwhelmed by the entirety of him.

Xiao pulled back slightly, and yet remained a hair's breadth away if only to catch a better look at her, to give her a chance to back out and return to the security of a relationship left unnamed.

But the Traveler was never known to be a coward.

She found it much easier to press her lips against his, than to continue conversing with words.

And she'd like to believe that Xiao strongly agreed, if not for the way he responded to her kiss with equal fervor.











@xTav

Through Gold and Flowers

By Lacryimosa

Prologue.

It all started with this poem, a sweet dream and a melody. A silent desire awoke within him, he who protected the nights and dreams of many, he who remained dreamless despite it all. He thought for the longest time all night could offer him was a restless sleep, darkness and hidden shadows whispered in his ears with nightmares.

Yet after he flew back to his vigil, after he closed his eyes knowing what awaited him, for the first time in eons he traveled into the realm of dreams. Not as an eater, but as a dreamer.

I. Traces of serenity.

Screams, voices hurling for death faded away, replaced by fresh caresses of the salty breeze. The crystallized water of the sea rustled on the shores of the Guyun Forest. He recognized this place, usually buzzing with monsters, but there was none of them - no demons to purge, no karmic debt shackling his mind.

This place that once held remnants of wrathful gods had almost changed beyond recognition. The forest of stones, beautiful under the sunshine reflected in the sea. Birds danced in the sky with freedom. The air felt pure and light, as though all of his burdens were lifted from his shoulders.

This was what he was fighting for. What he lived for. To give its beauty back to this land he cherished above all. But who would stand by his side? He felt a presence, and gold and blue filled his view; the scent of stars and sun was unmistakable.

Lumine.

Her dress was hiked up to her knees, tied on the side. She had removed her boots to play in the sand barefoot, drawing various things. A Berry? A butterfly? Maybe a bird? He couldn't help but watch her waltz on the sand, sharing her felicity. How long had it been since he had experienced the joy of simple things, unbothered by duty or monsters?

Not too far from them, a strange starconch glimmered with a ray of light, capturing Lumine's attention, who ran to it. Her face brimmed with so much joy it was influencing him, his own legs following suit with a strange eagerness.

"Look look!" her excitement overflowing as she picked it up. "It is twice as big as

normal ones. Do you think it is special?"

It was not, he almost snorted with a shake of his head. Without surprise, Lumine brought the conch to her ears. He waited a few moments, eyes never leaving her face, until her expression changed and burst with radiance.

"Listen X—"

Everything stopped as quickly as it started. He awoke from his dream, the stolen moment of serenity gone. As his mind adjusted back to reality, and despite how fleeting this peace was, he caught himself wishing for more, for it to have lasted just a little longer. Just enough to hear the call of his name.

II. Whispered memories.

Dreams are born from memories; of the day, of the week, of the unwinding time. A print of the past that can still live on in the realm of the unreal. Maybe when Xiao crossed paths with a special place for him, holding a deep bond to the yakshas, it awakened the lock of remembrance.

The steady gurgle of the waterfall, chirping birds and fresh smell of the various trees enveloped his senses. Just like centuries ago. The essence of the place was unchanged, as appeasing and carefree as it had been. Like the flow of life, many dear memories flew back. His throat tightened, emotions overcoming like crashing waves. All the meetings and parties with the other adepts and yakshas. The carefree days before the war.

"It feels so peaceful here." Lumine whispered softly, her words almost taken away by the winds.

The same silhouette as his last dream was sitting next to him, basking in the view of Chenyu Vale. It was no surprise to see her appear once more as she was his catalyst of change. He closed his eyes, breathing in the smells of sun and stars.

"Yes it is."

It was all but a dream. A reverie. But it was by her side Xiao felt the comfort of his vulnerability, the only one that could stand next to him, the one he could share his mind openly without second thoughts.

"There," he pointed out a small pavilion from afar, "with the other yakshas we used to climb up there. Though, it was mostly me carrying them there. Bosacius was too clumsy to climb and fell so many times. A lost cause. Even Menogias shrugged at his stubbornness."

"I wish I had known them."

"You can still know them."

Carried away, he shared more fondly the stories of their bygone life. Sometimes his tales were cut by a few questions or Lumine's chuckles, but he welcomed it - enjoying her responses, galvanizing him.

When he opened his eyes, still lying on the rooftop of Wangshu Inn, a single tear rolled on his cheek. A strange feeling remained within - one he started to recognize:

acceptance. He cast a glance aside, looking at the activity bursting from the inn in preparation for the Lantern Rite festival. And for the first time in eons a singular trail of thoughts crossed his mind. He never paid attention to mortal customs, yet this time he thought he could partake in them.

III. A glance & a touch of longing.

Over the last month, the dreams had become more frequent, and always at the center of them, one single star: Lumine. It was inevitable, past every fate; their paths entwined together and their ties impossible to sever. Whenever he closed his eyes, she would appear in his dream. A secret rendezvous, an illusion that he would fall into. His mind wove his silent desires into phantasm.

This one was no exception. It was a mirror to his wishes, a longing born from the brush of their hands when they released the lantern together. By the feel of her body, it pierced through the materials of his glove, and coated his mind with gentle warmth.

“What are you afraid of?” Lumine said with curiosity. Her voice sounded soft and soothing.

Everything around them was blurred with gold and night. He couldn’t understand where they were. But it didn’t matter, she was his only focus. The anchor that kept him grounded.

“I am a warrior. My hands are tools to kill.” Xiao said simply, but his eyes betrayed the hesitation he tried to hide beneath.

“Is that so?” She remained silent a moment, as if to let him ponder himself on this. “I don’t think your hands were made for this purpose. None are. They can be soft and gentle, whether you realize it or not.”

She brushed her fingers on his palm, careful and tender. Soft and delicate, as fragile as the morning dew. Xiao realized his gloves were gone, and their skin touched for the first time. It was only a dream, and yet his body shook and trembled. Burned and melted. It was intoxicating but, at the same time, not enough.

She slid her hand against his. Palm against palm, their fingers mirrored in perfect unison. It was an exalting feeling, as though he was touching the starry sea beyond the boundless sky.

“See. They’re not hurting me. You are not hurting me. I am fine.” Lumine slid her fingers between his. The caresses of her bare skin on his accentuated the sweetness of her words, sweeping him in a loving tide. “You’re more gentle than what you give yourself credit for. So you don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

He watched and listened carefully, letting himself feel and accept the weight of her touch. With eyes and body softening, he followed her, closing his hand as they intertwined together.

IV. Sweet reality & cherished dream.

His dreams cultivated his yearning and desire, unveiling the truth of his feelings. Deep, dark, far away. The chains that shackled him broke, his perception changing with each brief reflection of her presence in his dreams.

And her absence became a slow torture, burning his soul with fervor. Yet, it was a sweet pain that alighted his senses. A glance at flowers on his patrol, whispered secrets between lovers, the delicious smell of food. All he could think of was Lumine. Her twirling flowers between her fingers, her melodious voice as she would recount her last venture over dinner. And her smile.

He craved and ached, ardently waiting for her return.

As the sun's distant light echoes down to dreams.

"You're here early this year, Traveler." An amused voice called for Lumine, tethering with a tease that became familiar over the years.

"Yes, I am hoping to surprise Xia-" Lumine stopped herself, not wanting to summon him by accident and blowing away her early appearance. "Well, the adeptus of this inn. We haven't crossed each other much lately so..."

She trailed off, with a faint blush painting her cheeks while Verr's face glowed with mirth.

"I wonder who will be the surprised one," the innkeeper said. "I am sure the feeling is shared."

Lumine tilted her head with an inquisitive look. But before she could ask for any further explanation, other clients came their way, ending their short conversation. Verr gave her one last smile, "The balcony is closed for other guests for today. So you won't have to worry about anything, just relax and enjoy."

With a nod as a thank you, Lumine made her way to the staircase leading to the upper balcony; renowned for lovers. It had become their sacred rendezvous, a silent promise. Whenever they wanted to see each other, this place would be their solace. Her foot brushed gracefully on the wood, a hum on her lips.

But when she arrived at the top, a surprise awaited her. Amidst the warm scenery and the clouds, he stood there, in the same spot they had first met, his back facing her.

"Xiao?"

He turned around, and it was as if time slowed down. His eyes landed on hers, amber and gold met. There was something in his gaze, more intense and vibrant than usual, that made her shiver.

"Lumine."

She chuckled in reply, finally understanding the words Verr had said previously. "I didn't expect you to already be there."

"I wanted to see you."

"So did I." She paused, hesitating to voice her thoughts aloud. But his intense gaze unraveled her uncertainty. "I missed coming back, and I missed you."

He sucked in a dry breath, inhibitions put aside.

In a swift and smooth motion, he tugged her by the waist, his arm circling her in an enraptured embrace. On the winds rising, Gingko leaves danced around them. The

sun reflected in her widened eyes as the pink of her cheeks deepened. He caught a few strands, tucked them behind her ear and slid next to her flowers a single Qingxin.

“As expected, it looks beautiful on you.” Reality tasted far sweeter than any dreams he had. His hand lingered in her hair, golden threads flowing between his fingers, his eyes drinking in her beauty.

His favorite flower weaved in her hair was a sight to behold - one that even dreams would not replicate. A symbol. He was not a lonely flower, whispered by the hopes planted by the seeds of dreams.

Let me stay by your side.

He contemplated, awaited her answer: rejection or approval.

“You’re so unfair sometimes. Why do you always cover me with gifts on your birthday...” Lumine mumbled at first before melting into his arms.

She put her hand on his tattooed arm, a tell to not let her go as her delicate fingers took one of her inteyvat flowers. She reciprocated his gesture, giving him one of her own precious flowers in exchange. A part of herself to him.

The beam on her face swept away all doubts and worries he ever had. Yes, if he was ever allowed one dream, it would be her and her only. Through gold and flowers, Xiao found his happiness.

Heartbeats melted to a perfect tune as their lips tasted the softest and sweetest dream.



hydra
@hydra_gleam





Say You'll Remember Me

By luminyas

In Xiao's eyes, everything feels nostalgic today.

The golden sunlight that warms his skin, the quiet rustle of leaves mixed with the wind that carries the sweet scent of Lumine's perfume. Her voice, so soft and ever so tender while saying his name, the faint blush on her cheeks; and her smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. Even when it does, something's still off.

Xiao can't quite put a finger on what exactly it is. After rethinking the situation in his head and observing Lumine more carefully than he usually does, the meaning behind that odd mix of loneliness and pain that hides in her wide-eyed gaze remains a mystery.

He can't even seem to find the right name for that emotion. All he knows is that it feels strange. Almost as if there's something bothering Lumine - an emotion that keeps on weighing on her heart and she can't set herself free from it.

Another click of the Kamera followed by Lumine's quiet chuckle brings Xiao out of his thoughts.

"You still haven't answered me." he hums thoughtfully, arms crossed in front of his chest. "Why are you taking so many photos of me?"

Lumine blinks up at him, visibly taken aback by the sudden question. Then, she laughs sheepishly before saying, "Ah, but the weather is so beautiful today. Isn't it true, Xiao?"

There she goes again; avoiding the question.

A heavy sigh escapes his lips before Xiao can bite it back. He sends Lumine a half-hearted glare, eyes narrowing at her in a quiet reminder that she should know better and tell him the whole truth.

He watches her bite her lip before slowly averting her gaze. It's painfully obvious that she tries to hide something that's bothering her from him.

For some reason, Xiao feels a dull ache behind his ribs.

"Do I really have to say it?"

He hums and simply nods in response.

The atmosphere between them - that strong sense of melancholy tinted with longing for something he can't quite name - feels so tense, looms around, highly-strung as if it's about to snap at any given moment.

Adding anything more might pressure her and make her feel even worse, Xiao thinks faintly. He would rather have the abyssal monsters slowly rip his body apart into tiny pieces or his own karmic debt destroy him from inside out than watch the light in her eyes ever dim.

He remains quiet and watches as, with a heavy sigh, Lumine rests her back against the wall behind her. Somehow, that odd mix of emotions Xiao couldn't quite put his finger on is even more visibly reflected in her eyes.

"I think I'm starting to forget Aether sometimes. Or maybe I'm simply afraid that it will happen one day." Lumine hums as she looks at him a little sheepishly from the corner of her eye, toying with the Kamera between her hands.

His lips part only to close again, taken aback by the suddenness of her statement. Xiao knows how much it takes for her to confess this - even in front of him.

"But when I dream about our past together, his face is starting to get more and more blurry. Every time I see the scene of our meeting, he slips away into the void. Like he never existed at all, and our whole life together was just something I made out in my head."

Lumine exhales a shaky breath, her lower lip quivering. For a split second, her face twists in a look of hurt - not towards him but rather herself.

Xiao feels his stomach twist.

"It's just... it's like a nightmare. I'm so afraid of not remembering your face anymore one day and the memories we share fading away. I don't want to ever forget you, Xiao. I know it's such a stupid thing to be scared of but..."

"It's not stupid," he mumbles back to her, reaching out to take the Kamera from her fidgeting hands.

His whole body gravitates towards hers, fingers brushing over her knuckles as if he wants to take away all her pain and worries with a single touch. Just to make her happy, just to see her smile again and watch her golden eyes twinkle upon meeting his own.

It feels like ages before Lumine speaks up again, her voice barely a whisper.

"I don't know how to say it without sounding overly dramatic and clingy, and saying too much but..." her shoulders tremble as she takes in a deep breath. It takes everything in Xiao to stay still and not wrap his arms around her in that instant. "I would give up everything else just to be able to stay here more often. Really, I mean it. It's almost unbearable that right when I found my home in you, I can't stay in your arms as much as I would want to."

The silence that falls between them is filled with the roaring heartbeat that echoes in Xiao's ears. Somehow, its sound is insanelly similar to Lumine's name.

He watches her as she glances down at her shoes and takes a deep breath that makes him think scattered pieces of pain still linger somewhere inside her chest,

heavy and uncomfortable.

Gentle wind caresses her hair, and Xiao watches Lumine as she tucks a strand of it behind her ear, fingers toying with its end as if to ease the nervousness within her. Knowing how sensitive she is, her efforts are futile.

Still, he doesn't say anything - just watches her and waits until she's ready to talk again.

After what feels like forever, Lumine speaks up again, her voice almost inaudible; "So, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I just miss you, Xiao. I never stop missing you when we're apart."

Then, she tries to laugh it off - again - and say that he should call her greedy, like it's nothing and she didn't just rip her heart apart for his eyes and showed him a glimpse of the emotions he has never seen in her before. Not with so much intensity.

Xiao's brows furrow as he watches Lumine smile at him sheepishly.

If anything, he's the greedy one.

He's the one who yearns for her, who's overpowered by the enormity of his love for her. After long centuries of solitude Xiao has never expected he'll ever feel this way; and yet, when Lumine slips out of his reach, it's enough to make a mess out of him. He feels as if he's going crazy, then. Like he's slowly losing his mind and spinning into some kind of insanity he had no idea existed. He wants to protect her, watch over her or stand by her side and make sure she's fine.

He wants to be the reason behind her happiness.

When he closes his eyes, he thinks he can see her - with her doe-eyed hopeful stare, rosy cheeks and tender smile that manages to make his heart skip its beat each time. It's almost an instinct at this point; that in the quietest of nights, he thinks of her.

Even in his sleep, Xiao can see Lumine, too. Sometimes, his dreams are a kaleidoscope of the memories they share. A rose tinted mirage of fondness and pure adoration that's so tangible when it's just the two of them together.

Other times, it must be his imagination that runs wild and strays into places he has never dared to think about. The future - something he once deemed as hopeless - is filled with Lumine; with her breathy chuckles and her voice when she says his name in the way that makes him weak.

Each time one thing stays the same, though.

When Xiao allows himself to fall for Lumine, her love melts the sharp icy edges of his heart.

It's too late to stop those fondness from growing stronger. Just a mere thought about it makes something within his chest ache, fingertips itching with a longing so sheer just to reach out to her and hold her as close to himself as humanly possible.

He doesn't even want to imagine ever losing her.

A quiet sigh escapes Xiao's lips.

"Do you think that-" you're not going to come back here one day...? That you won't be able to make yourself a home here, with me...?"

Xiao swallows, ignoring the bitter taste of the words that linger on the tip of his tongue.

“Never mind. Forget it.”

He shrugs it off as if his mind isn't screaming, calling out her name over and over again like his salvation lies within it.

A shaky exhale leaves his lips. His trembling fingers turn into fists, nails digging into his skin. Yet it doesn't prevent his mind from spinning, dizzy with emotions that rush through his veins nonstop.

Lumine is the only one who thinks about him, the only one who prays for him and calls out his name. The sole reason why he has the will to keep going. The only one he swears his devotion to.

So please... Please, don't forget about me, Lumine.

His eyes close for a moment, head tilted back as he tries to get a grip on his own feelings. It used to be so easy for him to isolate himself from reality and focus solely on his duty, for his self-control to be stronger than anything else so he doesn't get distracted by fleeting promises of heaven that's too good to exist. Too good to last forever.

It's sudden when Lumine tiptoes her way closer to him only to wrap her arms around his waist. He didn't even notice her erasing the distance between them, too lost in his thoughts. Still, in that instant - in an instinct of sorts, because it feels like it's the most natural thing to do - he holds her back, tighter and more closely than he ever thought he'd hold anyone.

It makes Lumine laugh into the material of his shirt where her face is pressed. With his arms wrapped around her body and her heartbeat mixing with his own, Xiao faintly finds himself wishing this moment could last forever.

It's hard to say for how long they've been standing like this - wrapped in each other's embraces, bodies pressed tightly against each other as if they're trying to mold into one - but it feels like the whole world around them fades away.

There's something that Xiao understands as he stares into the warm golden light of the gradually darkening sky reflected in Lumine's eyes. Something that occurs to him all of the sudden and makes him shudder.

This love is never going to stop. If anything, it's only going to grow stronger each time she glances up at him - just like she does now, eyes wide and gleaming in the warm sunlight.

“You know, you shouldn't worry about me that much, Xiao. It's fine - I'm fine.”

His stomach pangs a bit in the wake of her words, lips pressing into a thin line. It's obvious that she tries to shrug her confessions off like they're something unimportant, just a random comment like the ones she usually makes about the weather when she doesn't want to talk.

Lumine tugs at his shirt weakly. “Really. I simply want to have something to remember you by when I'm away.”

Xiao clicks his tongue.

Foolish girl. Even in moments like this, she still cares more about reassuring

him than about herself.

“Lumine...”

She tenses a bit at the sound of her name on his lips. Weakly, she tries to mask it with a soft smile - something that always manages to take his breath away - but Xiao can tell how she truly feels. He can feel that rush of tenderness that overshadows the tension between them.

As Lumine still refuses to meet his eyes, he decides to tilt her head with a tip of his finger so their gazes meet, his nose brushing against hers in the process. Her lips part ever so slightly to say something, probably...

But before she can do it, Xiao kisses her.

He feels Lumine gasp into him, both shocked and overwhelmed by the fondness hidden within the sudden gesture. It's soft, gentle; just like her.

Every second molds into another, each filled with emotions so intense Xiao thinks it might be the death of him. Love he holds for Lumine consumes him to the point where he wonders whether she has him wrapped around her finger. Yearning etched its way into his bones, making him devastated and leaving him wanting her even more.

So his fingertips brush along the curve of her jaw, tilting her head slightly back just to press his lips further against hers with a bit more passion.

This kiss feels like an oath. Like a reassurance that he's always there; and even if he's not, she can take a piece of his heart with her.

Perhaps, it's already right in the palm of her hand because it feels like his happiness always resides wherever she is. She is everything he has dreamed about and more.

No matter what, their fates will remain intertwined with each other just like their heartbeats seem to be now, beating in sync.

When he pulls away to take a deep breath, Lumine's eyes gleam, illuminated by the warm golden sunlight. And yet, it's her light that calls out to him - that draws him in, pulls him into the endless reveries of her.

He doesn't hate it, though; not when it's her.

“I'm always one call away.” Xiao breathes, eyes closed and lips brushing against Lumine's.

It's selfish to ask her to remember him, keep him safe deep within her heart and never let him go no matter how far away she strays. Even more so, when a plea for her to come back to him - again and again - until the day when she can stay with him finally comes lingers on the tip of his tongue.

No matter where Lumine is, her love lingers even in her absence - he's aware of it. Yet sometimes he catches himself wishing to allow his body to rest in the comfort of her palms, bask in her light and watch her eyes gleam each time he calls her by her real name.

Xiao has never been greedy, he's never truly wanted anything in his life. But when it comes to her...

His eyes soften, thumb tracing delicate traces against her warm cheek. A breath catches in the back of her throat as he whispers, "If you wish to see me, just say my name, Lumine. I will always be there for you."





Falling Asleep

By SucreLune

Xiao never sleeps. It's a fact—a truth.

As immutable as the sun which sets and rises on the horizon each morning. As daily as the morning dew. As reassuring as the stars that shine after dark, eternal in their protective shine.

And yet, as beautiful and perpetual they might seem, even the stars eventually fall and cease to spark. Lumine knows this.

She should have known.

But through the years and decades, through months on end and centuries in Teyvat, Lumine has forgotten.

She forgot that even gods and spirits can be defeated, that adepti aren't invincible, and that Xiao is, perhaps, the most vulnerable of them.

Xiao and Lumine have been fighting together since the day they met. From this moment, once upon a time, at a little balcony overlooking the whole orange expanse of Liyue, until this summer evening, when the heat burns their sweaty skin, Xiao and Lumine have never ceased the fight. They never stopped, never even tried to halt and rest.

They were awkward at first. It wasn't a smooth ride, and they had to learn. Learn to understand, learn to communicate, learn to compromise, and, more importantly, *learn to trust each other.*

And learn, Lumine did.

She has learned everything about Xiao.

She knows by heart the tempo of his movements, the rhythm of his breath when he jumps, the dance of his steps when he turns, the force with which he will strike when he plunges.

She knows his facial expressions and gestures, how to decipher his slightest glance. She knows when his eyes send her discreet smiles and laughs. She knows when he loves behind a mask of indifference, when he cries without shedding a tear, or screams without a sound.

And she knows, when Xiao's iris, as bright as the stars that Lumine loves so much,

blurs, that Xiao is about to fall.

Contrary to what legends would say, contrary to what Lumine herself imagines, this does not happen following a terrible fight. It's not even one of these awful evenings when Xiao suffers from the heaviness of unrestful karma.

It happens on a night of peace and quiet. They have been chasing hilichurls and bandits. It's a simple and effective hunt, so much so that the night is still young when they decide to return to the Wangshu Inn. The moon is high, and around them, fireflies float. They brighten the gloom with their tiny wings, like thousands of small candles. A piece of flute sounds in the distance, and Lumine smiles.

She extends her hand to Xiao and invites him to dance on the way home. If the Yaksha has a moment of hesitation, his fingers find Lumine's hand early enough. They spin together, and Lumine bursts out laughing. Carried by the music and the intoxication of the moment, she does not see the man creeping up behind her.

This should never have been a difficult blow to avoid; *the man is clumsy, truly*. Yet Lumine is lost in her euphoria, and when she turns, she is stupefied, unable to move for one second too long and one second too late. Xiao's eyes are wide in horror.

It's funny, Lumine thinks distantly, as the Yaksha throws the human backwards in a cry of rage. She doesn't feel any pain.

Lumine grabs the blade with both hands. It pierces her chest right next to her heart. Her fingers grab weakly at the handle, and her knees suddenly give way beneath her. With a hiccup, she spits out a spray of blood and collapses.

Xiao is immediately at her side, an arm around her hips to steady her.

"Lumine," he calls.

His voice is dark, troubled.

Lumine guesses from the simple tensing of his muscles that he is getting ready to fly them away to Baizhu.

Lumine knows, however, that she will not survive the trip. The blade went too deep, and already she felt her heart slowing in her chest.

It's amazing, she whispers to herself, to feel so lucid and to be dying.

Shouldn't she be panicking right about now, torso impaled with a sword and bleeding out in the open wilds?

She just doesn't.

Maybe the reality of it all is too hard to fathom; perhaps she has already lost so much blood that she can't manage to care. She does think of Paimon, Aether, and all the people she won't have time to say goodbye to. But the seconds that tick by and escape are too short to warn anyone, and she does not want to spend the last minutes of her existence under the cold hands of a doctor.

More than ever, however, she thinks of Xiao and the terrible mess she has made of him, how anguished and stricken he looks after witnessing the gaping wound in her left breast.

“Xi...Xiao...stop”, she implores, her voice muffled in a gurgle of blood, her heart pumping painfully around the cavernous hole that cuts her chest in two.

The Yaksha’s mouth purses in anger. He reads the request in her eyes and looks away. His fists clench, the wind rages through his closed fingers, and his jaw cracks. The strength of his despair is such that Lumine can taste its sad flavour from the tip of her lips.

“Xi..xiao, “she repeats painfully, and the Yaksha suddenly takes her in his arms. He adjusts his grip, careful not to move the blade deeper into her heart. He gives her such a dark look that Lumine trembles, and then, in a flash, he disappears.

Lumine closes her eyes. She wishes she had the strength to talk to him and explain how futile it all is. *He can’t save her.*

Contrary to her fears, however, Xiao does not take her to Bubu Pharmacy.

Instead, the Yaksha takes them to the hill’s edge overlooking the temple of Pervases. Lumine’s senses are greatly diminished, and her vision becomes foggy with each step, but she vaguely recognizes the place.

They spent so many afternoons here, after all, talking about nothing and anything, holding hands, kissing, and sometimes just standing by each other’s sides that she could draw the trees, the river, and all the stones on this plain with her eyes closed. That’s actually what she does.

A slight shock shakes Lumine’s body, and she realizes in her torpor that she no longer feels her legs nor the heat of the grass under her calves.

She hears a viscous noise as Xiao pulls her firmly against his chest, one hand around her waist, another gripping the sharp side of the sword to avoid jostling it as he encases her between his thighs. His trembling, clawed hands are buried in the bloody panels of her formerly white dress; they must be scarlet.

Xiao’s breath caresses her cheek, and Lumine forces herself to open her eyes to meet his gaze. *It’s funny,* Lumine thinks for a second time.

She is the one bleeding out, yet Xiao is the one who looks like he is dying.

Yes, Xiao is wounded.

Terribly, in fact.

She has never seen him more hurt, more gutted.

She has never been so akin to his suffering and being unable to heal him.

He is in terrible pain, so much so that his entire body goes into spasm, and a black aura surrounds his dropping form. His eyes darken and redden. Xiao is drowning. He is submerged in an ocean of darkness and blood, and his karma, calm as it was, suddenly pierces and cracks the surface of his flesh, breaking it apart like a puzzle.

“Xiao,” Lumine tries. She tries to call, to call for him, to call for reasons beyond the madness. Her fingers tentatively reach the Yaksha’s wrist against her stomach. Even though she no longer feels his warmth, touching him is soothing.

“Please, don’t try to stop it,” —begs Xiao, agony tearing at his throat. Lumine wants

to reassure him, say sweet words, and save him.

But she can't, not anymore. Lumine is too weak to do it.

She doesn't have the strength to feel sorry for herself or even sad.

The only thing that keeps her breathing on this earth is Xiao's face. Soon, however, even the silent strength of his love won't be enough to force her heart to beat.

"You shouldn't lose yourself like this, Xiao," she finds the strength to whisper, drawing on her last energy reserve, the boost that every being experiences before wasting away. "You shouldn't worry, I will just fall asleep. Everything will be fine."

The Yaksha snorts derisively, then grows silent for a few seconds before murmuring, eyes downcast, on her fading silhouette.

"If you fall asleep, I shall do so with you."

But Xiao, Lumine wants to argue. You never sleep.

Xiao's lips rest on Lumine's cheek, icy.

"I will tonight, Lumine, for the first time." He affirms as if he has read her thoughts. Authoritative and unyielding, as she has always known him to be, when he has decided to follow something through the end.

"Lumine," her name in Xiao's mouth, is always so sweet—as sweet as that delicious almond tofu he used to love. Yet he rarely uses it. She confessed it to him a long time ago, but the Yaksha has respectfully kept calling her traveler around others. She never had to explain why her name was so important and why he shouldn't use it publicly. She didn't have to ask; Xiao did it as if it were natural.

He is always attentive like this. He recognizes important things. He is humble and kind. He knows what should be said and what should be done. He is selfless, keeping to his heart, his darkness and doubts, to protect everyone else. He is loyal and self-sacrificing, always responding to Lumine's calls when she needs him. And tonight, as she lays on his frame, the light fading from the world and her eyes, Lumine knows he will be there wherever she goes and calls him next.

"I will be there, Lumine.

I will be there when you call me on the other side."

Yes, I knew you would say that, Xiao.

Still, she can't help but blame herself.

Xiao is needed, and she has failed him with her ignorance.

She has failed to acknowledge how strongly Xiao could feel.

She thought that Xiao would forever stand, that he couldn't be beaten.

Somehow, his immeasurable strength had made her dismiss the cracks in his armour.

Over the years, bound to him by love and intimacy, Xiao had become Lumine's pillar. She could reach and catch his silhouette no matter how dear the situation. He was

this back that never disappeared and never faltered in his course.

Lumine had spent so much time protecting others, but never once had she felt more protected than when Xiao had come flying into her life. Even Aether had gone away and left Lumine behind.

But Xiao was always there, as unmoving as the stars in the sky.

She had used him shamelessly for this reason; she had trapped him in her hands and squeezed him to her chest within an inch of his life.

She had engulfed him in her love until he could no longer resist.

Until he stopped fighting and drowned in her, with *everything* he had to give.

And she hadn't cared for the consequences.

She hadn't cared to think that Xiao was a mortal among immortals.

That doing that might wound him so deeply that should the day come when she had to leave his side, he wouldn't be able to carry on.

Of all the immortals, Xiao is the most mortal among them, Lumine muses. And I killed him.

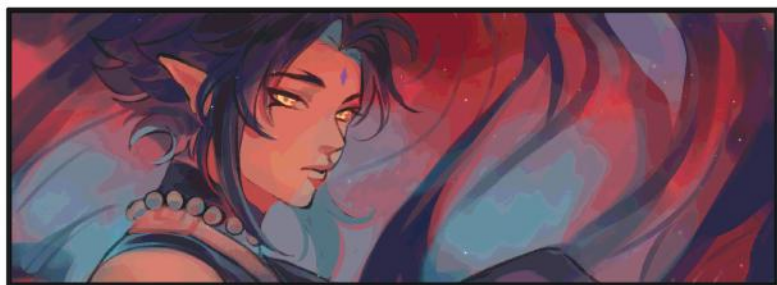
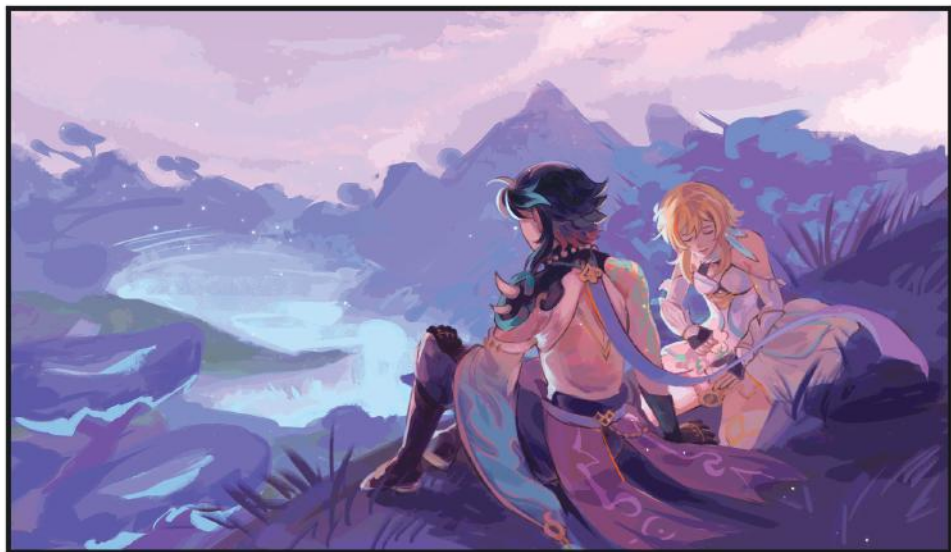
Beneath all his silences and coldness, Xiao loves the strongest, the most passionately, and the most faithfully. Despite the distance and his incomprehension of humans, he is the one who, ultimately, resembles them the most. Filled with doubts, regrets, and self-loathing.

Xiao was born an adepti, but tonight, he will fall asleep as a man.

Arms entwined around his loved one as their bodies become dust in the wind.

Falling asleep has never been more peaceful.











Where I Cannot Follow

By Liliputianbelle

Xiao found her just outside Qingce Village, walking among the bamboo and fireflies. She was looking up through the leaves, her eyes drifting across the starry heavens, and the moonlight painted her with silvery light. Somehow, on her, it looked warm.

“Lumine,” he greeted her simply. She looked back and smiled, gentle peace washing over him when the expression reached him.

“You came,” she said, “I’m still not used to it.”

“It’s incomprehensible to me that you could still have doubts when I have answered every call,” he said, moving closer as the fireflies danced between them. Lumine smiled and shook her head.

“I don’t doubt you.”

She looked at him softly. The kind of look he hadn’t seen directed at him for... countless years. Longer than he wanted to think about.

“You’re alone,” he noted. She moved closer, and he was certain he could feel the warmth from her skin seeping into his despite the space still between them. Her eyes sparkled in the moonlight, but his mind was distracted from the beauty – he couldn’t forget what he’d heard that morning. What she’d told all of them at Wangshu Inn. What all of this really was.

A goodbye.

“I had to beg Paimon to let me come alone. You’ve got more privileges than you know,” she said, a slight giggle punctuating the sentence. Xiao’s hand moved before he even recognized what he was doing, touching her cheek as if brushing away some dirt... but there was no dirt. No explanation. Their eyes met, silence hanging heavy in the air. Was it shock in her eyes? He let his fingers trace the edge of her face before falling away.

“No matter where you are, you can call me. Remember that,” he said. She had barely breathed while he touched her; now she inhaled a wavering breath.

“I will. And I’ll be back before you know it.” Her voice was soft, perhaps even uncertain. He nodded, accepting her assurance despite knowing it wasn’t so simple. The chance that she would not return was high; she knew it as well as he did. The

unspoken things deep within his soul raged to be set free, and he knew this would likely be his last chance.

“Can I make a selfish request?” He asked. She nodded, moving even closer. The fireflies lit their faces, the soft glow warming the otherwise cool silver night.

“Of course,” Lumine answered, her mouth twitching into a grin, “If there’s anyone I would encourage to be selfish sometimes, it’s you.”

Xiao lifted his hand again, brushing a firefly from her hair and letting his touch linger a few seconds beyond what was necessary. Then he touched the feathers by her ear, brushing them with his fingers before meeting her eyes once more.

“Allow me one confession before you go,” he said, hardly a whisper on the wind. Lumine’s brows twitched, almost an expression of grief, but only for a moment. Her eyes were bright, her smile kind, and then she nodded. Xiao felt his heart constrict, the briefest rush of something running through his veins. He thought it might be fear – he wasn’t sure what else to call it.

“In all the years I’ve lived, I’ve carried many regrets. Some are, admittedly, things I never could have changed. Others are regrets born from my own weakness, my own failing, my own lack of conviction.” He sighed, closing his eyes as memories of each sorrow flooded his mind. His voice, usually well-controlled, wavered slightly as he continued. “I do not wish to suffer from such regrets when it comes to you.”

He opened his eyes, taking in every detail of her. She did not speak, but her hand found his and held it gently.

“You’ve become so important to me,” he said, feeling his own brows pull together as emotion threatened to burst from within him. He couldn’t name the feeling. “Before you, the future was a vague haze of endless slaughter. My only desire was to serve Liyue to my ultimate end. I was certain of my place, of my purpose – certain that I could never exist in this world as I once had. And perhaps I couldn’t, if not for you. I... do not know what to call these feelings. All I know is that my place, my purpose, my desire is to be by your side for as long as I can be. I will not keep you from this duty you must complete, but I would ask that you do not leave this world without coming back to me first.”

The plain request, outright and selfish, burned his throat as he said it – but Lumine’s eyes held no malice or disgust. Her expression was warm and tender. Xiao felt his throat close, the otherworldly beauty almost too much for him.

“You’re important to me, too,” she whispered, shifting her head to kiss his hand which she still held. Her warm gaze returned to him even while her lips remained pressed to the back of his hand. He could feel her mouth move as she spoke. “I can name the feeling, though.”

All the sounds in the world seemed to fade from around them, the silent glow of fireflies the only thing still tethering Xiao to reality. Lumine lowered their linked hands, and for as long as he lived Xiao would be able to recall the shape of the words on her lips as well as the sound of them in her voice.

“I love you, Xiao.”

Time froze. Love. It had been so long since such an emotion had any place in his life...

Yet it did not feel out of place for Lumine. For what she meant to him. His free hand found her chin just before his lips found hers. It was so natural, so right – her kiss was soft and sweet, and he knew from this momentary touch that she truly could make qingxin taste sweet. After all, what did qingxin have on the bitterness of this farewell?

The kiss broke, but neither pulled away. Lumine leaned her head against his, her eyes still closed. Like she didn't want to open them and admit the moment had ended.

"I'll be leaving at first light," she said. Xiao traced the bottom of her lip with his thumb.

"There's a set time for this confrontation?"

She smiled ruefully and opened her eyes to look at him, the gold of her irises like liquid sunlight. "No, I just..."

She didn't finish the thought, but Xiao knew. Her eyes traveled across his face, memorizing his features the same way he'd been memorizing hers. She was choosing to give herself this one night. He felt her hand on his neck as she pulled him in for another kiss, erasing any remaining doubt in his mind. Time, distance, even death – nothing could break their connection now.

The fireflies danced through the bamboo; the moonlight reflected off the water; the stars in the dark web of the sky glittered like diamonds; and weaving among these were the secrets which would never be revealed, held between an adeptus and his wandering star.

Xiao stood on the familiar balcony overlooking Dihua Marsh. The whisper of a leaf landing on the old wood beneath his feet reminded him again that things were not as they should be. The wind had died several days past... and even now it did not return. The air felt stagnant, still as an abandoned grave. Around him the birds chirped anxiously, their sweet tones turned to sour and harsh chatter. They, too, knew something was wrong.

It had been weeks since Lumine left. Each day held both hope and dread, the balance ever shifting as they passed. Each bright gold sunrise teasing her return, each sunset levying another tally against her. The wind dying felt like yet another portent of grief.

And yet, when it did return, Xiao would only wish it hadn't. It was the barest breath of a breeze that carried her call, weak and waning, to his ear. The sound, which so often lately had filled him with peace, now tore through him and left a ragged wound.

He was too familiar with war to believe he would find her untouched, uninjured – and somehow the reality was still worse. Her body was all purple and red, her eyes dull and haunted, her hands clutching a dark cloth like it was her lifeline.

"You came," she said, her voice barely a rasping breath, "you came."

She laid against a rough stone, her feet halfway in the cold water of the pond behind her. She'd called him from a hidden glade in Chenyu Vale. He wondered how she'd gotten there. How long she'd laid there suffering alone. The damp air choked him, an unnatural chill crawling down his spine.

"I'm here," he said softly, kneeling beside her with as much care as he could. Her blood was already soaking the grass, spreading like a scarlet blight. He couldn't tell where it was coming from, didn't know if there was a way to stop it – if there was even time left to stop it.

"I came to—" a sharp inhale, a pained expression, "—came to say goodbye."

Xiao felt his blood turn to ice, the words so far from what he'd ever hoped to hear from those lips. She had always been a vision of health and vitality, but the blush of vigor he'd known so well was now replaced by a deathly wash, sapped of all color besides the blood smeared across her pallid skin. He couldn't respond, couldn't even think of what response he could have. Her life seemed to slip further from reach with each moment – and he could do nothing. Lumine reached for his hand and he let her twine her fingers through his, his chest aching at their icy touch.

"I did it, Xiao. It's done. But I can't... stay. The wound is deep – deeper than can be expressed. It's down to my essence. I need— I need you to help me let go. It's hard to let go." Her breath caught as if she was choking back a sob, but her eyes remained the same – dry, dull; already half dead. She didn't intend to fight anymore.

"No," Xiao said, terribly aware of his own selfishness. He tightened his hold on her hand, carefully pulling her toward him so she was wrapped in his arms instead of laying against the rough surface of the cold rock. She wasn't allowed to leave like this.

"There's another way," he said, his mind racing to find what his heart was certain must exist, "There has to be. You're here, you're still alive. That means you can live."

He knew the words were meaningless, that nothing he said was based in anything but his own fear and denial – but he couldn't stop himself. Lumine had taught him to find the things worth living for. She had made the impossible happen before. She could do it again. She had to. He held her tight, as if his strength could flow into her and bring her back from the brink. But she only shook her head at him, the barest glint of tears finally reflecting in her eyes.

"Please," Xiao begged, "just tell me what I have to do and I will save you."

"You can't save me," Lumine said, the ghost of a laugh escaping her throat as her fingers twitching against his – the closest she could manage to a reassuring squeeze. Then she flinched, gritting her teeth and turning her face to the sky with a grief-stricken look. A rushing sound filled Xiao's ears as she continued speaking, explaining; but Xiao could understand none of it. Descenders, trees, seas, truth... They were like mere ramblings of a dying soldier. He could understand it as nothing more.

"Please," Xiao begged again once she'd gone silent again. Her explanation, incomprehensible as it was, left no hope for revival. And yet he begged. He could not accept this. Lumine looked at him, her expression soft and her dull eyes shining one last time as if to urge him on.

"Just live, Xiao. Do that for me. That's all I ask," she said, her voice losing strength as the words spilled out. Xiao felt something break, sharp and deep, as if something holding him to the earth had snapped. Live in this world without her – a world that was no longer his, that he'd only come to know through her...? It seemed an impossible task. A final rejection stuck in his throat, the pointless words burning like fire and climbing behind his eyes, wrapping around his tongue, tightening within

his jaw. Sharp wind whipped around him, but he couldn't tell from where it came – couldn't tell if it was his own or if the world itself also raged against the death of one so pure. Her eyes never left his. For however long those final moments lasted he was the only thing she saw. Xiao could only watch in horror as the light left her eyes, the weight of her last request like a curse on his soul.

“Live.”



Only the Night

By Berry

“Hold on. Your flower came loose.”

It’s in the touch. Not the imaginary of what once was, the difference in weather, scenery and the world itself hardly matters. It’s all entrapped in the touch, the quality of peculiar tenderness as gentle fingertips brush ever-so-slightly through her hair to fix the minor disarray in her appearance. Through the most mundane, natural of gestures, Lumine is transported aeons back, galaxies away only to be left staring right into the wavering memory of a pair of golden eyes – a twin mirror of her own.

Then it drowns in a blur, in seconds transforming into a shimmering waterfall of salty tears to stain her trembling cheeks and lips. The reality hits her once more, its brute force disinviting the air from her lungs as if she could breathe solely on the recollection of the unreachable past.

She sees Xiao’s arm reclining hastily, as if afraid he did something to hurt her, however she can’t take the right action of stopping him to ease his worry, too consumed by the suddenness of her grief. And so they both linger in that moment of time, suspended in the atmosphere of uncertainty while neither of them can fill the silence with any healing words.

It seems that he’s the one to understand first – a rare occurrence, yet not unwelcomed as Xiao has truly become versed in reading and comprehending human emotions, especially when it came to her. The backside of his fingers slowly traces the pattern of Lumine’s tears, allowing the salty streams to sink readily into the fabric of his gloves. She pushes herself to regard him properly, only to be met with eyebrows knit in deep worry as his sparkling eyes waver. “Lumine.” It’s all he says. Her name. How can such simplicity contain an abundance of sheer love and support? Though her heart bursts with warmth at everything he’s left between the lines, she can’t help but let the dam break at a new wave of tears.

This time, she clumsily goes to wipe them herself, putting a few inches of distance between them. “I’m okay. I just... need a moment,” the voice lies against the words spoken as it breaks at its seams, cracking into a meek whisper at the last syllables. If she’s unable to convince herself, then he can’t stand convinced either.

“Tell me,” Xiao’s plea matches the volume of Lumine’s voice, as if uttering a single sound above anything but whisper could shatter the world around them. “What ails you?”

World and words be damned, it’s still all in the touch – the moment his palm cups

the side of her face and his thumb stands guard of her face against the incoming tears, Lumine can feel her defences crumbling down, everything suppressed from years ago blasting through each of her nerves, nearly threatening to fry them until nothing's left.

Only the night and the twinkling stars can bear witness to grand hero of this continent, the saviour of many, break. Only the night and only him. The pillar of delusions and denial that she'd built to support all of her being through the journey snaps, Lumine's body toppling forwards to find relief in the sturdy shoulders right in front of her – just to experience, for a selfish, egoistical minute, how it is to have someone carry her burden. Lumine's fingertips claw into the flesh hidden under the thin layer of fabric, not to cause pain but to reassure herself that there in fact is a living, breathing being ready to hold her and it's not all in her imagination.

Xiao seems to hesitate for just a heartbeat before the palm still resting on Lumine's face urges her softly to move until their foreheads meet halfway. He doesn't speak and she doesn't expect him to -whether he's aware of it or not, the sole weight of his touch is enough to engulf her spirit in a veil of peacefulness that soon turns her pained sobs into a barely audible wailing. She begins to catch her breath desperately, like a drowning person who managed to find the surface again.

"I'm...sorry. I'm sorry you have to see me like this," she mumbles woefully, her eyelids falling shut to avoid seeing his expression. This wasn't supposed to happen. When she asked him to go on a walk earlier today, it was to bring respite to Xiao's body ridden with karmic debt. Perhaps she's been holding on by the very last string for far longer than she'd known, but who knew a single gesture could lead to that thread breaking?

Even though it would be in her best interest to retreat and leave him to his own devices so he could actually taste the peace of the late summer night, Lumine moves her hands from his shoulder to wrap her arms around his neck. Ridiculous as it is, she can't help the unreasonable fear that once she lets go, he will disappear much like her brother, leaving her all alone.

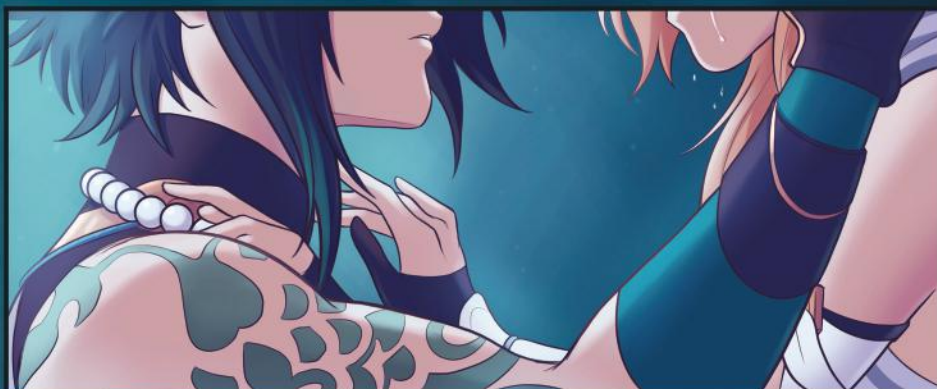
"Don't feel the need to apologise. Although I cannot offer you any words of wisdom to counter whatever has made you sad, it is not my wish for you to hold yourself back around me."

"Xiao, I don't need any wisdom," Lumine opposes with strength she's not aware of right now, eyes snapping back open to realise the worry has never left his features. She remembers some of the social cues are in the realm of obliviousness to him, not through ignorance but through the complicity of human behaviours, so she tries her best to have him know what she already carries deep within herself: "If you're around me, it's enough. If you hold me like this... it's enough."

"If it's enough, then why are you still shedding tears?" No malice or complaint lurks within the question, only curiosity backed by the fact that he desperately wants to bring her comfort.

"The way you fixed my flower... Aether, my brother, used to do this all the time back when we were travelling together. You reminded me of that."

"I—" Xiao opens his mouth, ready to rain apologies for something that requires no grief. She quickly reacts by putting an open palm on his lips.



"It's a pleasant memory. A very warm one. Thank you for bringing it to me. I don't mourn over the past it happened in, but over the present I can't have it anymore. To know someone else can do such a simple thing for me is bittersweet. I miss my brother, but it's because I have you next to me I can let these emotions tell their tale through the tears. I'm not forced to be alone in my sadness. Thank you for granting me this."

Xiao frowned slightly, mulling over her explanation as the last of her tears dry in the night wind. Coming to a conclusion of sorts, a mystery to Lumine, he takes a hold of her wrist, but instead of pulling her hand away from his mouth, he turns it around to kiss the back of her palm. "Thank you for trusting me with your feelings. I'll make sure to cherish them to be of better aid the next time you wish for a shoulder to lean on."

Of all things, that very statement manages to put a ghost of a smile on her still quivering lips. What would sound like a natural reply from any person, sculpted by the solemnity of his it's more than a mere response – it's an oath etched in the purest form of kindness.

"There's no 'better'. Unaware of it as you are, you've already surpassed any 'better' there is to achieve."

He might not know. He's the first person in this cursed world to ever see her tears. He's the first light of life to shine on the side of Lumine usually dormant deep within, the other face that doesn't don the mask of a hero and isn't perpetually strong and willful. He's the very first witness to her weakness and the protector of her utmost, bottomless trust. He might not now. But someday, she'll tell him. Perhaps soon. In straightforward, uncomplicated words, she'll tell Xiao he means so much and then some. Perhaps even today. But not now.

Right now the overdose of words could turn their night into the crisp orange of the waking sun as the time would flow and slip through their fingers. Neither of them is prone to such excessiveness anyway. All Lumine wants is to keep feeling his warmth next to her until her heart settles into its usual steady rhythm and the challenges of the approaching day won't bring about dread but another wave of determination.

"I doubt it," he retorts quietly. "Yet I won't meddle into your perception. Tell me, though: what is it that you yearn for now?"

"Let me stay like this for a while," Lumine says before bringing her head down to rest in the crook of his neck where she can clearly feel the humming of his sturdy pulse.

His arms, uncertain at first, find their way around her waist until the two of them fit like two pieces of a puzzle in the dead of night. Lumine counts Xiao's heartbeats well into the first light of dawn, securely enveloped in his presence.

By the time the sun awakes, the loneliness is once more locked in a vault in her heart and Lumine is fairly certain that this time it's Xiao who keeps guard to its key.





A Cup of Moon

By ahocrowregi

The wait until nightfall is long. The lights blink on slowly, one by one, little seeds of yellow flame scattered in the city as the sun descends over the glimmering sea.

“Are we *still* waiting? Let’s go already! Paimon’s huuungry.” The little fairy tugs insistently on Lumine’s scarf, trying to pull her down the steps to the harbor.

“Be patient. He’ll be here soon,” she soothes, patting Paimon on her head.

“If he doesn’t get here in ten minutes Paimon’ll starve to death! Why don’t you just call his name? He always listens to you.”

“Because we invited him, remember? It’s rude to force someone to come to a date.”

Paimon’s eyes flash. “Oooh! This is a date?”

“Oh, hush. You know that’s not what I meant.”

“No wonder you kept going on your little outings without Paimon! You should’ve said something! How could you keep that a secret from me?!”

As the sun settles over the cusp of the horizon with Paimon’s bickering, he arrives with a whisper of wind.

“What’s going on here?” a gruff voice asks.

“Nothing! Nothing at all!” Lumine turns and grins. “Paimon thought you weren’t coming.” (“I never said that!”)

“I knew you wouldn’t leave unless I came,” comes the curt response. He walks forward and stops at what seems to be the limits of the harbor’s immediate circle. Below them is life and light, noise and revelry.

Xiao’s face is nigh inscrutable—though perhaps a hint of apprehension seeps through a hairline fracture of his mask.

“I’ll stay near you,” Lumine reassures him with a smile. “Want to hold hands?”

He grimaces and pushes away her proffered hand. “Don’t mock me.”

“All right, I’ll stop teasing,” she sighs.

Paimon is already yards ahead of them. “Let’s head down! Paimon’s starving!”

The scene before them is Paimon's ultimate gluttonous fantasy come to life. The smells of grilled meat and spices; the ever-present salty spray of the ocean; a veritable rainbow of colors and lights. For Xiao, it's a nightmare of noise and disarray; the sensory overload merging in a clamorous din.

Lumine somehow senses his discomfort before he even realizes he's gritting his teeth in pain. "Paimon, go browse for a bit, okay? I need to check something out," she says, pulling Xiao towards a nearby alleyway.

"Huh? Okay, just shout for Paimon when you need her!"

And just by turning the corner, it's better. Not great, but better. The alley is dark, a little musty; the sharp smell of rust sings the air. He's doubled over, trying not to hyperventilate.

"You don't have to push yourself," says Lumine quietly, resting a hand on his shoulder. "If it's too much for now, we can come back another night."

"No. I'll... compose myself."

Even with her face barely illuminated, Xiao can see her concerned expression in those honey-gold eyes; those furrowed brows. He darts his gaze away, unable to hold it for too long—it's like staring at the sun. He instead concentrates on breathing. Centers all his focus on her hand against his bare shoulder. Her touch is warm in contrast to his clammy skin, and it grounds him. The crowd outside is still bustling, but it's easier to bear. Before, a riotous mess; individual flashing lights of overwhelming energy. Now, nothing more than a muted mass. Like a ship coasting a wave, he lets it pass and breathes a sigh.

"Better?"

"Yes." He shrugs off her hand, though an ache of reluctance makes itself known in his chest. "Thank you. Let's make haste. I believe it's best not to keep your little friend waiting."

They make their way out again, scanning the crowd—and they spot Paimon almost instantly. It's hard not to notice the manic flitting of that insatiable pixie; she's hopping from stall to stall as if burned.

"Lumine! Xiao! C'mon, c'mon, we gotta try all of this!" Paimon tugs on Lumine's scarf and all but drags her over.

The first stall owner accosts them with skewers of sugar-coated fruit. "Fresh *tanghulu*! Crunchy and delicious!" Another owner from across them waves bowls of dubious pale chunks around. "Stinky tofu! A local delicacy!" A third simply shouts, "Grilled fish and squid! Caught today!"

"Chicken feet!"

"Rice cakes!"

Lumine nudges Xiao. "Anything catches your eye?"

He wrinkles his nose. "I'm not hungry."

"It's the night market! You have to try *something*. It's my treat!"

He heaves a sigh, then glances around. The owners beseech him silently with pleading eyes.

"I'll have that." He points at the second vendor, whose face splits into a wide grin. Lumine and Paimon grimace in tandem, shooting each other anxious looks.

Paimon flits over to Xiao's side and elbows him urgently. "Are you sure you want to try that? It smells... uh..."

He casts her a cool look. "You first."

"Nope! Nuh-uh! Paimon's not trying any of that stuff!" She ducks behind Lumine's shoulder, casting an evil eye at the food being scooped into the cup.

"Didn't you say you were hungry?"

Lumine could swear that's a *smirk* on his face. "Xiao! You're a bully!"

"Uh-uhm... 150 Mora, if you please," the vendor simpers, holding out the tofu. Lumine scowls and drops the coins into his hand, snatching the cup from him.

"Well?" Xiao says.

He's got her cornered. Paimon won't touch it, little coward that she is, and she can't just toss it uneaten, can she? Lumine sighs, tries her best not to breathe through her nose, and takes a bite.

As she chews, her eyes widen. Despite the smell (which *reeks* of feet), the texture is nice, with a crisp outside and soft and spongy inside. The flavor is both savory and subtly sweet. She manages to swallow, and it slides down easily... but the aftertaste is almost too much to bear.

"That's not... *too* bad," she chokes out. (Paimon's gaze is that of overwhelming pity.) Well, she's done her share. She shoves the cup into Xiao's hands. "Your turn."

He takes a bite without complaint—which is surprising, knowing how picky he is. He even manages to swallow without looking thoroughly ill. And to Lumine's disbelief, he slowly but surely picks up each chunk of tofu, chews, and swallows, until it's completely devoured. Even the vendor appears surprised.

"I... I don't know how you managed to finish that," she says in awe as Xiao tosses the cup away.

"The texture wasn't bad. Just the smell."

"Paimon nearly threw up," the fairy complains. "Nuh-uh! How could anyone want that over grilled skewers? I think you should ask for your Mora back!"

"Mortals seem to crave novelty at all costs, even subjecting themselves to physical pain to achieve this." Xiao shakes his head. "Incomprehensible."

"Yet you're doing your best to understand," Lumine says gently. "That's worthy of praise."

He huffs. "Praise? Unnecessary. I'm simply doing what I should."

“You’re way too daring for someone trying this for the first time!” Paimon squawks.

The next hour is spent browsing more food stalls. Lumine offers Xiao other treats as well—fish balls, tea eggs, cold noodles, et cetera—but he only takes a little nibble, grimaces, and pushes it away. Well. He’s already done admirably for tonight. Paimon is only too happy to act as the resident garbage bin, packing so much food away in that tiny stomach of hers that it boggles the mind. At the end of the food street, Lumine picks up a cup of sweet sticky rice cakes, which seems more suited to Xiao’s palate. She even catches a glimpse of him licking at a drop of brown sugar that had somehow ended up on his cheek. Adorable.

Their bellies satisfied, they turn to the next street and start browsing the wares being sold there. There are toys, jewelry, antiques, rare books, pottery, art pieces, clothes, perfumes, and even instruments. The prices range from dirt cheap to more Mora than Lumine has ever seen. It all passes in a blur—they do little more than browse, after all; stroking the smooth fabric of an elegant silk robe or testing the weight of a chunk of jade—but even so, it takes hours to make their way through everything. In those hours Lumine learns more about Xiao through observation than he’s ever told her himself. He picks up a bamboo flute at Paimon’s behest and plays a clear melody, wistful and sweet, and the owner begs him to keep it after flocks of customers poke their curious heads around to listen. He has a good eye for fakes and usually has a little story to tell about the owners of rare adeptal antiques. He prefers traditional, nature-themed paintings, and even accepts a small scroll of a night landscape as a gift from Lumine.

“Hey? What’s that on the back?” Paimon asks, noticing the black ink in a small corner behind the painting.

“Calligraphy?” Lumine guesses.

“Let me see.” Xiao’s eyes dart back and forth as he deciphers the flowery text. “‘The moon glows gently, carved from jade, curved like your brows arrayed.’ This is a poem.”

“Wow! A double gift! That means you owe Lumine and me both,” Paimon says smugly, probably trying to get a reaction from Xiao. But he only huffs.

“Very well. What would you like in return?”

“Oh! U-uh—Paimon doesn’t really need anything right now. It’s nice enough to see you out and about—with friends!”

“Be that as it may. I will repay my debts.”

“Don’t be silly,” Lumine cuts in. “There’s no debt here. Gifts are given in the moment.”

“How about... oohh, Paimon knows! Paimon gets to eat your next bowl of Almond Tofu,” she snickers, and Lumine gives her a gentle swat.

“Enough about food. Isn’t it about time for your bedtime anyway?”

As if on cue, Paimon yawns. “It *is* pretty late... what about you, Lumi? Are you going to sleep too?”

“Why don’t you duck inside the Teapot and rest first? I’ll join you in a bit. Just want to look at the stars for a bit before I head to bed.”

"All right! Have fun," Paimon says with a wave, and with a *poof*, she vanishes.

A moment passes, and then Lumine spins on her heel. "Well, Xiao?" she says with a coy smile. "Would you like to join me?"

The silence between them lingers as she leads them up the stairs to the second floor of the Yanshang Teahouse. They take a seat under the overhanging branches (next to each other, Xiao notices—is that a strange thing to do?), and Lumine conjures up two small cups and a porcelain jug. Xiao does not comment as she fills up the cups, sliding the first one over to him. He brings it to his nose and sniffs warily. It's alcohol, a strong *baijiu* with fragrant floral undertones.

"Well? Are you going to drink with me, Xiao? Now that Paimon's gone, I can afford to let loose a little."

"Normally, I would refuse," he says, but upon seeing her pout he immediately relents. "I'll make an exception for you," he sighs. "Just this once." Under her watchful gaze, he downs the entire shot. It burns its way down his throat; the taste of liquor unfamiliar to him after so many long years, and he can feel it warming his extremities already.

"That's what I'm talking about!" she laughs, refilling his cup. "Cheers," she says, and Xiao has no choice but to down it again, as is tradition. The second cup is heady, the sweet flavor unfurling its petals across his tongue.

"I didn't know you drank," he says accusingly, watching her tip her head back. Her throat bobs as she swallows, and he can't help his eyes lingering on her jaw, the outline of her profile, the sweet curve of her face.

"I don't, normally," she replies. "People usually assume I'm too young to drink. But I do enjoy it once in a while."

"Mm. I don't drink on principle," he says. But he doesn't object when Lumine refills his cup again. "It makes me sloppy. But if it's with you... it's okay."

"You always make me feel special, Xiao," she confesses, setting the jug down. "Always letting me do things you'd never allow other people to do. Aren't you spoiling me a bit?"

He prays that the darkness is concealing the heat in his cheeks. "I fail to comprehend your meaning."

She giggles. "Never mind. It's just... you make me happy. Always pushing yourself for me. But just know that you don't have to."

"But I want to," he says, a bit too loudly, making Lumine spill a little bit of liquor in her surprise. His face flushes, and he settles back in his seat. "It's... I want to understand you. To know what you like. To feel as you feel." The words are awkward, lead in his mouth, a landslide of jagged stones crashing their way out from his stumbling tongue. But all she does is laugh sweetly.

"Hmhm. Well? What do you think I'm feeling now? Do you feel it too?"

She swirls the alcohol around in her cup, and they both look up to the sky. A full moon hangs above them, silver and plump, like a ripe apple begging to be plucked. The chatter has died almost completely—probably owing to the fact that it's only

four hours to sunrise—and stillness hangs nervously between them.

Some foolish notion grips him, and he recalls the rest of the poem from the painting she'd given him. "I journey south through jade gates once more, yet again I ask for your return to shore," he recites quietly.

She tilts her head, puzzled. "Hm?"

"The poem," he explains. "'A Cup of Moon.' That's its name. It's about... a traveler who yearns for their love, far away."

The light of the moon paints Lumine's skin silver, yet it's still abundantly clear that she's blushing. "I guess it's a fitting gift, then," she mumbles, so quietly that not even Xiao can be sure that he heard her correctly.

"You should come back more often," he blurts, before biting down on his tongue.

"Hm?" she says, a coquettish smirk on her face. It's a new expression to Xiao—far cheekier than he's ever seen. "Of course, I should, but why do you suddenly say that?" She leans closer to him, her shoulder pressing against his. "Because you miss me?"

His gaze lowers. "Yes."

She jolts a little at his answer, clearly not expecting honesty. He can't help it. Three drinks in, and his heart is all but bleeding out, exposed and palpitating on his sleeve. But she doesn't push him away, to his surprise. He can only watch dumbly as she extends her hand and gently nudges her way under his palm with her thumb. A little cat, pushing under his fingers to be pet. Her fingers—oh, dream above dreams—interlace with his. Squeeze gently. He shudders at the touch; the familiarity.

He manages to look up, and perhaps the alcohol has made it more bearable for him to stare deeply into her golden eyes. The sun eclipsed by the moon. Hypnotizing; a tawny gold, as if glowing from within.

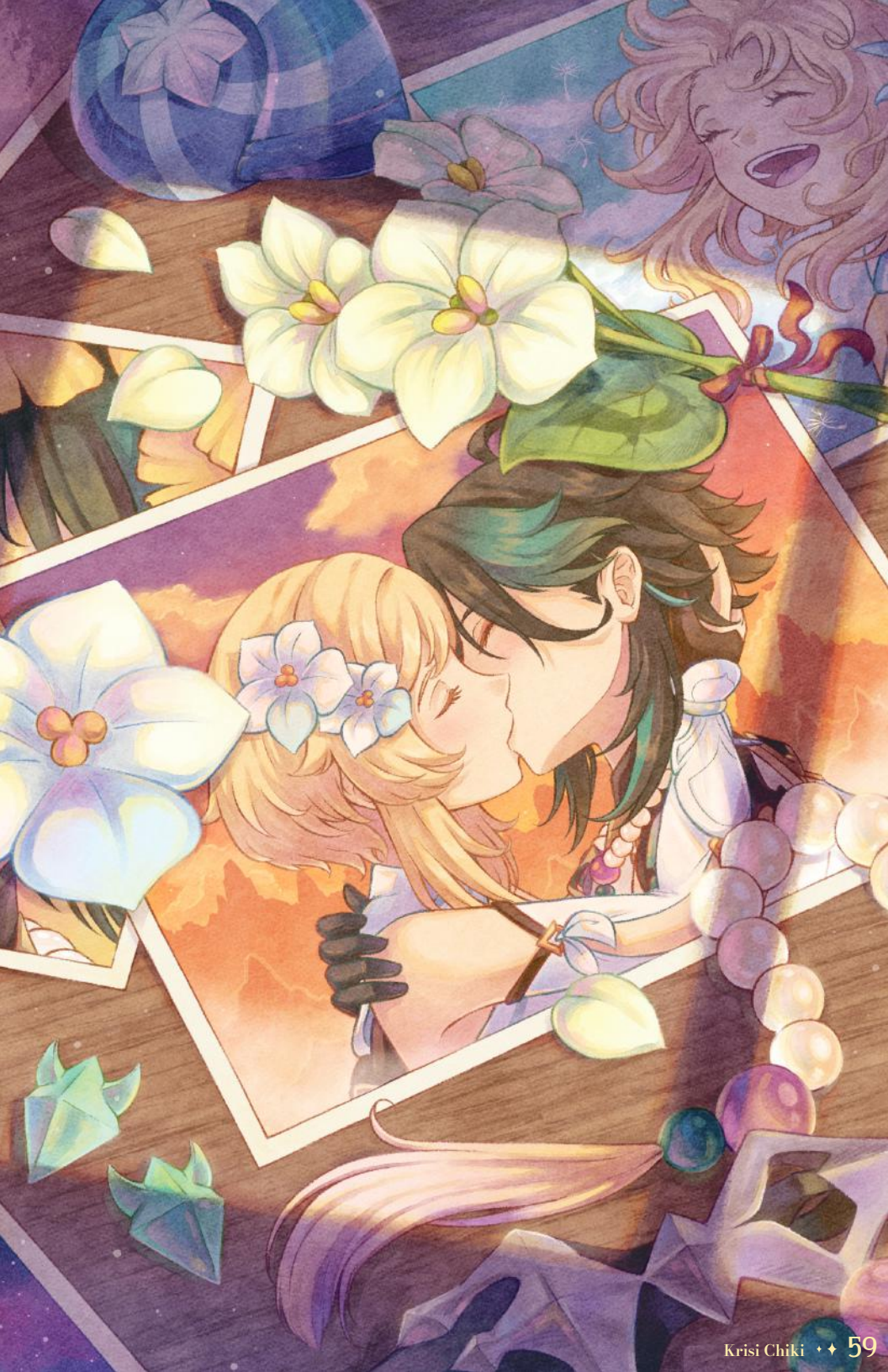
"I'll come back," she vows, and a breeze rustles through the leaves, chasing her words. Brushes them against his face like a caress.

"Promise me," he whispers.

"Hmm. I swear to the vigilant Yaksha, protector of Liyue, that I shall return of sound body and mind to his side, for when I need him and he needs me." Her mouth quirks in a smile. "Satisfied?"

How lovely the moon is tonight. He gives her a squeeze and seals the promise.

"Passable."



Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō

By Mythicamagic

When setting out for a commission earlier that day Lumine hadn't really stopped to examine her party members. Sucrose had been traveling with her as a means of gathering more data on how Liyue's mountainous terrain affected mint-leaf samples in comparison to those found in Mondstadt or Dragonspine. Before picking up her daily commissions list, they'd stepped inside Lumine's Serenitea Pot and promptly found Faruzan and Zhongli inside; one having visited to pick up a book, the other to lounge around and enjoy free tea.

They'd both accepted her invitation to travel through Liyue for the day and help with the commissions, following Lumine's lead as she scoured the terrain in search of a lost artifact.

That was how the Traveller came to realize she'd unwittingly picked up three of the most intelligent people she'd met in Teyvat.

If I don't ask them now, I'd be letting this opportunity go to waste...

They were already near the location. It would just take a little more hiking.

Slyly leading her companions, Lumine glided down from Mt. Aozang toward lonely peaks. She made a show of using Elemental Sight, pretending to track the commission's lost artifact, touching down and climbing up the smooth rocks just below Qingyun Peak.

"M-might we- *hah*- stop for a rest?"

Glancing over her shoulder, she noticed Zhongli reaching down, offering a hand to a panting Faruzan. She accepted, allowing him to pull her up and over a ledge, huffing and adjusting her skirts with a flutter. "Thank you, young man. At least someone around here respects their elders."

Zhongli blinked, giving a bemused smile. "Not at all."

Opening her mouth to apologize, Lumine froze as a sound graced her ears. Lonely, long and mournful. She whipped her head around to look up at the lonely mountain peaks before them. By some miracle they'd made it on time.

Everyone in the group fell quiet at the noise. The sound- strange and foreign to their ears- repeated its sad song once more, allowing the rocks of the mountains to echo

its noise, carrying it so far Lumine wondered if its cries reached Dihua Marsh.

Only when the sound drifted off and everything fell quiet once more did everyone look at each other; its haunting melody lingering like a gossamer veil, preventing them from raising their voices too high.

"What on Teyvat was that?" Faruzan monitored the dark skies above. "Certainly nothing I've ever heard before."

"Curious indeed," sitting down upon a fallen log elegantly, Zhongli laced his fingers. "Any guesses?"

"Well I'm no forest ranger, but it sounded like an animal of some sort," tapping her chin, Faruzan frowned to herself. "Much too otherworldly to be a common finch though."

Lumine nodded. "I know it's silly to say- but I almost thought of a whale the first time I heard it. In other worlds, they had similar creatures who communicated through sonar, and they sounded similar over tracking machines. Not that there's any sky whales around here..." she hoped. "Next I thought it could be a whistle, or a flute-

"No, not that."

The group shifted to find Sucrose standing further away. Furious scribbling noises could be heard as she took notes. "I've never met one of course, but logically it could be assumed that the noises were from one of the Adepti. The power, reverb and scope is unlike a regular animal cry."

Lumine bit her lip, catching Zhongli's calm gaze. In truth, she'd suspected as much, but needed confirmation before doing anything about it.

"You're right to suspect a bird, Madam Faruzan. My first guess is...ah, what was her name, Cloud Retainer?" Sucrose hummed. "Or it could be Alatus, also known as the Golden-Winged King. I read about him in a book once. As a scientist, I'm sure you know I don't put too much stock in folklore though. This is just an initial guess."

And there it was. So achingly simple. The answer she'd long since suspected but hadn't been sure what to do with, how to confront it. Lumine's chest tightened. Her breath stalled.

Against her better judgment, she looked to Zhongli again. He smiled softly, turning severe golden eyes to the misty mountains.

"...And they say: 'Hark, the yaksha calls to summon his old friends to their homeland,'" he uttered, eyes softening at the memory of something that had long passed.

Sucrose lit up. "You've read the book too, Mr. Zhongli?"

"Oh yes, and that cry was indeed from an Adeptus. A melancholy sound, to be sure; for the song is intended as a duet you see. If it has no answer, then the lone singer feels the silence all the keener. Don't you agree, Traveler?"

Avoiding his knowing gaze and joining Sucrose at the cliff side, Lumine let out a long exhale.

A duet.

A call waiting for an answer that would never come.

Xiao.

Had he really been calling for his companions all this time? Mourning them every night, hoping beyond hope, that one would answer? Or was there no hope in that song? Just a moonlit cry of grief and aching heartache. The Chasm had snatched away any lingering hope of seeing Bociasus again, and yet Xiao's mournful singing had not stopped even after their return.

Rubbing her eyes, Lumine set her shoulders back. "Right. I see."

"Hm?"

"I'd like to answer then, if I can."

Faruzan spoke up, skeptical. "How are you going to do a thing like that?"

The Traveler couldn't help but smile a little. "I know some...special little guys who are well versed in music."

Returning to Vanarana again never failed to put her at peace. The static noise of worries and stresses died down, soothed by the happy hum of a thousand voices in the forest breeze. The village greeted her warmly. To her delight, a familiar face was also there amongst the crowd.

"Oh wow, what luck it is running into you here!" Nahida beamed, waving from within the cluster of Aranara. "To what do we owe your joyous visit?"

Sitting among the Aranara with their Archon, Lumine began explaining her idea. She'd returned to Liyue's mountains not too long ago, but this time she'd brought along a device from Fontaine.

Everyone gathered around the small box, gasping as Xiao's birdsong blared out of it. Lumine quickly adjusted the volume. "It's a recording," she explained, smiling at the wood folk as they tittered amongst themselves. "This is what he sounds like, pretty isn't it?" taking a breath, she felt her heart tighten. "Do you think you can help me answer him?"

The group got to work immediately. The first thing to settle on was the right instrument. The Aranara brought out a variety of wooden instruments they'd made themselves, inspired by various Sumeru instruments. Nahida tracked the pitch of each one, seeming to mentally sync up with Xiao's birdsong enough to hear which strum of strings or musical notes matched the melody via the use of a digital dendro screen simulating volume and pitch.

Lumine tried every instrument, strumming on the Oud, Baglama, Tanpura and Riqq before moving onto instruments Nahida seemed to produce out of nowhere; saying they should try Liyue inspired music. Though proficient in a few instruments, blowing notes into a Guanzi, Dizi, and Hulusi flute proved challenging. Lumine didn't complain once though, drinking plenty and enjoying the process of playing each new thing. She particularly liked the aptly named; Xiao Bamboo Flute, but sadly Nahida found the sound too reedy to sync nicely with his birdsong.

Though it took several hours, eventually with their combined efforts, they selected the right pitch to match Xiao's birdsong. Since it required a combination of different flutes, Nahida turned to Lumine with a smile.

"You should carve a flute yourself out of wood."

"Are you sure? I don't know anything about making musical instruments. It'll be a back scratcher more than anything," Lumine pointed out.

"That won't matter," unfathomably kind eyes twinkled, "Trust me!"

Deciding to trust her, Lumine sat down with a long piece of wood, hollowing out the middle and crudely poking holes through it. As predicted, it looked awful.

True to her word however, Nahida took the flute in hand. After a moment, a faint green glow began seeping through the rosewood. As it left her hands to hover mid-air, the Aranaras began to sing. Sweet, joyful and childlike, their melody wrapped around the instrument, giving it a pale shine.

Lumine's eyes were wide as the flute floated down into her open hands. She could feel the blessings of countless souls vibrating within. Well wishes, a desire to connect.

For some reason, her eyes stung.

It was perfect for Xiao.

She lifted her head and smiled tearfully. "Thank you, everyone."

He couldn't verbalize, let alone explain to himself, why he needed to call out.

Bosacius was dead. He'd confirmed it himself back in the Chasm. The rest of his Yaksha comrades were gone, the stories of their time serving Morax wrapped up with overexaggerated glitz into various mortal books and otherwise largely forgotten. Xiao had no reason to fold and change himself into his original form, to give voice to his grief and longing via song.

The feelings that had once inspired him to start singing near Mt. Aozang had somewhat changed at least. No longer was he plagued by uncertainty about the fate of the last Yaksha- and though he mourned, the birdsong that burst out from his throat was meant for many lives that had come and gone, not just his brethren. He pictured Pervases, Guizhong, and other Illuminated Beasts and Gods that had once walked their world. If he reached back even further into his mind, he pictured his parents, and sang for them too.

Being honest, he'd learned his birdsong from listening to his parents perform a duet. A question posed, and an answer. Their faces were hazy, worn and blurred by the passing of thousands of years, but their song had stayed in his memories, and become transformed by his own voice and feelings.

As he perched that evening upon a high outcropping of rock, Xiao looked out at the misty mountains, allowing himself to be lulled by emotion. Folding his ragged, teal wings that had seen better days, he let himself call out.

Long, lingering notes escaped him instinctively. Mournful, longing. The vast emptiness above the cloudbank made the answering beat of silence all the more apparent. The mocking answer of his own cries echoing back to him as they bounced off Mt. Aozang's rocks had felt like extra salt in the wound during his earlier days.

But Xiao didn't expect an answer. Though he paused after each segment of his song, it was not out of hope a kindred spirit might reply. It was just out of learned, instinctive politeness when performing a replica of a duet. He had no mate to sing his heart to.

He could long for a gentle touch to run across the calluses of his skin or ragged feathers but the spaces between his fingers would remain empty of another's hand clasping his own. A flash of golden hair entered his mind- before being roughly shoved aside. There was no use in dwelling on such impossible things.

His voice carried, settling over the ravines and valleys below. He readied himself for another trill, wings shifting, the wind combing through his tail feathers.

A long, gentle melody sounded out from below. Xiao froze, voice dying in his throat. Everything in him stiffened, falling silent. He sucked in a breath so sharply his lungs protested.

The music notes were drawn out, before fluttering into a tune that was lifting, lulling, reminiscent of his own. The only difference was that this tune was full of hope. He waited for the lilting noise to die down, listening keenly a few beats longer. Reluctantly, carefully, as if afraid he were dreaming, the Yaksha called out again, his voice becoming stronger the longer he sang.

When the music came again shortly after his segment, its purpose was unmistakable. His heart began to thrum erratically. Blood sang through his veins with renewed vigor.

A question and an answer. His eyes stung.

It sounded...strange. So very foreign and previously unthinkable, to hear the hills be filled up with a tune that wasn't carried by him.

Awkwardly, and with a slight tremor- Xiao tried to sync up. He chirped a new notes, before calling out in time with the stranger's notes. They began to sing antiphonally, or at least that's what the music sounded like to him. The person playing their instrument was singing, no matter how he looked at it. They'd learned his song enough to replicate it almost perfectly.

Their combined songs rose to a crescendo, notes overlapping until one couldn't be separated from the other.

Before the song could end, Xiao pushed off from the mountain face, freefalling downwards. Wrapped in the warmth of the stranger's lingering music, he followed the sound's pathway, beating his wings.

Weaving around a few stone pillars, his gaze locked on a familiar figure.

It's you...

Lumine's eyes flew wide, lowering the flute from her mouth.

Teal feathers tangled in gently swaying blonde locks as he halted inches before

her, breath stalling. Of course it was her. It hadn't occurred to him beforehand, but suddenly the answer was so simple and fitting. A puzzle piece slotting into place. It only ever could have been her. The music had even sounded like her; strong, yet simultaneously gentle and encouraging.

Lumine smiled a little, drenched in his shadow as his form dwarfed her in size. He lowered his head, neck craning down for her hand when she reached up.

"I heard you, many, many months ago now," she said softly, carding her fingers through his feathers. "I only recently found out your song was a duet. I hope it's okay that I joined in."

Bedraggled feathers shuddered. He couldn't stop the noise that escaped him: a soft keen of long forgotten wanting. Something he'd long since denied himself.

His wings reformed into arms, feathers shedding, discarded around him in a burst of dark energy as he stumbled into her waiting embrace.

"More than...okay," he breathed, hiding his face in the juncture between her neck and shoulder, breathing her in. Lumine's fingers shifted to comb through his reformed hair, leaning into him just as his arms curled around her in a rare moment of indulgence. There was no Karma in those stolen touches, no war, no loss or pain. The squeeze and press of their limbs and torsos was an acknowledgment, a wordless vow.

'I'm here. You're not alone.'







giupear



Truths Carried in the Wind

By MusaStyle

The Traveler's name was a mystery to most.

It was a word that held weight and that almost nobody was privy to. The masses remained unaware of the information they were lacking.

For so many years, enough for her to have lost count, Aether had been the only one who said her name. It always came in moments she ended up cherishing looking back on them. It was a reminder of their bond, the promise to always stay together until they found a home bigger than each other.

In the same way, the names they'd come up with when visiting other worlds served as a reminder to not get attached.

While their hearts remained open to the beauty and wonders of each planet, their names stayed under lock and key.

Teyvat was no different.

Even if she no longer had her brother, every time someone said whatever moniker she was using, the Traveler remembered what she was here for: to find Aether and leave. Nothing, nobody, would hold her back, not even the memories she had made with others.

It was always so easy, so simple. As long as nobody knew her name, then they'd never know her, the deepest parts of her. The wall she had built around herself had never come close to being breached, and so, she counted on the strength of the names she chose to keep herself untethered, disconnected, unaffected.

But *Xiao*...

Xiao was a special case, one she hadn't been able to fathom completely.

It wasn't like she had tried to understand him and his effect on her fully, anyway. Every time she came close to an answer, she was quick to dismiss the thought as absolutely ridiculous. The answers that formed in her mind scared her, which was why she never let them take full shape.

Even now, as they stood side by side near a cliff of Jueyun Karst, she found herself avoiding prying too much into her own thoughts about him.

It was best if she focused on the kites they were flying. After all, she did invite him here and although she appreciated the silence as much as he did, and she knew he did, she wanted to talk to him.

To fill the silence, she told herself. Have something else to focus on. It wasn't like his voice worked like a balm to ease her worries, however many there might be. No, of course not.

It wasn't a surprise that her eyes drifted away from the kite she was flying, and settled comfortably on Xiao, who was standing right next to her. He was staring intently at his own kite, a ghost design courtesy of Hu Tao, as if it would fly away at any given moment and he would have to catch it before it was too late.

He was tense, too much for an activity that was supposed to be relaxing for him.

"Xiao?"

"Hm?"

"Take a deep breath for me," she instructed gently. Xiao looked at her, unable to mask the why? written on his face. It was difficult to discern exactly when it became so easy for her to read him or, perhaps, Xiao had simply stopped being so guarded, allowing a crack in his own walls for her to peek through.

She spoke before she could wonder if the same had happened to her.

"I only want you to enjoy what we're doing, that's all," she explained, though she was aware a deep breath wouldn't be enough for him to suddenly be completely at ease.

Still, she hoped he would find some reprieve in what they were doing.

The pull of the string, even if slight and barely there, was grounding. Observing the way in which the kite swayed from side to side served to brush off unwanted thoughts, leaving her mind blissfully empty. Quiet. Nowadays, it was difficult to find moments like these, where—if only temporarily—she could allow herself to not worry about *anything*, except the stability of her kite.

It was no wonder she wanted the same for Xiao, who was constantly haunted by karmic voices and pain he didn't deserve.

"I apologize," Xiao said, but he did listen to her advice and took a deep breath after looking away. It only helped a little in dissipating the tension from his shoulders, as expected.

"I'm not... used to this," he added. *This*, he said, effortlessly encapsulating everything with one word. She didn't need him to elaborate in order for her to understand exactly what he meant.

"I'm aware. If... you find you're not liking it, we can stop," she offered, giving him a smile, as empathetic as she could muster.

Xiao's eyes widened a fraction, his gaze flickering in her direction for a moment, brief as lightning but equally capable of weakening her stance.

"No, it's... it's alright," he replied, his volume having dropped along with one of the layers guarding him. "I can see the appeal, I... just need some time to adjust."

She watched as his attention drifted back to their kites, and she did the same, grasping the opportunity to look away. It was often that she found herself drowning in the warm amber of his eyes, and what worried her was that she didn't mind if it devoured her.

He didn't want to leave, and she was quick to discard the idea of him staying just to please her. If he really didn't like it nor her company, he would have no qualms in leaving. He wouldn't have even accepted her invitation in the first place.

I'm overthinking this.

"That's okay," she said with a nod, loosening the rope of her kite just so her hands were doing something. If she weren't holding the handle, she was sure her fingers would be tugging on the fabric of her gloves.

A pause. Longer than necessary. She caught the idea of a question before it escaped her and left her with the kind of silence she didn't like.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

Xiao glanced at her and she could almost see the gears turning in his head. At least he wasn't brushing her off immediately.

"Keep talking," he finally answered, and she detected the faintest touch of vulnerability lacing his syllables. It was minimal, perceptible only to her ears trained to read his tone.

"Your voice... it helps."

Ah.

Why did her chest feel so strange after he said that? It made a new type of warmth spark in the middle of her ribcage, spreading to the rest of her body, filling up her veins and making her want more.

More of Xiao, more of his voice, his eyes, his smile—the rarest and most precious of gems she could ever find—

She shook her head lightly, interrupting that train of thought. It wasn't the first time she had done that; gone off the rails and focused on the little things, more than she should've.

"Anything you'd like me to talk about?" she asked, as a way to forget where her mind had been heading.

Xiao's eyes were still on their kites, something she confirmed after risking a glance his way, but he was clearly not paying much attention to them anymore. He seemed to be more focused on her and their conversation.

A conversation she hoped wouldn't stop. She could talk about the most trivial of things, and as long as it was with Xiao, she would relish the moment, hold the memory close to her heart and cradle it with care.

"Tell me about your travels," he responded after a short pause. "What has been most memorable so far in your journey through Teyvat?"

You.

When you saved me as I fell.

When you invited me to release a lantern with you.

When you told me your real name, murmured it in the middle of the night when it was quiet so only I could hear it.

Every single one of your birthdays, when you sent me those letters—

She gulped, and hummed, looking away. No. She couldn't start thinking like this. There were many moments in her journey through Teyvat that were memorable.

"Well... There have been many," she said, echoing her thoughts, but when she was supposed to elaborate on one of those *many* memories, she came up short and was left thinking. Instead, her mind continued conjuring up moments with Xiao, which weren't far and few in between.

Archons above.

Her eyes remained locked on her kite, almost staring holes into the thin material as she hoped Xiao didn't pick up on her lack of elaboration. She didn't talk a lot, but when she did, she liked to think she was eloquent, her words fluent.

Eventually, she chose something that had happened recently, letting herself narrate the events automatically.

She was lost in her thoughts though, swimming between them as she tried to control the feelings coming to the surface that refused to settle down. Too immersed in her own mind, she only noticed her kite faltering once the pull of the string disappeared.

Looking up and finding the little Paimon figurine starting to fall, she straightened up, her focus back on the mundane activity for a split second in order to try and salvage it. The breeze that had been stable and present for the past couple of minutes had slowed down.

However, she didn't have to worry for long.

There was a sudden hold on her hand—strong and familiar and *wonderfully gentle*—, letting her feel the texture of a glove she'd be able to recognize even if it were caked with mud and dry blood, and it made her heart go into a frenzy. A gentle rush of Anemo surrounded her, with the kite going back to leisurely floating in the air.

The reaction of her body, mind, and soul to a touch that was as simple as that was one she couldn't deny. It was a field of sleeping flowers that had been shrouded in darkness for too long finally being showered with the first rays of the sun, allowing the petals to open and bloom, welcoming a warmth that they had always needed.

It was a splash of freshwater hitting dry skin, nourishing it, filling it with life and washing away the bad, the uncomfortable, the *ache*, that permeated her every step.

It was a star, perhaps not finding its kin, but someone it belonged with all the same.

She looked at Xiao, finding herself at a loss for words. All, except one, which was pushing itself out from deep within. It was a plea waiting to be heard from his lips—lips that curved into a small smile once he looked at her, at *her*, and not the Traveler she wanted everyone else to see. She could feel those eyes reaching inside her, his

amber encasing her heart like an embrace.

Her mouth opened, allowing a small gasp, and she couldn't hold it in any longer, lest it suffocate her.

"Lumine," she finally uttered, keeping her eyes on him as confusion flashed across his features. The word felt heavy on her tongue, in the air, in her heart. It had been so long that she had nearly forgotten what it sounded like. There was a question hanging between them, but he didn't voice it. He didn't need to.

"That's... my real name."

And she needn't explain, either. Realization of the importance of what she had just confessed to him dawned almost immediately, a wide range of emotions intermingling, made clear by the way his expression subtly changed. She would've been worried, perhaps even regretted her decision, if his hand hadn't stayed on hers. In fact, she could swear his grip tightened ever so slightly.

It was all the reassurance she needed, but Xiao gave her more, the kind she'd been craving this entire time.

"Lumine," he said, whispered, *praised*. The way he said it nearly sounded like a confession of its own, her word replacing what could've been something else.

This was something so plain—no more than him tasting the weight of the two syllables on his tongue, really—but so meaningful at the very same time, that it made her soul thrum with an unknown feeling she welcomed nonetheless. His voice, carrying her name like it was holy, burrowed itself under her skin and became one with her.

If Xiao hadn't been holding her hand, she was sure she would've released her kite, letting it fly free to an unknown destination. Frankly, she wouldn't care, not when her heart was already soaring.

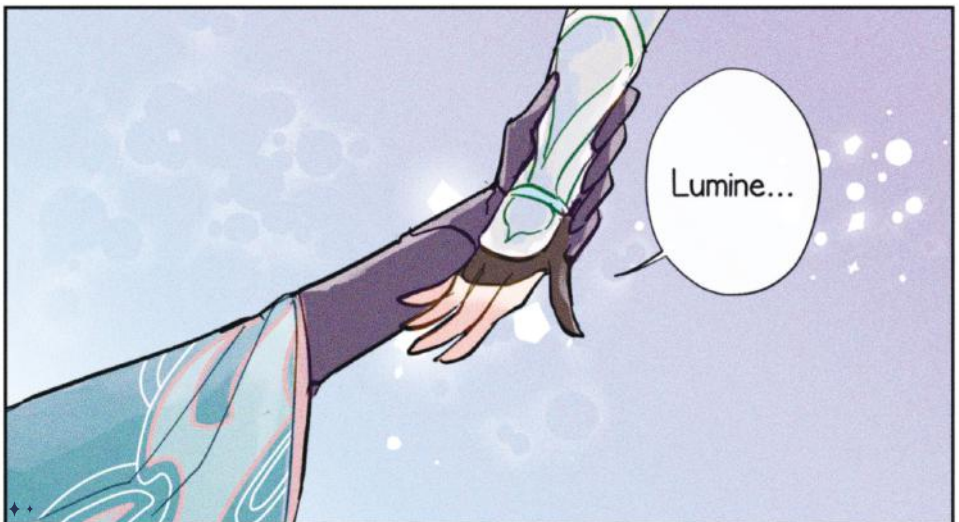
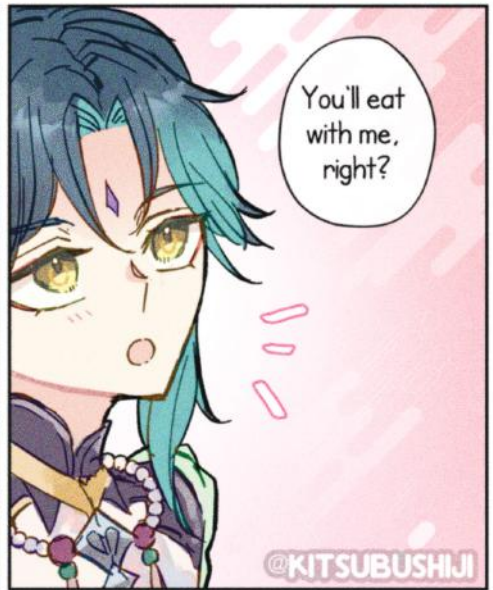
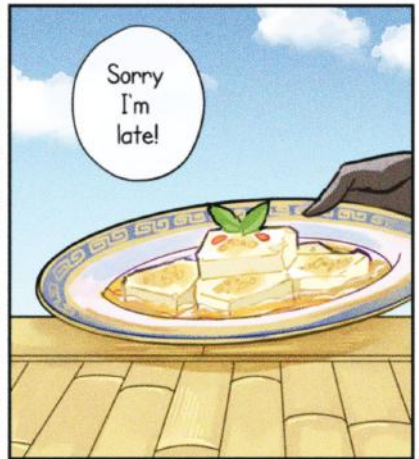
Her focus remained solely on the echo of her name slipping from his lips; it's a sound she wanted to keep close to her chest like a pendant, its weight grounding and its warmth comforting.

"Could you... say it again?" she murmured, almost bashfully, like speaking too loudly would somehow shatter the moment into pieces, and that was the last thing she wanted.

She didn't think she could handle more, but Xiao smiled so *softly* it made her heart clench. He leaned in close, and she steeled herself so she'd hear it loud and clear.

"*Lumine.*"

And that was all it took for her to fall, fall, fall, until she belonged to him, wholly and unreservedly.





I'll wait
until you
feed me...



I'm
not
joking.



Don't
tease
me!

Bewitched

By Noelle_1230

An invitation to a ball was hardly something for Lumine to expect when a Fontainian envelope came to her a few weeks ago. A grand masquerade event celebrating the efforts of the Fontainian citizens quelling the Prophecy's flood that would've consumed them. In any other country, perhaps there would be an uproar of how this was a waste of resources or time, but this was Fontaine, and it was welcomed with the same enthusiasm as a nation of people intrigued with operas and melodramatic trials have grown used to. Seamstresses worked day and night, and caterers perfected dozens of Fontainian recipes for the Grand Event to take place.

Several invitations were even sent out to those outside of Fontaine's borders, those who would add to the festivities and jovial celebrations. Among them were Nilou, the accomplished dancer of Fontaine, Diluc, the owner of the Dawn Winery, Ayaka and Ayato of the Kamisato clans respectively. All of whom accepted...with a few exceptions...

Which is what led Lumine here to Wangshu Inn, where Xiao resided...It seemed the Tianquan, Lady Ningguang couldn't attend the Masquerade Ball, and she had to find a suitable replacement for her absence. Zhongli would've been perfect, but it seemed he had an aversion to lingering in the country of Fontaine...especially due to the presence of the Hydro Dragon. Xiangling and Xingqiu, while flattered by the humble invite, were both busy with their own things. In the end, she had to rely on her dearest companion...and lover. If only for just one night...

Lumine had half expected the rather introverted and reclusive adeptus to oppose her...to protest, especially since there was going to be quite the turnout. Instead he asked a series of questions.

"Will there be areas for myself to be away from the populace?"

"How long will we be here? I can only guarantee a couple of hours."

"...And you will be alone? No one to accompany you?"

Lumine answered all of these the best that she could. Yes, he could be stolen away as it was in the middle of the square in the Court of Fontaine. A couple of hours is more than enough. Yes, she would be alone...with Paimon of course. Xiao had paced the balcony for several minutes...contemplating all of Lumine's words and all of the things she had spoken. And, after a brief pause, he finally gave his answer with a

tender and loving gaze in his avian eyes.

“Allow me time to prepare...then I shall depart.”

The ball proceeded as plan, filigree and couture was everywhere to be seen. Fontaine had surely saved all the dramatics and melodrama for this event to celebrate their new found sense of freedom from the consuming doom that loomed over their fragile lives. They feasted on wine and food from Fontaine and abroad in places like Mondstadt and Inazuma, courtesy to the representatives of those countries there to join them. Ayato and Ayaka were the epitome of noble graciousness and greeted most of those in higher standing within the court, even extending their kindness to the brave common folk who were slightly intimidated by their rank. Diluc, arriving with a familiar Acting Grand Master Jean at his side, took part in handing the richest and boldest Dandelion Wine that could be made. All of it was well received, and judging by the jovial drunken crowds, the Fontainians were enthusiastic for it.

As for their Sumeran guest, Nilou provided the populace within the Court with a traditional dance from her homeland, with Cyno standing guard should anyone feel the need to interrupt the art that she performed. A likely easy job, since the Fontainians had stopped their small courtly dances to admire the lovely dancer, whose smile could melt the iciest of hearts.

As Lumine observed Nilou dance on the floor, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy come over her. Lumine was great at a lot of things; she was a renowned cook, an accomplished polyglot of languages not even heard in the world of Teyvat, and she had several degrees earned from dozens of worlds across the universe. However, there was one thing that she couldn't do...she couldn't dance.

Dancing was something that never came naturally to her. Even trying her hand at different styles of doing so, it was never a form of movement that flowed out of her. It was always so much simpler to fight or to defend herself. The act of even doing a simple pirouette felt as though a black hole had resided itself in the pit of her stomach.

Suddenly the ornate and regal gown she was fitted in felt so much tighter. Deep and luxurious velvet fabrics of royal blue adorned with golden roses and a shimmering overlay on her skirt, she should be feeling as though she was the belle of the ball. Instead she felt as though she was an out of place, and well decorated wall flower, for which all eyes could see her as the fraud she was.

And so when she fidgeted slightly in Xiao's line of sight, he became quite curious, and quietly approached her side.

“Is there something bothering you?” His words tenderly tumbled out of his lips, looking at Lumine with the kind of care and concern that she just adored, the sight of it made her melt, as if his well tailored and beautiful Fontainian attire wasn't enough to do so. With the help of Chiori, Xiao was dressed in the finest of fabrics, looking more like a noble residing here than the adeptus safeguarding the land of Liyue. His silk cravat was fastened with a golden kite for which its body was alight with a false vision of Anemo and on his left arm his sleeve was adorned with fur that resembled a bird's wings. All a nod to his Illuminate Beast form. As a final touch, his mask's nose piece curved subtly downward past the tip of his nose, for

added theatrics. While he found the clothes confining and rather ostentatious, he bore it well, after seeing Lumine's reaction to them. However, that was the least of his worries at the moment...

"It's just..." Lumine sighed, leaning her head on Xiao's shoulder, noticing his hesitance at this simple touch, "I can only envy someone like Nilou...she's so talented at her art."

"I do not understand, what does this dancer's abilities have to do with your own?" Xiao asked, a brow raised in Lumine's direction.

"Dancing is so difficult for me to even learn, let alone try to do..."

"And yet you're capable of so many other abilities, why is this something that you have insecurities about?"

Lumine shook her head, rubbing the back of her neck as a new wave of embarrassment washed over her cheeks, dusting them in a light pink, "It's because I can do so many things that it makes me insecure. It's ridiculous, I know, but it's always left me confused...but there's another reason why as well..."

"And that is?"

Lumine gazed into Xiao's eyes as she lifted her head off of his shoulder, her golden butterfly-like mask doing nothing to hide her emotions. There he saw a fraction of her own vulnerabilities reflected off of golden rays of her shining doe like eyes, "Because...I remember you mentioning to me once, that you are fond of dancing," Peering down at her deep blue skirt of her dress, twisting the fabric, "Or at least, you'd like to one day...when your duties come to an end..."

Xiao was silent looking back at the scene on the stage as he tried to formulate his thoughts. Nilou's dancing was...sublime, transcendent even. It was similar to some of the dancers he had seen before performing at Wangshu Inn for centuries upon centuries. However, Nilou's was quite exceptional...moving like a river ebbed and flowed upon the banks of land it carved through a valley, slow but precise. Her technique didn't seem to overpower the fluidity of her spins and the movement of her arms. She was a work of art all on her own...

"Your friend dances with confidence...a confidence that I do not possess myself... which hinders my own abilities to follow in the path that she has," Xiao spoke softly, his body gravitating towards Lumine's as their shoulder grazed against one another, "It is true that I have confided in you about my own desires...after much pestering, of course. However, she exudes a freedom that I have yet to obtain for myself. Something I am sure you also understand."

Lumine nodded, a knowing expression painted on her face. Xiao had changed so much since the first time she'd met him. At first, he was a recluse content on living away from the mortal world if it kept the populace of Liyue safe from the dangers of his karmic debt. After the events of the Chasm, however, it seemed his viewpoint was changing by the day. His demeanor was calmer, Lumine could linger in his presence for longer without him having to worry. Xiao, while still just as distant as before, was far more open to being with mortals and engaging in their customs. Easily seen now, even as he pulled a little at the collar of his shirt.

"You shouldn't compare yourself to her, you have other traits that are worth admiration..." Xiao said softly, his glowing amber eyes looked sweetly into her own, Lumine's breath hitching at the sight.

"W-what do you mean?"

Xiao hummed, his gloved hand quietly grasped onto Lumine's, his fingertips grazing against her own, "You're quite stubborn, especially for a being who doesn't respect the ways of the adepti," Lumine snorted at Xiao's comment, gradually opening up to Xiao as his words flowed, "That determination to seek me out and...to allow me to see a different point of view far from my own...it is a debt that I cannot repay. You're a light to guide others towards a bright future, I am fortunate that you deem me worthy to follow your path."

"Oh Xiao," Lumine's fingers laced with his own, squeezing his hand ever so softly, "I...I don't know what to say."

"I do not require a response," Xiao said, using his other hand to brush a strand of hair behind Lumine's ear, "I am merely speaking the truth. One that even the other adepti can agree with."

Lumine chuckled, bashfully looking away from the Yaksha, as he seemingly was full of compliments today, "How am I supposed to repay your kindness to me then?"

Xiao was silent for a moment, only after the sounds of the applause once Nilou's dance was over did he speak, "Come with me." In a wisp of smoke Lumine was carried away with the wind, before appearing onto the balcony overlooking the square of the Court of Fontaine, away from prying eyes and judgmental comments. Taking her hand with his own, Xiao bowed towards Lumine and closed his eyes behind the teal and black mask

"If you so wish to fulfill my own desires, perhaps humble me..."

Lumine flushed with a rush of embarrassment, stammered hurriedly "I-I don't know, Xiao. What if I don't live up to your expectations."

"It matters not what expectations you think I have of you," Xiao looked up at Lumine, his hand still grasping hers, "I only endeavor and yearn to dance with you...only you, regardless of your own proficiency in the action."

Lumine's heart felt it may stop, but with a deep breath she allowed herself to give in, "Alright, I shall dance with you."

Taking their positions in front of one another, Xiao bowed as Lumine curtsied, the moment the music started once again. The citizens of Fontaine found their way to the dance floor and started to waltz down below, all the while Xiao quietly took Lumine's right hand into his left, while the opposite found its way onto her waist. Lumine looked up at the adeptus and found a reassuring spark in his sharp irises. "For once, I shall lead. You need only follow."

Lumine nodded slowly, mustering the courage to follow Xiao's footsteps as they moved in $\frac{3}{4}$ time. 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3. Lumine started off quite clumsy, quietly whispering her apologies to Xiao whenever she'd trip over her skirts or misstep to the side. Xiao only smiled, shaking his head and squeezing her hand in his; a form of reassurance that she wasn't doing anything otherwise that would bring him displeasure. In time,

the movement between them felt more fluid, as if they were fighting on the field; perfect symmetry and chemistry, as Lumine was able to tell where to step next and when to spin away from Xiao only to be nestled safely back into his arms. Their movements slowed and with a small dip near the end of the song, Xiao brought Lumine back up to her feet, but still remained in his kind and warm hands. The sound of applause towards the band below allowed Lumine to breathe a sigh of relief, smiling up at Xiao with a quiet thanks.

“Where did you learn to dance like that?” She asked the adeptus.

Xiao cleared his throat, a blush forming on his cheekbones, “I...there have been many guests that have danced on the balcony at Wangshu Inn over the centuries...I merely mimicked their movements.”

Lumine beamed, leaning in to kiss Xiao on the cheek as an expression of gratitude. She gently laid her lips on Xiao’s face, pulling away with a sweet smile, “Either way, you made me feel as though I am actually better than I seem.”

“You’re far better than your own expectations, Lumine,” Xiao whispered, his head leaning on Lumine’s, as they stood a breath away from their lips meeting, “You’re a far more rare and beautiful creature than you give yourself credit for.”

“Is that so?” Lumine’s eyes flickered to Xiao’s lips, eagerness pooling into her ever expanding pupils.

“Yes...very much so.” Xiao’s breath was wavering, his resolve to remain composed utterly lost. He whispered her name once more before their lips closed the distance and their arms wrapped around one another in a passionate embrace, with only the sounds of their lips parting and sweet nothings passing from one to the other to be heard.

From below, the ball went onwards without a person noticing of the strange absence of the Traveler and the strange Liyuean warrior she brought with her.

For that night...they were not only bewitched by the dance they shared...but for the feelings for one another...







Dawn

By youraquari

I've never liked dreaming. No matter what I see, I can neither control it nor easily escape. But recently... it's you that I keep seeing.

Lumine nearly laughed. She nearly cried, too. She nearly panicked. There were many emotions, an aquarelle of glittering hues, that coursed through her at the sight of those words etched across that worn piece of parchment.

Xiao's handwriting was rough and jagged, yet it felt far more thoughtful than any sort of rounded edges. More delicate than cursive, in fact. If there were a moment for her to wonder how that was possible, she would have taken it—but, no, she had far greater things to occupy her mind at this moment.

It was a cool spring morning when she received it. She had awoken with the sun, colors of blue, orange, and yellow darting across the sky, welcoming her into the reality she had grown to abhor. It woke her with that of a creased forehead and a slight frown. Though the sunrise was kind to her, the reality it shone for was not.

Every morning, Lumine woke with that soft silk ribbon of a memory streaming across her consciousness. That seconds-long period between sleep and full wake was her favorite; it was the time between vivid dreams and the reality that that was truly all they were: dreams. Somehow, that's when they felt the most real, in those moments before cruel daybreak, as if the two realms of sleep and wake were one.

In reality, she had not seen Xiao for months. Though her dreams told her a different story: they wove gossamer tales of friendship and of something more. These dreams had been taking form over weeks, months, whatever—all Lumine knew that it had been going on for far longer than she'd like to admit.

And that's the thing: there was so much that Lumine wouldn't like to admit. Like how closely she had grown to this dream form of Xiao. Like how sparks flew every time their fingers brushed against each other. Like how she had fallen so deeply for him. She had fallen for a dream man, a person that didn't exist, and it colored her sunrise skies with desolation.

Every morning, she spiraled. Today was no different. But that was just a moment before she found the letter resting atop the grass at her side.

Now, as she grasped the edges of the already-wrinkled parchment, a bead of hope

formed in her throat. She nearly choked sobs of gratitude and shifted to her knees to call his name out to the open sky. His arms were warm and encircling within her dreams, his chest as rigid and toned as it was welcoming, and she wondered if it felt the same in reality.

But then she stopped herself.

Realistically, there could be no relation between these carefully written words and the reality that haunted her at dawn. A coincidence. Her urgent eyes swept across those words countless times, searching for something to keep her heart from breaking.

Even if this was a complete coincidence, it was clear that he had been dreaming of her. He had written these words ever so carefully across this piece of worn paper as if he had debated them nightly for gods know how long.

Each time I awake, I can't help but wonder if I deserve to have such "sweet dreams"... Perhaps were I to see you in the waking world, I would find the answer?

Lumine swallowed hard in a futile attempt to will away this mounting hope. Her heart began to thump and her fingers began to tremble as reality set in: today was Xiao's birthday, and no matter how it terrified her, she had to visit him.

Her eyes trailed toward the open sky. Buds of blossoms and birds were busy soaking in the morning, excited for a new set of possibilities to encounter. It was a beautiful sight, but all she could ponder was if Xiao's eyes would be as bright as they were in her dreams. If his smile would be as warm, if he would readily encircle her in those candlelight conversations of a past spoken only to her. Were those stories real, or were they merely figments of her tattered imagination?

There was only one way to find out, but she was terrified.

In a moment of clarity, Lumine realized that her next actions led to a fork in the road: love or despair. To stand upon the edge of this metaphorical cliff and jump without a safety net was as terrifying as it was necessary. One could imagine their most significant choices in life would come from these cliffs, these forks in the path toward inevitability.

She would never be ready, but she would be a fool to allow this chance to pass her by.

"Xiao." It was soft, but it was true.

In a flash of teal, the man at the apex of her dreams stood before her. Lumine startled at the sight of him—as if she hadn't grown to expect his sudden presence.

But no, that wasn't why she nearly shrieked there; it was because she hadn't taken into consideration how *real* he'd look. Those amber eyes were open wide, lips parted slightly in hesitation. Even in the most vivid dream, none would match the clarity of his topaz gaze, his jade locks, the tattoo that etched its way down his toned arm. She had traversed that tattoo with featherlight fingertips countless times under the dim of dreamlight, but it would never compare to the way he looked at this very moment.

"Did I startle you?" Xiao spoke in a panic. His hand reached out for a moment only to shrink away back to his side.

"No," she laughed, but it sounded wrong. It was too loud, boisterous, with a touch

of unease. Xiao's brow wrinkled in disbelief, head tilting as if to challenge her, "Is everything okay?"

Of course, he could read right through her. After all, he knew her well—*Ah, no*, she stopped herself. 'Dream Xiao' knew her well; this Xiao didn't know her at all. "Y-yeah," Lumine choked out. "I was just going to apologize—I didn't even get you a gift this year."

Xiao smiled a ghost of a smile, the corners of his mouth perking up slightly. His eyes glimmered as he spoke, "Physical gifts are no use to me. Birthdays are a human custom, after all." He tried to maintain his usual brooding tone, but it failed to pierce the upward turn of his lips. "Though, the weather is nice today. I think a stroll beside the river may suffice."

Lumine was thankful for a break from his eyes. She would much rather stare at the ground as they walked; his voice, his proximity, *all of it* was so intense compared to her dreams. But that was until he spoke: "So, about my letter..." he started.

Her face immediately went tomato-red, eyes darting up to meet his once more, "H-have you been having weird dreams?" she choked out. Xiao watched her tumble over her words with the utmost amusement before shoving his hands in his pockets. He pressed his lips together, formulating a careful sentence before speaking, "Very weird dreams. I see you in almost all of them."

Lumine swallowed, opening her mouth and closing it once more.

"I wanted to speak to you about them. I'm unsure of why, but I think it has to do with the fact that every time I wake, I wonder what I did to... to *deserve* them."

Then he stopped mid-step, hesitating. His smile had fallen by the time Lumine turned toward him. Even amid the chaos, her heart halted, breaking at his words of self-doubt. "Xiao," she murmured softly, taking a step toward him. She was as sure as the sun hanging high in the sky, as sure as the harrowed look in his eye, as sure as the fact that—"You deserve far more than you believe."

"You are unaware of the atrocities I committed long ago," he said, brows knitting as his eyes turned downcast. Though, he didn't know how wrong he was. *I do know*, Lumine wished to scream. She was there in that harrowing dream; that desolate night, she held him as he relived those memories just so that he could let her in.

"It's as if coming here and telling you is some sort of penance," he continued, taking a step back, "as if to atone for my sin of having these dreams. I should not have wasted your time."

"No," Lumine's voice was sure and true as she spoke.

"You do not see what happens in those dreams," his cat-like eyes flashed to meet her own once more. But now, they were full of repressed passion, of something like longing breaching its cage. "I do not deserve it, and I should not have come here. I apologize for wasting your time like th—"

"Xiao," Lumine's voice was lined with urgency as she strode forward and grasped his hands in hers. Anything to keep him from leaving, from disappearing from her reality as quickly as he disappeared from her dreams. "I do know. I know what happens in your dreams, and I know what you've been through."

Xiao's eyes went wide, throat bobbing as he swallowed. Time seemed to stop. Even the birds turned, awaiting their next words.

It was at that moment that Lumine realized how curious it was to be equally as sure and unsure. To teeter so readily on the edge of this cliff that could very well cause her demise if she plummeted.

What if I'm wrong?

But what if I'm right?

"Do you remember when we were huddled inside that cave during that downpour? The wood was nearly too wet for a fire, but we managed."

A beat of silence. "How..." Xiao stared blankly.

"You told me everything that night. The day you were enslaved. Tortured. Forced to kill."

"You were in... you were in my *dream*?"

Lumine nodded slowly, eyes fixed on his. "I lived through every night with you, and every day without you," she said in a soft murmur.

Xiao took a moment to stand there and stare at her, absorbing her words. Slowly, surely, the surprise in his eyes was replaced with shades of hope, of admiration, of devotion. They were the eyes she had long since coveted in her dreams, now steeped in delectable reality. "But all those words you said to me, all those words I said to you..."

"They were all true. I'm having a hard time believing it all myself, if I'm honest." She shook her head in disbelief, though she still smiled up at him, slowly growing used to the glow she knew and loved so dearly. It was so much brighter in reality.

Then, something glimmered in his eyes. "Do you remember that dream by the lake, beneath the fireworks..."

"Ah, the one from the other night? I woke up before you could finish your sentence, and you refused to tell me what you were going to say." Her eyes narrowed in playful skepticism.

Xiao stilled, eyes flickering between hers as if yearning to read her thoughts. "I wanted to say that I love you, Lumine. I've just been too scared to tell you. I was—"

But before he could finish his sentence, her lips were already on his. She couldn't help it, really. Of course, he was scared to tell her; after all, *she* was equally as scared to tell him the same thing.

It wasn't long until they found themselves in the lover's embrace they once knew only in their dreams. Only, now their love was as true as the birds singing songs of hope and trust. No more would Lumine dread the taste of dawn—no, not when her lover would be only a name away.

"I love you too, you know."

Xiao nearly toppled her over with his next kiss.





Of Dreams and Sleepless Nights

By Autumn Alistaire

Lumine can't remember the last time she's had a decent night's sleep.

The nightmares, however, she remembers clearly—Aether turning his back on her, the Raiden Shogun cutting her down, being trapped in the endless maze in the Realm of Snaring Illusions...

Really, it's no surprise when she wakes yet again with a start, her heart hammering in her chest.

Glancing at Paimon—who snores, mumbling about Sweet Madame—Lumine can't help but be a little jealous. But instead of waking her companion to move on with their travels, she sneaks away from camp.

Pulling the lyre from her bag, she strums it with hesitant fingers, trying to recall familiar melodies. On long nights like these, she'd sit by the fire with her brother, humming tunes from across the worlds until one of them fell asleep.

Tonight, though, it's just her sitting beneath the foggy skies and imposing peaks, so she closes her eyes to the world and those bittersweet memories as a lullaby about star crossed lovers resurfaces.

Trying to recall the notes, she frowns when the words and the story escape her. Over and over she fumbles, chasing them in vain like searching for the stars hiding from her tonight.

Then softly she tries again, plucking words unsaid from her heart instead.

She thinks of amber eyes and careful touches, of a soul so ready to sacrifice for others, yet so hesitant to accept another's help. Recalls the way her heart sank as Xiao fell from the Fantastic Compass' platform, of her hand clasping only empty air.

The melody stumbles as she remembers him appearing before them on the surface, her prayers answered as she struggled not to throw her arms around him, to keep feelings from spilling forth.

Silly, Yaksha. How could you?

Don't you know how much I care for you?

Her fingers freeze on the strings, pulse thundering in her ears as if repeating the

unspoken confession over and over again. But Lumine tries to bury it as she did that day, shoving the lyre into her bag.

It's just a silly fantasy.

The side effect of too little sleep, surely.

Something that will wilt long before it blooms.

She will travel ever onward while he remains ever dutiful. Wishing to change their paths, to chase a hope so impossible would be foolish—and it would end more tragically than for lovers “star crossed” beneath the same skies.

But these thoughts chase her with more determination than the nightmares.

They haunt her with sweet, secret wishes and longing sighs as she tosses and turns that night and many to follow. They sprout and blossom ever brighter with the lightest of touches and softening gazes until her reason is buried beneath them, and she grows more attached to this world.

By the time she next takes out her lyre in the lands of Liyue, much has changed. The forests and sands of Sumeru have not been kind; she knows now just how quickly a life is taken or erased, how the absence aches, and regrets fester.

Now the notes no longer stumble as she plucks up her words and courage, not even when she imagines confessing these feelings—a dream she has let bloom, nurtured even, as it carried her through many seemingly endless nights.

Soon, she hopes. I'll tell him this time for sure.

Wrapped up in her thoughts, she fails to notice a streak of teal lighting upon a nearby peak. Yet as she falls into a peaceful dream that night, she's accompanied by the sounds of a hesitant melody.

Despite her best efforts, it's months before she returns to Liyue for a “vacation” after the hurricane of adventure in Fontaine, and even then the Traveler can't turn down a request, especially from Verr Goldet.

The first few days were fine as she scoured Sal Terrae and the surrounding islands. A few cramped nights “sleeping” in the Waverider were just a drop in the bucket of experience.

But, despite her efforts, she hasn't come across anything like the haunting melody the inn's patrons have complained of. According to Verr Goldet, some claim it's a ghost who wandered away from Wuwang Hill. Others say it's Treasure Hoarders luring prey to an ambush.

Lumine originally wondered if it was another “sibling” of Albedo's, yet there wasn't a sign of life anywhere on Dragonspine.

Now, after all that, she's holed up in Mingyun Village, peeking out between the haphazard boards of an abandoned house, the single blanket from her pack doing

little to keep out the draft.

She sneezes again, and blows on her hands, once more regretting her decision not to realign her element before hiding out for the night. With the cold winds of Dragonspine cutting through the gaps in the boards and mixing with the Hydro energy swirling within her, it's as if she's on the peak of the mountain without a Warming Seelie or a Crimson Agate in sight.

At least she can rest easier with Paimon staying at the inn—though there's sure to be a hefty bill and more probing questions when the commission is finished.

"You're doing a lot for this," the pixie had pointed out as the days dragged on. "Are you suuure this is just for the mora?"

Lumine laughed it off at the time, simply gesturing toward the piles of empty plates as evidence. But away from curious eyes and ears, she swallows back the familiar name that rises longingly to her lips.

It's been months since they've seen each other. Longer still since they've had any sort of quality time together, but that isn't something she'll complain about—out loud, anyway.

When Verr Goldet said a "certain young man" was away on business, Lumine understood, and when the inn owner told her about the "haunting incidents," she'd accepted the commission before the story had even ended.

It's not Almond Tofu, but...

I hope it helps him.

Snuggling deeper into her blanket, Lumine thinks about amber eyes and tireless duty, about shadows and sleepless nights filled with blood and blades... about what else she can do to ease just a bit of Xiao's burdens.

The chattering of her teeth, however, drags her back to reality.

What I wouldn't give for a spark of Pyro, she thinks with a wry smile before creaking her way onto her feet. Might as well realign. Surely that's better than freezing to death.

She wraps the blanket around her shoulders and creeps out of her hiding spot, holding her breath out of habit, though, so far it's yielded only a bit of lightheadedness.

One heartbeat passes, then two.

She draws in a steady breath, turning to the Geo Statue, then—

With you... I wish...

Forever by your side...

She freezes, the hair rising on the back of her neck. The words fade into the crisp whisper of lyre strings that linger for barely a breath before they too vanish into the night, the world drawing silent as she shivers from a very different sort of chill.

A cloud passes before the moon and then another.

The lazy sweep of wind through the grass, the steady beat of her heart, the crickets in the distance—they fill the void left by the music.

A trick of the mind? She thinks. Or a lack of sleep?

Just as she's about to turn back toward the Geo Statue, the melody begins again. This time, though, other notes follow in its wake, falling like spring rain upon flower petals, delicate and sweet, melding into something familiar that tugs at a memory from adventures ago.

Her hands awkwardly holding the lyre in the still of the night.

Her voice a whisper amid the fog, a forgotten lullaby struggling to be sung.

She throws the blanket off and hurries through the shadows of dilapidated houses and towering cliffs until she leaves Mingyun Village behind, rushing along the long forgotten path.

Even if it isn't a playful ghost like Dusky Ming or an echo of memories like Clervie, it's not likely to be Hilichurls or a Geo Vishap Hatching, or even the Ruin Guard she'd scrapped earlier that day. Still, Lumine draws her blade and advances.

But, before she can emerge from between the cliffs, the music stops with a gust of air, and she squeezes her eyes shut against the rush of leaves and dust. Swings wide as the scent of blood and a presence appear at her side.

The specter grips her wrist and the metallic tang of battle is overtaken by the tender scent of qingxin and rain.

"Xiao," she whispers.

"Hello, Lumine."

She blinks several times, first to clear away the dust and daze, then to make sure she's not just seeing things. "What are you doing here?"

He releases her wrist and frowns a smidge, lips pursing cutely. She stares at them—those soft, inviting lips she's felt just once before—then glances away. Lumine sheathes her sword, trying to ignore thoughts about kisses for greetings before stepping closer, cheeks warming as she spreads her arms wide.

"If you don't want to tell me," she mumbles, "I'll trade your silence for a hug?"

He hesitates—just long enough for nervousness to bubble up like an awkward chuckle—before he steps into her embrace, hands carefully settling on her back. Lumine sinks into him, nuzzling closer, indulging in his warmth and the sound of his racing heartbeat.

"It has been... quite some time," he whispers into her hair.

"Too long."

Long enough for the memory of his hand in hers to fade like smoke in the wind, for the warmth of his embrace to grow colder in her memories as she thought of him during those long, sleepless nights.

Now they stand here together, breaths quiet, her heartbeat thundering in her ears. Yet it ends far too quickly when Xiao steps back and tenderly studies her face.

"You are flushed."

"You have quite the effect on me," she teases, though the sneeze that follows ruins her flirting. Her cheeks heat and she pouts, glancing away pointedly. "It's also a little chilly when I'm Hydro aligned."

He nods and reaches for her hand. "Shall we visit the inn?"

Though tempted, she jerks her head in the direction of Mingyun Village with a sigh. "I'm here on a commission, actually."

And, despite the desire to slide into his embrace again, to ask him to stay, she buries those selfish requests deep in her heart. If he finally has a moment to rest—and rest well—she hopes he'll use it, that he'll put himself first for once.

But as she begins to pull away, he slips his fingers between hers, catching her gaze in a way that has her heart fluttering and her thoughts spiraling as she admires beloved amber eyes bright like Geo Crystalflies soaring through the night.

"Then I shall accompany you."

"Welcome to my temporary abode."

Lumine sweeps her arm dramatically around the haphazard house, flashing Xiao a wry grin as they settle down beside each other on the dusty earth. She offers him the blanket—which wasn't swept away by the wind, Barbatos be blessed.

"I'd offer something to drink, but this is the best I have."

"You need it more than I do," Xiao says, shaking his head.

"That would make me a terrible host, so we should share," she murmurs, snuggling into his side and draping the blanket over both of them before hiding her smile beneath its edges. "We'll be warmer this way too. Haven't you ever huddled together with someone in the cold?"

His gaze drops to the side, then slides back to hers. "No."

She searches for his hand beneath the blanket, shaky fingers sneaking between his own, until their palms press together.

"But it is... pleasant," he murmurs. "Warm."

The tips of his ears redden, and she's suddenly grateful for the holes in the roof. There's just enough moonlight for her to see and admire him up close, yet not so much that she should move away—not that she would, or could, with the way his hand clasps hers.

"It'd be even better with a fire and tea, but it's the company that matters most."

"And where is your usual company?"

"Eating us into the poor house," Lumine says with a chuckle before explaining about her adventures over the past few days. When she mentions the details of her current commission and the tales Verr Goldet told her, Xiao stiffens.

"Have you heard anything like that?" she asks.

"I... have not."

She squints into the darkness and leans forward to get a better look at his face, but Xiao clears his throat and looks away. Lumine frowns slightly and sinks deeper into the blanket.

"Maybe we should make a trade agreement; not answering for a hug," she teases, eyes soft as she turns her attention back to him. "We're in the land of contracts after all."

Though, the hug is worth so much more, she thinks.

"We do not need a contract for that," Xiao whispers.

Lumine blinks, nearly asking him to repeat that, but the request is forgotten when he releases her hand and opens his arms to invite her without disturbing the blanket—always so careful, so attentive.

In an instant, she buries her face in the crook of his neck, suddenly shy as loving arms wrap around her, cozier than any blanket and far warmer than any Seelie. He strokes her back with gentle fingers, each touch softer than the kiss of moonlight on their cheeks, and it isn't long before her eyelids grow heavier, her breathing slower.

"You should rest."

"But we don't get much time together..." she murmurs through a yawn. "And I'm not happy just dreaming about you... anymore..."

Pressed against him, she feels his chest tighten, his heart skip a beat. He leans in, whispering, "Then, shall I offer you a trade? You rest and I will... sing."

"You will?" she mumbles.

Xiao doesn't answer, only brushes the hair from her face, his touch lingering at the corner of her lips. Then, as gentle as spring rain upon flower petals, he hums a familiar melody, wordless and sweet, accompanying her once more into peaceful dreams.

Index



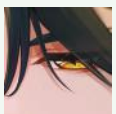
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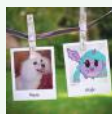
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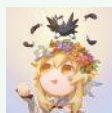
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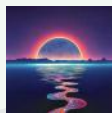
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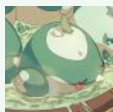
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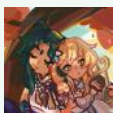
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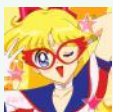
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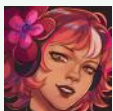
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📷 zeetingdraws

guest contributors;



Mina | @peatchoune

🐦 peatchoune



Mouyiyiyiyi

🐦 mouyiyiyiyi



rina | @luminyas

🐦 luminyas

🔗 luminyas



Autumn Alistaire

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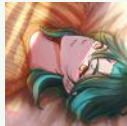
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