

Recurring explosions of a thousand different colors illuminated the night sky and projected shimmering reflections upon the surface of the pond at whose shore a lonesome Fujiwara no Mokou was sitting. Under different circumstances, the sight might have excited her, yet today was this one time of the year when the nocturnal ruckus above her head was not, in fact, the frantic exchange of danmaku fire and spellcards between two competing girls, but something far more trivial.

Fireworks. Dozens upon dozens of rockets were launched towards the heavens themselves, each dangerously overloaded with gunpowder and a variety of other chemical components to make their brief blaze of glory as loud and flashy as possible. Nothing less than that would have been suitable to crown the celebration of the Lunar New Year festival; an occasion on which the humans of the nearby village conveniently forgot all of their worldly worries and instead displayed such an amount of merrymaking and good cheers that one could almost forget most of them would not normally leave the house at night unless they strictly had to.

To their defense, the fireworks were not the only thing that made the festival a night to remember. All along the roads of the village, stalls selling anything from yakitari to fried rice to various different (and invariably plentiful) types of booze would pop up like mushrooms. The Hakurei miko would lead a parade in which hundreds of paper lanterns symbolizing evil spirits were carried to the edge of the settlement and extinguished in order to ensure good luck and prosperity to its inhabitants. There was drinking, singing, dancing, more drinking, and a sudden spike in childbirths that would follow after an interval of precisely nine months. So manically happy was the mood that even many Youkai, normally observed with a very highly raised eyebrow at best, suddenly would find themselves welcomed with open arms as guests of honor.

In short, the Lunar New Year Festival was an opportunity where just about everyone had the time of their life. Everyone safe for Fujiwara no Mokou, who had abstained from visiting it this year, and

instead chose to spend the night in self-imposed isolation at a small clearing within the Bamboo Forest of the Lost.

It was a cozy little place. Far off from any beaten road leading through the dense undergrowth, the pool of water that dominated its center was a source of serenity, and the sound of the wind as it combed through the surrounding reeds unfailingly produced a soothing effect on the woman with the notoriously fiery temper. Most important of all, its secluded nature meant that the clearing was virtually impossible to find unless one knew precisely where to look for it – an effect which probably was the result of a localized spatial anomaly, but nonetheless reliably allowed Mokou to spend some time alone whenever she felt like spending some time alone.

Needless to say, not all things were meant to be of a permanent nature.

„Figured I would find you here, old hothead. May I take a seat?“

A long, tired sigh escaped Mokou's lungs, for she already knew who this voice belonged too. But for whatever it was worth, Kaguya at least was polite enough to ask whether she could bother her (not that she wouldn't have done it anyway), and the human immortal decided to reward this outstanding feat of diplomacy by producing an indifferent shrug.

Her eyes locked on the pond, she could see the mirror image of the Lunarian as the latter strolled up to and sat down right next to her; an unusually dull-looking, grey winter coat wrapped around her shoulders to protect her from the cold. Yet anyone who knew the old enemies even just by hearsay would quickly note that it was not the cold that posed a threat to the life of the moon princess: It already was a small miracle that Mokou had not attacked her upon first sight, let alone after she had carelessly moved herself so close beside her. With the pond lying to their feet, there was a more

than fair chance that the human would grab her by the throat, force her head beneath its surface, and continue to do so until she made a futile attempt to breathe water.

And indeed, a part of the white-haired woman still had the burning desire to do exactly that, fueled by more than a thousand years of what she had considered to be mutual hatred. But as a result of the last few weeks, another part of her wondered just what this would accomplish – Kaguya would die, reincarnate, and then just sit down next to her again. Killing her now would just be a waste of time and effort.

„So“, the Lunarian addressed her old enemy, „why are you not at the festival, Mokou? I imagine Keine must be disappointed, not to speak of being worried. Even a loner like you shouldn't be all by herself on a night like this.“

The human heard the question, yet for some reason, she found it remarkably difficult to tear her eyes away from the image of the strangle couple floating on the surface of the water. Side-by-side as they were, one could almost be led to believe that the two might be something like friends.

„Well, you're here now. Means I'm no longer alone, doesn't it? And besides, I likewise could ask why *you* aren't on the festival. I would have thought that kind of stuff is just your thing“.

„Oh, I know it probably sounds funny, but Lunarians do not actually celebrate the Lunar New Year. It's a purely Terran tradition, because observing the phases of the moon when you are on the moon and the moon is tidally locked to the...“. Kaguya suddenly stopped, her mouth half-open. Expecting that the moon princess had heard some kind of weird noise, Mokou's head shot from left to right in search for potential threats or voyeurs, but only found that the two of them were as alone as before.

„You know what? I'm lying.“

A sense of profound, tired sadness had crept upon the features of the Lunarian as her gaze unsteadily shifted between the ground and the sky.

„I couldn't care less about whether someone up there celebrating or not celebrating a festival means I should or should not celebrate it here, either. I really don't. The reason why I don't go to the festival is because it makes me think about my old home too much. The Lunar Capital. The Udonge tree gardens. Soft waves breaking against the shores of Mare Nubium and Mare Vaporum, all while a blue planet looms on the horizon. I miss all that. And when I go to a festival that is directly dedicated to the moon, it gets so bad that it hurts.

For reasons she could barely hope to understand, Mokou caught herself as she extended an arm and wrapped it around the shoulder of her old enemy, pulling her closer to herself. But the tension and stiffness she had expected from the Lunarian weren't there – quite on the contrary, she could sense how Kaguya relaxed and willfully allowed her own body to come to rest against that of her nemesis.

Silence engulfed the unlikely couple for some ten, fifteen minutes until the moon princess once more raised her voice and said: “Do you remember what I told you the other day?”

„That I can be 'endearingly simple'?“, the human immortal replied with a crooked smile. Judging by the long-drawn sigh of Kaguya, this answer did not satisfy her.

“That I don't hate you. Because I really don't hate you, Mokou. I know I always make fun of you. Mock you. Insult you. That I can act like a stupid, childish *idiot* whose only reason for existence lies in driving you up the wall. But you know that I never mean it, right?”

An absurd suggestion. This woman had spent virtually every encounter of theirs over the last few centuries coming up with ever so many new ways to belittle her opponent, and now she humbly asked to just look over it, as if none of it ever happened. Really, it was downright absurd.

Then again, so was the sight of them sitting together at the edge of the pond.

“Kaguya, just...just what do you want me to say in response to this? That's alright? That I don't mind? That I...I don't know, secretly found it funny all along?”

The Lunarian slowly shook her head, and when she spoke, it was clear that one of the possible answers to the question she was about to ask deeply terrified her.

“Mokou...do *you* hate me? Hate me, still?”

Her adversary found herself flabbergasted. Barely a month ago, her plain answer to this kind of question would have been a quick and decided 'Yes', one that she would have written down on a legal document and signed thrice just to make her opinion on the matter perfectly clear.

But now? She wanted to tell Kaguya that she *did* still hate her, and would continue to do so until the end of days. That she *had* to hate her because she had gotten so used to it over the centuries that she could not think of it; was scared of it being any other way. Yet the words refused to come out, as if someone had wrapped unbreakable chains around her vocal chords. The pyromancer found herself rapidly opening and closing her mouth like a fish stranded on dry land.

Seeing the panic that was rising in the eyes of her adversary, the Lunarian sought to calm her by

placing two outstretched fingers across her lips. “It's alright”, she whispered; again and again.

“Eirin always says that if you don't hate someone, said someone can not truly hate you, either. So don't worry, Mokou – it really is not your fault. It's alright.”

“It's not alright!”, the human immortal suddenly howled as she sprang to her feet; pacing back and forth next to the princess with a mix of madness and confusion in her eyes. “Do you...do you have any idea what this means to me? The sole reason I am still alive; the sole reason why I drank this miserable elixir all those long years ago was that I hated you, more than anything in this world. I wanted to kill you, wanted to hurt you – and now, you try to take it away!” Her fists were clenched so tightly that it almost seemed the knuckles would shoot out of the skin. “You probably find that funny, right? Take a person, and just steal the only thing that still gives her unending life some vague sense of purpose.”

Before Kaguya even had the chance to formulate a reply, Mokou launched herself against her old opponent; thin trickles of saliva running down from the corners of her mouth as she buried her fingers into the throat of the princess.

“You want to hear it from my own mouth?! Fine! I hate you, Kaguya Houraisan! I hate I hate you I hate you I hate you I...”

“*Mokou*”. Given the physical abuse her larynx was subjected to, it was no surprise that the voice of the Lunarian was barely audible

“What?!”

“...*you're hurting me.*”

Three words, and the human felt as if someone had punched her straight into the gut with enough force to drive every last bit of air out of her lungs. She pushed herself away from her victim and stumbled backwards like someone that had nearly stepped upon a poisonous snake, yet whereas those who had an encounter with such an animal displayed fear based on a very tangible threat, the horror in the eyes of the attacker was of a far more abstract kind. Tellingly enough, her breathing had become as heavy and frantic as that of the woman she had wanted to choke to death only a few heartbeats ago.

And just like that, something inside Fujiwara no Mokou broke. She started to cry – not in the hysterical, sobbing fashion of a girl that had lost a loved one, but in the quiet, silent manner of one that had lost herself; one that struggled to recognize her own reflection in the waters beneath her.

Kaguya, meanwhile, had managed to pull herself back to her feet, although her face now was disfigured by an expression of intense worry. Even as she and her old foe had grown closer and closer over the last weeks, she knew full well that this – the realization that she was no longer capable of hating the Lunarian – was a thought Mokou had tried to ignore as much as she could, for this hate was all she had. In a morbid way, her forcing the immortal to face this truth resembled kicking the chair away from underneath someone that already had a noose around the neck, and unless she hurried to catch her, it was the rope which would do it in her place.

She shot forward, slung her arms around the woman she had killed on more occasions than she could possibly count, and pulled her into an embrace so tight that it was almost painful. Perhaps Mokou would not return it. Perhaps she would push her back, punch her, kick her, cover her body in white-hot fire. But that would be fine. What frightened her, instead, was the prospect that Mokou would not react at all; that her brain might become so overwhelmed by the giant contradiction in her

new identity that it would simply shut down as a last means of self-protection; and leave its owner in a state of mindless catatonia.

She thus let out several deep breaths of relief when she, after several agonizing seconds, could sense how the hands of her old foe slowly started to creep upwards along her arms and eventually came to rest on her shoulders. The face of the human followed until the two of them were cheek-to-cheek, and the Lunarian could feel the hot liquid running down from the eyes of the human on her own skin.

“I don't hate you”. Quiet as her voice was, it was obvious that using it to speak these words through her clenched teeth required a titanic amount of effort and exertion from the human. “I...I don't hate you, Kaguya. Not... not anymore.”

The moon princes immediately felt the overwhelming urge to hold Mokou even tighter than she already did and to not let go of her again until time itself ended; but to her surprise, the immortal gently wound herself out of the Lunarian's arms and returned to the edge of the pond, sitting down in the same spot she had occupied before. Thankfully, her fear that Mokou wanted her to go away was quickly dispelled when the old hothead calmly patted on the ground next to her.

“You wanted to know why I'm not on the festival, right?” The manner in which she talked was casual, but as Kaguya joined her, she could see how her pressed into a tight line.

“I was there, last year. And you know what? It was fun. Even though I normally can't stand being around that many people at all. It was all fun and games, right up until the fireworks announced that the last year had ended and we all exchanged congratulations and good wishes for the new one. I did too, until someone helpfully told me that I got the date wrong.”

“But Mokou,” the princess wondered with a slightly raised eyebrow. “That happens to everyone once in a while. You know, when you get a bit drunk, and with all the lights and noises – it's really nothing bad when you mistakenly use the date of the old year instead of the new one.”

“I wasn't mistaken by a year, Kaguya. It was a *decade*. Ten years, at least as many major incidents in Gensokyo...and memories of them are all fuzzy. Indistinct. All I can clearly remember is you and me fighting, over and over and over again.”

The daughter of Fujiwara laughed a thoroughly humorless laugh.

“I guess that's it. 1300 years, and Fujiwara no Mokou finally starts to transform into a demented old granny. But hey, at least I'll eventually reach a state where I'll no longer remember that I don't remember, right? Might as well stop doing anything, then. Making friends with people like Keine was bad enough when your immortality meant you would see all of them die, but if you know you'll forget they even existed – why bother? Why bother with anything at all?”

Another false laugh.

“Pathetic, isn't it? I mean, for all I know you are much, much older than me. And here I am bawling my eyes out over something that probably is completely trivial to you, right?”

“*It is not.*” The sharpness of Kaguya's voice startled Mokou, but the Lunarian quickly sought to calm her with an understanding smile. “What you experience, my dear old enemy, is something that all long-lived creatures go through at one point or another, and immortals doubly so. And although I think you know that yourself, it is not trivial, but something that is guaranteed to make you lose

your mind; your very self if left unchecked.”

“So...so you suffered through it, too?”

“Of course. So has Eirin. But whereas she staves off this creeping madness by keeping herself occupied with her medicine and the people that come to visit her clinic, I am not made for this kind of thing. You could say I need something more intense. Something so exciting that it makes each day worth remembering.”

“Our fights.” A sarcastic grin formed across the face of the human. “You need our constant fights. Well, I would scold you for it, but it's not like it's any different for me, I guess. Looking back, I *was* fairly miserable until I came here and found someone I could beat up all day. Although – if the fighting is what keeps me sane, me no longer hating probably means I'll go bonkers in the foreseeable future.”

Kaguya sighed and placed a soft hand upon that of her rival. “It's not the fighting that I need, Mokou.”

“What then?”

“I need *you*.”

Mokou's heart, calm and steady before, suddenly drove into high gear. A rather pointless reaction, for in truth, she knew that Kaguya needed her, and also knew that she needed Kaguya. How many times had she woken up screaming because of a nightmare in which the Lunarian actually *did not* come back to life after she had killed her? How many times had she told herself that the unyielding terror which she felt at the thought of Kaguya being gone forever simply came from the fact that she

would need a new sparring partner, when in truth, she knew that she had permanently lost something far more important?

The storm of different emotions that now surged across the face of the human made it easily apparent what kind of thoughts were racing through her head, and the moon princess patiently waited until her old foe had at least partially sorted them back into their respective registers. Admitting that she did not hate her already had taken a great effort from Mokou. Coming to understand that there was more than just a lack of hate would be none easier.

“Kaguya?”

“Mhm?”

“I've been thinking. If fighting alone no longer is exciting enough to make my days memorable – then the logical thing to do would be to pull off something so crazy, so outrageous that I could not possibly forget the day even if I wanted to, right?”

“Well...*maybe*? But it would have to be something really, *really* outrageous, you know?” The Lunarian made no direct allusion as to what outrageous thing in particular she was thinking about, but the fact that she closed her eyes and pursed her lips in anticipation was rather telling.

Had Mokou's ancient heart been beating fast before, it now threatened to smash open her ribcage and burst through her chest like some kind of extraterrestrial abomination. Thick beads of liquid pearled down from her forehead as if she was a rapidly melting block of ice, and she was so insanely nervous that her body no longer even bothered to start shaking. She did not know just what in this world or the next actually drove her to close her own eyes. Purse her own lips. And to drive them to towards those of her old nemesis. Slowly, inch by inch.

Until they met.

Mokou felt nothing at first. Merely the physical movement as the their two mouths were pressed and started to shift against each other. Yet as the seconds passed, the fear and reluctance she had felt liquified and was washed away by a sense of longing she did not even knew she had. Even as her mind became clouded as if in drunk stupor, each and every of her bodily senses sharpened until they could pick up every detail of the Lunarian's physique – the heat on her smooth skin. The wetness of her lips as the saliva of the two immortals mixed. Her usual perfume, and the more basal fragrance that lingered underneath.

And she wanted, *needed* more of it. Somewhere at the far end of her mind, the human could hear Kaguya's startled yelp as she grabbed her as if she was a drug and Mokou an addict suffering from acute withdrawal symptoms. The sound was immediately drowned out by the raw pleasure that detonated in every single fiber of her body where it met that of the princess; dwarfed only by the wild firestorm that still swept across her lips.

It took the immortal all of the willpower she could muster and then some to stop herself and open her eyes. In her blind passion, she had pushed herself upon the Lunarian until the latter was laying flatly on her back; the long black hair spread out around her head like the corona of a dark sun or the halo of a fallen saint.

And there were tears in her widened eyes. Not long ago, she would have been indifferent to them, or possibly enjoyed them. Now, the sight sufficed to plunge a rod of cold steel straight into her chest. Mokou became painfully aware that this already was the second time this evening she had lunged at Kaguya and hurt her, and just as before, the thought made her recoil in dismay. Her

movement, however, was abruptly ended when both arms locked around her and held her back.

“Don't go. Please. It's...it's just that – it took you so long to...and I was afraid that you wouldn't...”

The voice of the Lunarian gave out, and she looked so fragile that her old enemy was afraid she might shatter like glass if she touched her.

“Love me, Mokou”, she finally begged. “Please, please - love me!”

So Mokou did. Resumed their kiss, only to move on and plant additional ones all across her ivory-white face before she continued to the neck. The last part proved slightly frustrating because the fabric of Kaguya's mantle and her other clothes got in the way, but although most of the hothead's higher cognitive functions already had disappeared behind the haze of desire again, her hands retained more than enough dexterity to remove the offending objects in due haste. So concentrated was she on this task that she barely registered that the fingers of the Lunarian had pulled the suspenders from her shoulders in turn and were now unbuttoning her shirt in record speed.

Before long, even the last wardrobe article on the two immortals had been cast aside, and Mokou could not suppress a gasp as she fully lowered her naked body atop that of Kaguya; producing in her a sensation as if she was lit on fire and had been plunged into frigidly cold waters at the same time. Even through the soft flesh of their breasts that now were squeezed together, she could feel that the heart of the princess was hammering as fast as her own, and its reassured the pyromaniac as she continued to kiss the woman laying beneath her, their tongues meeting with increasing frequency.

In defiance of the cold winter night, the sheer heat given off by the two intercoiled bodies caused a layer of sweat to emerge between them, lubricating their frames and allowing them to slide across

each other with much greater ease. More importantly, its scent carried potent pheromones in it that bombarded the already intoxicated brains of the couple and began to transform their hitherto passionate lovemaking into something far more carnal. Mokou's hips began to perform thrusting motions into Kaguya and the Lunarian replied in kind, sending sharp spikes of ecstasy up their spines like bolts of lightning whenever their most sensitive spots came into contact and tickled one another.

Their moans, quiet and soft before, grew louder as both sped up the pace of their movements in an increasingly hectic attempt to uphold the momentum and the all-overwhelming pleasure that came with it, but no matter how frantically their bodies rubbed against another, the fleeting sensation was all too short. Atop of that, it fed into something else – something like a massive wave that threatened to break through the boundaries of the dam containing it and loudly demanded release.

Mokou was about to give in to it. All sensations of her body, even that of Kaguya's long-nailed fingers as they clawed into her back, were small embers compared to the gigantic bonfire burning in the region between her legs; and judging by the half closed eyes of the Lunarian, she likewise was about to lose it. Just a bit more. Just a bit more. Just a bit...

Climax.

Fujiwara no Mokou felt as if she was flying. Ironically enough, it was a bit like those out-of-body experiences that people supposedly had when dying: She knew how violently her private parts were twitching right now, and how these spasms echoed through the rest of her body. She also could see the face of the woman lying beneath her; the tension in her clenched teeth as she let out a muted scream and desperately held on to her lover. But the human immortal wasn't really there. She was flying, flying through a world where there was no space, and there was no time.

Then she fell. Fell and fell and fell, until she found herself back in her own body and promptly collapsed upon that of Kaguya Houraisan; her head resting on her old foe's shoulder as she tried to catch her breath. When she no longer felt that she was going to pass out at the next moment, she tried to roll off from atop of the princess, but the latter made no attempt to unlock the arms that kept her in place.

“Hey, I think I'm the heavier one of us two”, the human sheepishly mumbled.

“Doesn't matter. I am going to kill you if you don't stay right where you are.”

“But why?”

“Because it feels nice”, Kaguya giggled while she reached out for her mantle and spread it above the resting couple as a makeshift blanket.

“Have it your way, then”, Mokou grumbled in mock indignation as she snuggled back up against Kaguya's shoulder and gratefully accepted the warm and highly comfortable sleeping place the princess was offering her. “But just this once.”

“Just this once”, the moon princess repeated and started to stroke across the head of the woman lying atop of her. She continued to do so and remained awake long after the hothead she had fallen in love with had fallen into slumber. For even in her sleep, Fujiwara no Mokou smiled the smile of someone who had finally found happiness after several lifetimes of regret. It was the singularly most beautiful thing that Kaguya had ever seen, and so long as Mokou kept smiling, she would smile, too.

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For a regular observer, no notable change in the relationship between Fujiwara no Mokou and Kaguya Houraisan took place following this most unlikely of events. Whenever the pyromaniac and the princess met, it was only a matter of seconds until insults and mutual mockery filled the air, closely followed by flames, sustained danmaku fire, and the occasional punch to the nose.

Those, on the other hand, who were brave or dumb enough to remain in the disaster area that formed whenever the two immortals started to fight, might paint a slightly different picture. One, for instance, of two women who seemed more amused than angry at the nasty words they threw at each other. Another, perhaps, of an immortal that shielded the lifeless body of the other from rain and the elements, a soft smile on her face as she patiently waited for the resurrection of her foe. And a particularly lucky observer might even come to watch Mokou and Kaguya as they left their dueling place; both covered in cuts and bruises, but also laughing heartily and with their arm around the shoulder of the respective other.

And sometimes, just sometimes, travelers would report hearing the strangest kinds of noises coming out of the Bamboo Forest of the Lost.

Certainly something to remember.