The Four Horsemen

by LegendaryBard

Summary

War, Death, Famine, and Conquest are the Four Horsemen.

They're eternally bound together, even if they get on one another's nerves.

INDEFINITE HIATUS AS OF 12/8/18
The Horsemen

War, Death, Famine, and Conquest all ride together, as they have for years upon years and will continue until long after humanity grinds itself into dust.

They ride together in silence, with the comfortable ease of pleasant companionship.

They have no official leader. Occasionally they vie for the title- Particularly Death and War- but no one comes out on top and the squabble goes nowhere. If it were to come down to it, Conquest would be the decisive victor out of the four of them. He always is- it’s in his name.

War rides on a crimson stallion. The horse’s mane is cut short, tail immaculately trimmed but still long. He wears armor- glinting golden plates with the occasional spatter of blood gilding its surface. Scars part some edges of red fur, deep and old. Muscles bulge underneath his pelt. His name is Immortal.

Conquest rides on a white mare. It is twice the size of War’s horse, because Conquest is twice the size of War. The mare is a flawless, uniform white, with golden tresses that blow free and triumphant. Banners flutter from her flanks, blue flags bearing a golden pegasus. Other than that, she is unarmored. Her name is Balderich.

Death rides on a pale horse. The horse bears no characteristics of its sex. Death refers to it as both him and her, and occasionally with it and they. Splotches of grey dapple its creamy flanks, and its ribs jut out visibly. The horse looks as though it will keel over at any moment, but it does not. Its eyes are glossy, hateful. Flies buzz by its ears and tail, anticipating the moment it will die, but it never does. Its name is Shadow Step.

Famine rides on a black mare. If Death’s horse is thin, then Famine’s is skeletal. Every single bone is visible from the outside, with her stomach entirely concave. In order to even get that thin, Famine’s mare had to be missing a multitude of organs. Her fur is dull, with no shine, but brushed with extreme care. She has no armor- She can barely hold up her rider in her emaciated state. Her name is Shrike.

None of the Horsemen are young. Perhaps, once upon a time, they had been. No longer.

The first Horseman that came into existence was Death.

He was closely followed by Famine.

Then War.

Then Conquest.

And the four were with one another ever since. It was almost a curse. Trapped together until the stars burned out and the world turned to ash underneath their feet and their horses’ hooves.

War was white-haired, as most of them were. Thinning and with a receding hairline. Scars marred his face, oft hidden by a mask. The whole world feared that mask- Red with a gold band winding down the middle. It was the precursor of battle, and brought blood in its wake. War’s choice of attire changed throughout the years. From simple cloth to Roman tunics to steel plates to chainmail to military coats to Kevlar armor. Green camouflage, a bulletproof chestplate, and lace-up brown boots was his current get-up. War was aggressive and unpredictable, as was the case with most literal wars.
War may have adapted to suit modern times, but Conquest did not. He was embellished in glinting golden armor. A ruff of fur around his neck and wings atop his helmet added to a mothlike appearance, which faded out the further the armor went. Massive steel claws rested on Conquest’s huge fists, built into his gauntlets. His armor was impossibly huge and bulky, likely weighing more than a ton, but he moved in it as swiftly as an unfettered man would. He held a great club, a spiked morningstar, which was his preferred weapon even in this day and age. Underneath the helmet and tons of armor was a scarred old man, blinded in one eye. His only defeat.

Death had periodically updated his appearance, while keeping a distinct look. The skull and hooded robe had been signature ever since he had been birthed into existence. Along the way, though, he had picked up armor. Chain mail or steel or Kevlar, whatever was most modern, to compete with War. He bore his skull mask and his dark cloak, with modernized armor underneath.

Famine was small in stature and old. She, like her horse, was thin. She wore layers of armor and a tattered cloak which made it difficult to ascertain just how thin she was. She occasionally wore a mask, a curved triangular symbol in the middle. She was stout and slightly hunched. She had a battered old rifle strapped to her back, bandaged up with fabric and tape, dinged and slightly rusted.

War and Death are arguing. Again.

“We go east,” Death insists. “Death is in the breeze.”

“We go west,” War says. “I can smell conflict.”

“It’s probably your own.” Famine grumbles. “There is hunger to the south.”

“There is a glorious victory in our paths should we head north,” Conquest adds. “I insist we go.”

The four of them are at a crossroads.

“I’m going west,” War snorts.

“I’m going east.” Death shoots back.

“I will head north,” Conquest booms.

Famine shifts. “I suppose I will go with you, Conquest.”

“Ah! You are generous and compensating as always, Famine.” Conquest dips his head. “We will head south after we find the glory to the north.”

“I’m not going north.” Death lifts his chin and huffs.

“Neither am I.” War proclaims.

“The Horsemen stay together.” Conquest reminds them. “We go as one or we do not go at all!”

“We’ve separated before,” War says stubbornly. “I’m not going anywhere with him.”

“I’m not going anywhere with him.” Death growls.

“Behave, children.” Famine chides. “I have a compromise.”

“Speak, then, dear lady.” Conquest urges.

“Ride west with War, Conquest. I will ride east with Death.”
“Are you certain?”

“War and Death have a tendency to get into trouble when left on their own.” Famine says. War and Death snort simultaneously but don’t argue. Famine is correct, as always.

“My lady, wherever shall we meet up after we have found what we seek?” Conquest bows his head slightly.

“We will find one another, Conquest. It is simply the way of the Horseman.”

Conquest hums thoughtfully. He turns his mare towards War, who looks incredibly sour about this whole turn of events.

“Clear that frown off of your face, War- A great adventure awaits us!” Conquest thunders. War gives a disbelieving snort and directs his stallion to the west. Conquest taps his mare’s flanks with his heels and rides after him.

Death, meanwhile, sulks on the back of his horse. Famine directs her mare towards him and stops at his side.

“Cheer up.”

“I won’t be cheered until War comes with us.” Death replies bitterly.

“You despise War.”

“He can smell death from the east just as thickly as I, and yet he insists that his conflict is more important. He’s selfish.”

“Hush.” Famine spurs her mare, encouraging her east. Death directs his horse after her. “War is inherently self-absorbed. The same way you are incorrigibly bitter over perceived slights.”

“Or the way that you can’t keep your nose out of our business.” Death fires back. “I would prefer to travel by myself, Famine.”

“Riders stay together, Death. We both know what happens when one of us travels alone.” Famine’s voice is light, but the memories behind her words cut deep.

Death bows his head to her and they gallop towards the rising sun.
War and Conquest

Chapter Summary

War and Conquest look for a fight, but find only death and a very unpleasant angel.

The two strike an odd pair.

War is not, by any means, a small man. He is six feet tall, two hundred pounds of muscle, with a powerful chest and broad shoulders. He tapers at the waist, although not drastically. The jut of his chin and mandible suggest abundant masculinity, and his stubble and physique back it up.

Compared to Conquest, though, he is a tiny doll. Conquest stands at seven and a half feet tall. His chest is a barrel, his waist is thick, his legs are tree trunks and his arms are boulders. His shoulders are like mountains, only complimented by his massive shoulder pauldrons.

War and Conquest are related. The typical result of war is conquest. The typical result of conquest is more war.

War and Conquest have one of the strongest connections out of any of the four; although in the Horsemens’ cases, opposites attract. Conquest and Famine, who have one of the weakest relations, can rarely stay apart from one another. Love is not, perhaps, the right word to use to describe their bond. The four have long speculated if Horsemen can love, but they reached the consensus that they most likely cannot. At any rate, Conquest and Famine carry on acting as sappy as any human couple.

“It’s close,” War declares, taking a deep inhalation.

“I can feel it.” Conquest rumbles in reply. “Like stormclouds beneath my skin.”

War spurs his stallion, and the beast practically flies. Conquest is not far behind, his mare valiantly attempting to keep pace.

The streets are cluttered with cars and people. Balderich and Immortal gallop over the sidewalks, nimbly weaving to avoid pedestrians. There are shouts of fear and curiosity from children, but the adults ignore them.

The adults cannot see the Horsemen. If they witness anything at all, it will be brief glimpses of old men on bicycles instead of massive horses with knightly riders. Children see them for what they truly are— their minds are uncluttered and clear for the first half-decade or so. Their parents scold them and tug them along, busy in their world.

The horses swerve sharply past wooden gates, narrowly cornering a ramen shop.

They come to a sharp halt, the two horses nearly deseating their riders. Immortal snorts, ear flicking. He is bothered by the stench that hangs thick and heavy in the air. Balderich is similarly affected— she whinnies and her tail lashes, whiplike. A twenty foot gate stands in their way, solid and strong. A few knocks from Conquest’s morningstar ought to be enough to break the wood in. A clan mark is engraved on it. An ouroboros, comprised of two dragons eating one another. The sigil is familiar to Conquest, not familiar to War. Conquest makes no mention of this.
“Steady,” War grunts, patting his stallion’s muzzle. He directs a question to his companion. “Do you smell that?”

Conquest nods, wrinkling his nose underneath his helmet. “Conflict. Deeply broiled conflict.” His voice is deep and grave, a contrast to the cheery shout he usually speaks in. “Your specialty.”

“Dismount and knock that door down.”

“Are you sure?” Conquests asks. “We wouldn’t want to startle our quarry.”

“Presumably, they’re adults. They won’t even notice us, broken door or no.”

Conquest grunts. Balderich preemptively kneels, allowing Conquest a smooth dismount. He takes the massive morningstar off his back, weighing it slightly in his hands.

War dismounts as well. He takes Immortal’s reins in hand, guiding him to a safe distance. Immortal’s name is true to life- neither rider nor horse can be slain- but splinters of wood to the eyes or nose were painful, to say the least. War heads back to Balderich. He holds no special connection with another Horseman’s horse, so she is reluctant to heed his commands. He is well aware of this.

War holds out his hand, allows her to place her muzzle in it in her own time. She snorts, sniffs his fingers. War gingerly slides his hands towards her reins. She permits him to take hold of them and carefully guide her to Immortal, but War is well aware that if he jostles the bit in her mouth he’ll be faced with her teeth and hooves.

“Ready?” Conquest booms.

“Ready.”

Conquest pulls himself back. His hips and shoulders stand far apart, and he puts all of his force into swinging the morningstar.

It slams against the wooden door with an almighty, thundering crack. The door splinters inward, jagged forks of wood bristling like a porcupine’s spines. Conquest pulls back, gathers his strength, and hits the door again.

The entire world seems to shake from the impact. The heavy wooden doors nearly splinter clean off their massive hinges. They part enough for Balderich’s entry, which is all they need. Conquest sheathes the massive morningstar on his back.

War unceremoniously hops back on Immortal. Balderich lowers herself for Conquest to climb on her back, then straightens.

“I’m first,” War says decisively. Conquest does not contest him.

War guides Immortal carefully through the ruined gates and over the wooden shards. The soles of Immortal’s hooves are just as tender as his eyes or muzzle, and War’s not keen on digging out splinters for the next couple of days.

The scent of conflict grows stronger.

“Do you smell that?” War checks.

“Yes.”

“There’s something wrong with it,” War murmurs. “Like ozone and electricity. It feels like Old
World magic.”

“Indeed.” Conquest murmurs. “It has been a long time since I felt something such as this.”

“Should we turn back? I hate dealing with magic.”

“No.” Conquest taps Balderich’s flanks with his heels. “We are Horsemen. We do not back down.”

“Should we tie the horses?”

“They are just as deserving of seeing this battle. I will take Balderich. If you would like to saddle your steed-”

“Giddyup!” War calls. Immortal whinnies loudly and sets a quick pace, charging past Conquest. Conquest murmurs something fondly under his breath and urges Balderich after the horse and rider.

The horses gallop into a temple- or, possibly, castle- and come to a halt in front of a large open room.

The fight was already over.

One man lies prone, slumped into a broken pile. His limbs are mangled and mashed, his body tangled like it’s been crushed in a hydraulic press. The scent of burning flesh, rancid and vile, sears War’s and Conquest’s nostrils. Blood pools underneath the man, though a relatively small amount for his grievous wounds.

Old World magic crackles through the air, dangerous and sharp. A thread of blue lightning flickers over the prone man’s body, and he twitches, chest heaving in pain. The burns are not normal burns.

There’s another person within. He stands tall, breathing hard, blood spattering his clothes. Whether his own or not it was hard to be sure of.

He has a tattoo winding down one of his arms, currently glowing a brilliant blue. The tattoo roils and bubbles underneath his skin, as if the ink is a sentient being trapped underneath a thin layer.

He looks up to see War and Conquest and his face grows ashy. The broken, burned man on the ground lets out a pained wheeze.

Conquest knows them. They are Shimadas. Renowned for battle prowess, for trapping the spirits of Old World dragons in ink and commanding their power and respect. He does not move to dismount. Neither does War.

“This is private,” The elder Shimada says shakily. He sheathes his sword on his back.


“Dragon of the South,” Conquest says. His voice is grave and deep, surprisingly soft, a contrast to his boisterous attitude before. “You’ve beaten the Dragon of the North.”

“I did not want this,” The Southern Dragon pulls back from his brother’s body, as if suddenly disgusted at what he’d done. “It was done for the clan.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Conquest says. His eyes slide to his companion. “War, my friend, I apologize. We have arrived too late for your part.”

“There will be other battles.” War says neutrally.
Conquest dismounts, boots landing heavy on wood. The sound makes the Southern Dragon flinch. When Conquest takes a step towards him, he freezes, like a terrified animal. Another step has him hunching on himself. War can feel the tension in the air.

A third step and the Southern Dragon flees. His feet patter away, footsteps irregular and slippery in his haste to escape.

“Hm.” Conquest stares down at the dying Northern Dragon, then at the direction the Southern Dragon had run off. “I hope lady Famine and Death have found more success than us. Thus far we have seen no battle and I have not honored the rightful victor.”

“Knowing Death, they’re even worse off than we are.” War sighs. Conquest pads back to Balderich and climbs on top of her again, scratching behind her ear and giving her rump a pat. “I wish we had arrived sooner.”

“It would have been an entertaining battle, no doubt.” Conquest turns Balderich towards the way they’d come, with War not far behind. “It is disappointing our victor did not want to claim some honor for his own.”

“Wait a moment!” A thin voice cries. It is neither War nor Conquest, neither the Dragon of the South Wind or the Dragon of the North Wind. It is a woman’s voice.

War growls wordlessly. He recognizes it.

The Angel of Death is, unlike her name suggests, not a harbinger of death. She is quite the opposite. Wherever she goes, the dead walk again. Not as zombies or as skeletons, as serfs or servants. They are independent and free, willed and unbound. The Horsemen have had clashes with her before, particularly Death, and none of them turned out well. The problem with a multitude of immortals battling is that no one stays down for long.

“We owe you nothing, Angel.” War tells her. He motions to spur Immortal away, but Conquest stops him.

“She is a lady, War.” He says, sounding slightly wounded. “We will hear her out.”

War growls.

The Angel of Death kneels besides the Dragon of the North Wind.

The Angel of Death is eternally young and eternally beautiful. Her blond hair is tied up behind her head, blue eyes bright, cheeks pink and skin glowing. She has magnificent white wings, trimmed with gold, that fan behind her back. Her legs are slender- she has large hips, large breasts, a thin waist. Her appearance is deceiving, however. She is an immortal, as old as Death himself, and just as unpleasant.

The Northern Dragon is dead. War and Conquest know it without seeing the stillness of his chest or the silence of his heart. The Angel of Death would not come if there was not a dead man to be raised.

She lays her hand on his chest, breaths in deeply. She tugs on his very soul- a practice offensive to War but not to Conquest- and he stirs with a choked moan.

“Shimada Genji,” She says clearly to the Northern Dragon, “You have died, as you very well may know. Too much of your blood lays spilled, your tissue has taken too much damage. However, I will restore your body. At a cost. I want you to kill the rest of the Shimada clan.”
Always a catch. They may have free will after resurrection, but bargaining for your life came with hefty pricetag.

“I will give you a moment to dwell on my offer while I catch up with old friends.” She gives him a pat to the shoulder and stands up. She walks towards Conquest and War with a professional, clinical smile.

“Where are Death and Famine?” She inquires politely.

“They tried their luck to the east.” War says dismissively. He would like this conversation to be over as soon as possible. There is no reason to be here anymore. He didn’t see the fight between the Shimadas and he doesn’t want to deal with the Angel of Death.

“Ah! That works out perfectly! While they’re absent… Could I possibly get you to do a small favor for me?” The question is directed more towards Conquest than War.

“Of course! We have nothing better to do, do we not?” Conquest looks at War expectantly.

“I want to know what this ‘small favor’ happens to be first.” War replies, irritation making his jaw stiff. “You know that we’re not errand boys to fetch you this and that-”

“War,” Conquest chides gently. “It is rude to refuse a lady.”

“I’ve seen ladies, Conquest, and she isn’t one of them.” His tone stubbornly holds no compromise. “I’m going back to make sure Death doesn’t do anything stupid.”

“Famine is more than capable of doing that,” Conquest reasons. “Let us hear the task you have set for us, dearest Angel. I was hoping for a grand adventure this morning, and we have yet to find one. Perhaps this will be it!”

War growls.

“Danke schoen, Conquest.” The Angel purrs. “I would like you to give someone a gift- A present, from me to them.”

“Let’s not beat around the bush,” War grunts. “Who?”

“Fareeha Amari.”

Conquest stiffens visibly- His previous easygoing slouch in his saddle becomes straight-backed. His fingers grip the reins tightly, too tightly. Balderich tosses up her head, tail flicking nervously.

“That’s not a request I’m willing to take,” War snaps. “Deliver it yourself. Have your new dragon deliver it for you.”

“His terms have already been drawn.” The Angel pouts. “Please consider it, at the very least.”

“What’s the gift?” War asks, suspicious.

The Angel laughs softly. She plucks a single golden feather off of her back and bows slightly as she offers it to War.

“Take it, War.” Conquest says. His voice is somber. “She will get someone else to do it if we do not.”

War takes the feather. He’s not happy about it.
“We don’t get anything in return?” War asks her, sour.

“You would not expect us to do something like this without recompense.” Conquest’s voice borders on hostility. He is very rarely angered, but Fareeha Amari sets the old Horseman on edge.

“You will have a favor of equal or greater value,” The Angel promises. “For now, I must attend to my wayward dragon. Please give Fareeha my regards as well as my feather.”

She drifts towards the Northern Dragon. She kneels beside him and speaks in a foreign tongue—Either her own or his.

War and Conquest set their horses out together. They leave the boundaries of the Shimada castle and enter the streets, where the mid-morning bustle has just began.

“We just had to help her,” War complains, tucking the feather into his pocket. “Because she’s a lady.”

“I am not pleased about this either,” Conquest grumbles. “This venture stays a secret from Famine, understood?”

“I’m just as scared of her wrath as you are,” War admits. “I agree- This doesn’t leave the two of us.”

And the two Horsemen set off to find Famine’s estranged daughter, Fareeha.
Death and Famine

Chapter Summary

The two horsemen try their luck across the sea.

War and Conquest were doing only slightly better than Famine and Death.

“You’re not a good navigator, are you, Death?” Famine says.

They stand at the shoreline, a vast stretch of water before them. There is five thousand miles of ocean in this direction, unbroken by not so much as a stray island.

“I smelled death this way.” Death insists.

“There is nothing here but the ocean,” Famine replies, exasperated.

“I’m Death,” he insists. “This is my speciality.”

“Perhaps you’re addling in your old age.” Famine rolls her eyes.

“Why don’t you just ride off and go find War while I investigate this myself?” Death snaps. “God knows you’d rather be traipsing around with him and Conquest.”

“You know very well why, Death. Need I remind you of what happened the last time you were alone?”

“There was a plague that killed a majority of the population of England.” Famine finishes for him, voice curt.

“Well, that’s not my-”

“Shush. You know as well as I do that our spheres of influence grow uncontrollable when we’re apart from one another. I’m not leaving you alone.” Famine says firmly.

“I’m sick of you all.” He growls. “I want to be alone for a while. If humanity suffers, that’s it’s problem, not mine.”

“Stop being dramatic, Death. You’ve dealt with us for millennia and I doubt a tiff between you and War- which you have almost every day, by the way- is the straw that broke the camel’s back.” She lets go of Shrike’s reins and twirls in her saddle to glare at him. “You and War have been awful for the past few years, though. Did something happen?”

“Oh, like you care!” Death punctuates that with a snort, and he jerks on Shadow Step’s reins to encourage it to move.

“Don’t turn your back on me, Death-” Famine’s voice is sharp and warning. She digs her heels into Shrike’s side, and the mare whinnies in protest, trotting after Death. “This conversation isn’t done.”
“Why don’t you meddle in someone else’s affai-”

A chill pricks its way across his skin, accompanied by what feels like a knock on his skull, but from the inside. He scowls and fights off a shiver.

“Did you feel that?” He asks, voice husky.

“A little. I’m not quite sure what it was.” Famine says.

“The Angel of Death just brought someone else back.” Death mutters.

“The Angel.” Famine pauses. “She’s back? You ripped off her wings and tore out her heart the last time we met. I swear it’s only been a couple of years. A few decades at most.”

“I guess she regenerates quickly.” Death digs his heels into Shadow Step’s sides. The horse whinnies sharply, letting him know that it doesn’t appreciate the treatment. Nevertheless, it obliges him and spins away from the shore, galloping back towards the mainland. Shrike and Famine follow without being told. “The reason I kept smelling death… A dead immortal running around messes with my nose.”

“You’re not going to go kill her, are you?”

“Where do you think we’re going right now?” Death indicates the road ahead of them, then their straining horses.

“Death, you don’t have to get along, but you do have to stop murdering her. She has just as much right to reverse death as you have to bring it.”

“She’s not a Horseman. I don’t have to care about her ‘rights’.” Death replies.

“Death!” Famine says, reproachful.

“You’re not a bleeding heart, Famine.” Death dismisses almost immediately. “Can’t convince me of it, I know you. And besides, I know as well as you do that you’re no fan of the Angel of Death either.”

“She hasn’t tried to contact Fareeha in years,” Famine says, slightly prickly. Death maneuvers as gracefully as he can around the landmine that was Famine’s daughter.

“Not that you know of.” Death says.

“Has she been talking to Fareeha?” Famine demands.

“I don’t keep tabs on your daughter.” Death says, “How should I know?”

His head abruptly snaps up, and he inhales deeply. Without a word of warning, he pulls on Shadow Step’s reins, giving a snarl instead of the traditional “whoa”. Shadow Step comes to a sharp halt, whinnying loudly. It halfway rears on its hind legs, flicking its tail hard to convey its irritation. Death makes no comment, keeping his face in the air and nose high.

“What is it now?” Famine asks, exasperated. Shrike slows to an amble, pacing near Death impatiently.

“That scent is back,” Death mutters.

“There’s nothing there but the sea, Death.”
“It’s across the sea.” He says. He feels sure of it- he knows that he’s right.

“Across the sea?” Famine echoes. Her voice is cautionary. “That’s a long journey, Death.”

“A few days away from Conquest won’t kill you,” He says, annoyed. “I want to know what this is. It’s an… Anomaly.”

“Fareeha is in that direction anyway,” Famine relinquishes. “I suppose we ride.”

“You planning on checking on her?” Death asks. “We don’t want to go too far out of the way.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“You haven’t so much as looked at her for a hundred years.” Death attempts to dissuade her.

“Then perhaps it is about time we go see how she’s doing,” She replies curtly. Famine can get positively icy when she’s angry. Death never hungers- none of the Horsemen ever do- but his guts clench with an unknown, twisting pain that could only be starvation.

“Okay,” He acquiesces quickly. “We’ll go check on her. But don’t say I didn’t warn you when things go awfully.”

The smile on Famine’s elderly, weather-beaten face softens him. Just a bit. The two of them gain control of their horses, wheeling them towards the shore’s edge. They go at a slow, easy pace.

“That scent of death in the wind, though.” He attempts to turn the topic back to himself. “What is so strong I can taste it across the sea?”

“A dead god, perhaps?” Famine ponders.

“What deities still reside in America?”

She laughs. “Fareeha does.”

“She’s a demigod.” Death dismisses. “Besides, if she died, you would know.”

“You’re right. So who else are we missing?”

A grunt. “I think Time is in America right now. Perhaps she did something stupid and died.” The ‘again’ is left unspoken.

“What’s she doing in America?”

“Sightseeing with her mortal girlfriend, the last I heard.”

Famine winces. “I hate it when she has flings with mortals. Surely she knows, better than anyone else, that a mortal’s time is short?”

“It’s ‘love’,” Death uses air quotes. “Even if it lasts only a blink.”

Their horses reach the shore’s edge. Shadow Step regards the water with some apprehension.

“We’re traveling over,” He directs. Shadow Step whinnies in reply and sets foot to the waters. Its hoof stays, as though stepping on a solid mass instead of liquid, and it travels over top of water as smoothly as land.
Shrike does the same.

The Horsemen and their horses pick up the pace, galloping out over the sea.

“So if it’s not Time and it’s not Fareeha…” Famine starts.

“I hope it’s not the Spirit of the West,” Death groans.

“I thought you’d be happy to see him again. He’s practically your son.”

“He is not my son. Horsemen do not sire children.”

Famine glares at him.

“As if I would produce such a ridiculous deity!” Death blusters.

“What deity would you be delighted to have as the product of your loins, Death?”

“Sombra,” He says, slowly. “She is intelligent. Quick-witted. Secretive. The Lady of the Shadows would be an excellent child of Death.”

A snort. “You certainly treat her that way. Whenever we head to the southern hemisphere, you always ask to visit her… And the Spirit of the West, come to think of it.”

“They are closeby. Southern United States and Northern Mexico. I may as well take tabs on the both of them.”

“Because you care.”

“Because I need to make sure they’re not getting into trouble,” He corrects.

“Because you care,” She repeats. He doesn’t dignify that with a response.

“What do you think Conquest and War are doing?” He asks instead, keeping his voice amicable.

“By now they’ll have found their conflict and claimed a conqueror,” She says, wryly. “Didn’t you just say you wanted to be away from them for a while? Why ask?”

Words catch in his throat; he is not one to admit feelings. He looks away, sour, and says nothing. Famine’s wordless satisfaction only makes his irritation blossom further.

They ride over the endless blue expanse of the sea, the setting sun at their backs.
“Come on, Immortal!”

The Horseman of War is currently ankle-deep in the Pacific Ocean, hands insistently grasping his stallion’s reins. He pulls firmly and Immortal digs his hooves into the sand, swinging his head in broad, protesting arcs. A sharp, insistent whinny rips its way out of his throat, and War sighs and lets go.

Conquest watches nearby, the barest hint of sympathy in his eyes. Balderich and Conquest had none of the difficulty Immortal and War were having- the mare’s hooves rest comfortably atop the waves. She hadn’t so much as hesitated before setting foot to the waterline.

“Maybe you should go on ahead without me,” War suggests. He pulls the feather out of his pocket, then sloshes through the surf to offer it to Conquest.

The golden-flecked feather glimmers radiantly, warm and bright. If it were from any other being, War might’ve called it beautiful or something of the kind. As it was, the Angel of Death was nothing but trouble and her ‘gifts’ were probably the same way.

“I am not going to see Fareeha alone.” Conquest shifts uncomfortably in his saddle. “Besides, it is bad enough that we have separated! Divvying up even further will be disastrous!”

“Immortal doesn’t want to get in the water,” War growls, tucking the feather back somewhere safe. A sudden urge to throw it into the water and let the ocean take care of it hits him, but he resists it.

“What do you want me to do?”


“War and ‘gentle’ don’t go well together.” War replies, sour. “Immortal, get in the water, I’m going to walk if you don’t-”

Immortal whines stubbornly, flicking his tail.

“Say please,” Conquest tries.

War kicks a large pebble and sends it sailing fifty feet away. “Immortal, I’m going to ride Balderich and leave you here if you don’t move right now.”

Immortal’s ears flick up. He digs a forehoof into the sand, making a low, unhappy whinny akin to the whine of a scolded dog.

“If you don’t like it maybe you should get in the water!” War rages. Immortal remains stern for half a second, then kneels and allows War on his back.
War firmly takes Immortal’s reins, directing the stallion into the water; Immortal doesn’t resist this time and trots to stand beside Balderich. War shoots Conquest a glare, nonverbally challenging him to comment on his stallion’s insubordination. Conquest wisely says nothing and the two set a steady gallop across the waves.

They get a few miles out before the horses start getting antsy- Balderich and Immortal’s supernaturally quick pace slows to barely a trot, and the two horses begin whinnying anxiously and defying their riders’ orders.

“What’s wrong with them?” War shouts, and receives a helpless shrug from Conquest, who was doing his best to calm Balderich.

Their answer came not long after. The sea starts churning, frothing, bubbling- War and Conquest exchange glances, wordlessly asking if there’s a fight. War conjures a rifle from thin air and Conquest takes his morningstar off his back.

The bubbling and frothing gets larger, bigger-

A multitude of horses suddenly explode out of the water. A dozen, maybe more, in shades of glacial blue, vivid teal, cool lavender, sea green and glittering aquamarine, colors of the ocean. Immortal rears in fright at the sudden burst of horses, a startled whinny ripping itself out of his throat.

War has to drop the rifle to get both hands on Immortal’s reins. Balderich is also panicking, eyes rolling back and ears slicked, hooves coming up and a strident screech of fear leaving her. Conquest attempts to calm her and nearly gets bucked off for his troubles.

The horses thunder over the waves, a clattering of forty-eight hooves spraying sea foam in every direction. They gallop in a lazy circle around the Horsemen, then come to an equally lazy stop in front of them.

The horses aren’t horses- not that War couldn’t have guessed that, given the shades of blue and purple and green they sported. They’re kelpies or hippocampi or something else- their manes are comprised of seaweed, their backs sport fins, and they have scales instead of fur.

The worst part? The lead horse- a massive stallion that rivals Balderich in size, colored a purplish blue- has a rider.

“West,” War growls.

The Spirit of the West grins back at him around the lit cigar in his teeth. The Spirit of the West is one of the newest gods- less than three hundred years old and with a youthful cockiness that never seemed to wane. He had a deep tan and a dark beard as wild as the untamed western frontier that spawned him. He dressed as a walking cowboy stereotype- stetson, spurs, gloves, boots, chaps, and to top it off, a gaudy red serape patterned with gold symbols. Despite emerging from the water, the Spirit of the West was completely dry, and his burning cigar didn’t seem to be affected either. He blows a cloud of smoke, sets the cigar back between his teeth, and straightens his back when he faces the two Horsemen.

“Howdy, War.” He doffs his stereotypical cowboy hat and bows low on his horse’s back.

“Conquest. Real honor to meet the original horsemen.”

He clears his throat, straightening in his saddle. “Seein’ your steeds makes me a little jealous, gotta say. Any chance I could borrow your stallion, War, an’ let him sire some foals with my finest mare? I know you Horsemen deal in favors instead of currency, an’ while I may not be on par with you, I am
“Shut up,” War barks. “What do you want? You’re an American god, you wouldn’t come all the way to Japan for chatter.”

“Spirit of the West,” The cowboy says sourly. “Japan is west. Everywhere is west. It just depends where you’re lookin’ at.”

“You’re a god of the American west, specifically.” War argues.

“Don’t mean I’m bound to the place. I can go where I want.”

“Not for long,” Conquest rumbles, soft and low. “You are tied to your continent and staying outside it for too long weakens you. Let us not pretend that we don’t all know this.”

The Spirit of the West rubs his arm awkwardly. “Okay. That’s true. So, is that a ‘no’ from you, War?”

“It is a no. But more importantly, I want to know what you actually want.”

“What I want?” The Spirit of the West repeats blankly. War and Conquest both note the shadow of uncertainty creeping across his weathered face. ‘Oh. Uh. Nothin’.”

“You wouldn’t materialize this far from the States if you didn’t need something.” War says impatiently. “What. Do. You. Want.”

“First: you’ll help?” West asks, dancing neatly around the actual question.

“We’re already doing some deity’s dirty work,” War mutters. “It better be good, whatever it is.”

“Sure! Yes, thank you! It’s about, um-” He seems to be thinking. “Oh! Fareeha.”

“No,” Conquest growls softly. “We’re not doing it.”

War straightens in his saddle to look at the old Horseman. Conquest’s entire body is taut, fists clenching at Balderich’s reins so tight it’s a wonder they don’t snap.

“We’re heading over there anyway.” War persuades. War never thought he would be the one to suggest that they start an adventure, but Conquest is looking less enthused and more angry by the second.

“I am not going to get involved.” Conquest mutters. “We are going to deliver the feather and nothing else.”

“Deliver the feather? What feather?” The Spirit of the West looks between the two Horsemen, blatant curiosity on his face.

“The Angel of Death tasked us with delivering one of her feathers to Fareeha.” Conquest rumbles. He doesn’t sound happy.

“Oh, hell, they still doin’ that forbidden lovers thing?” West asks, shaking his head in disbelief. “Tell ya what- You help me, I’ll give her the feather, an’ y’all can focus on my problem instead of the separated lovebirds. No need for Conquest and Fareeha to even meet besides, Fareeha likes me.”

“That sounds… Good.” War ventures hesitantly.
“Uh-huh.” West clicks his tongue at the entourage of water horses- they start galloping, then abruptly plunge underneath the water, leaving no trace they were ever there. All that’s left after a few moments is the calm stillness of the water- not broken by so much as a ripple- and the trio of gods and their steeds. “Look, I really appreciate you fellers doin’ this for m-”

“It’s not about Fareeha, is it.” War cuts off.

West sags guiltily in the saddle. “Well, no, it ain’t, but I knew that’d get ya’ll to listen.”

“Then who?”

“People’re dyin’. Some kinda scourge in the New World, been sweepin’ through my territory an’ pickin’ off animals. Normally I wouldn’t give so much as a bother, but somethin’s been killin’ the horses and cattle on my ranch.” He says it with sharp indignation, and War nods in understanding.

Gods that aren’t nomads- Gods that are tied to a specific place- have Domains, with a capital D. Their eternal homes. The place they dwell and will dwell until the world is burned to ash. The Nepali Spirits stay in their cozy temple in Nepal, worshipping their goddess, the Iris. The Spirit of the West has a ranch smack dab in the middle of New Mexico, with special horses and cattle and other ranch animals. Mother Russia, unsurprisingly, has her home in Russia, a simple palace deep in the mountain staffed by kikimora and domovoi. There are other spirits that have homes- such as The Inventor and her cow-centaur companion, who reside presently in Numbani, although they move wherever and whenever technology innovates. Time currently has a residence in Britain, and the Lady of the Shadows has some kind of dwelling in Mexico. Vulcan claims his Domain in the middle of an active volcano, an unpronounceable place on the edge of Sweden.

All deities had a mutual respect for one another’s Domain- you did not harm those living there or destroy property. Even Horsemen observed and obeyed this rule.

But someone hadn’t been, from the looks of things.

“It was another god,” Conquest says, musingly. “Mortals do not accidentally wander into god’s Domain, not unless they have strong magic or know precisely what they are looking for. Do you have suspects?”

“The Lady of Shadows. She’s closeby. But she ain’t a killer like that- The animals’re torn open, chewed up. Lady of Shadows doesn’t do stuff like that.” West shakes his head. “Maybe a monster? But I don’t smell nothin’ out of the ordinary.”

“It sounds like a monster.” Conquest offers, while War says,

“Chewed up? It’s got to be a monster.”

“Yeah, I think so, but there are some freaky gods out there.” The Spirit of the West says. “Anyway. You gonna help me out? I’ll deliver that feather, real quick. Faster’n you ever will- you guys may be Horsemen, but I can snap back to America any time I want.”

War and Conquest exchange glances. War urges Immortal towards the Spirit of the West, then offers out the feather. The cowboy takes it, stares for a second- there’s an unreadable emotion on his face, soft and curious, but it goes quickly. He tucks the feather into his pants pocket.

“I’m gonna get goin’. Jus’ in case you forgot how to get to my ranch, I’ll give you a guide.” West tips his hat, tightens his slack hold on the horse’s reins, and it dives smoothly into the water without so much as a ripple.
“I didn’t know he had control over horses in the water,” War gripes in his absence. “Could he always do that?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps he is growing more powerful.” Conquest suggests.

“That’s just what we need.” War sighs.

The water starts bubbling and frothing again, although neither Immortal or Balderich startle when a dog emerges from the depths. It’s small, though not overly so. Its coat is a natural color, a spotted and flecked greyish hue. It sports a red and gold bandana around its neck, reminiscent of the Spirit of the West’s serape. It looks up at them expectantly, yellow eyes glowing with more intelligence than a canine had any right to.

“I believe this is the guide the Spirit of the West mentioned,” Conquest peers at the new arrival. The hound starts up a trot to the southeast, pausing to glance back at them before breaking into an out-and-out sprint.

“Eee-yah!” War digs his heels into Immortal’s sides and goes galloping after the cattle dog.

It takes a second, but Conquest booms out a joyous laugh and is right at his heel, launching boldly into their next adventure.
Deserted

Chapter Summary

Death and Famine face off against a trio of demons.

“I didn’t think the mortal world could get this hot,” Death pants.

“You were the one who chose to garb himself in a heavy black cloak.” Famine is unsympathetic.

Death lets out a soft little moan. “Why did you pick such a hellish place to leave your daughter?”

“Because no one- not even Death himself- would want to come here.”

Death accepts that with a begrudging nod.

The valley they find themselves in is devoid of life, baked and seared into a barren crisp. It regularly reaches temperatures upwards of a hundred and thirty degrees, all year ‘round. The only movement is the blowing of dry, bitter dust across the endless, flat wasteland. The only sound is the whistling of wind, which does nothing to suppress the unwelcome heat of the flaming sun overhead. There is no reprieve, no end to the heat and lifelessness; it is that way by design. This slice of empty hell on earth was purposely hostile, purposely killed anything that stayed in it too long; and things that couldn’t be killed were eventually forced out by the sheer unpleasantness of the landscape or the other defensive capabilities this wretched place held.

Something encircles them overhead. Not a buzzard, not anything living- it’s an entourage of dust devils. Literal demons made out of dust and dirt and other small fragments of desert trash, animated through magic.

The dust devils land by the Horsemen and Famine encourages Shrike to stop. Death pulls on Shadow Step’s reins, mutters a deep “whoa” in the back of his throat, and his horse halts alongside Shrike.

There are three in total- Wadjet, a dust devil with massive wings comprised of multicolored shards of glass from broken bottles, with the face and body of a snake. The second is Horus, who bears a resemblance to a massive hawk- one eye is made of a penny, shined to perfection. The other is a glinting silver dollar scrubbed clean of dirt. The final dust devil is Anubis, made of congealed pitch and cinders, roughly shaped like a winged jackal. The three of them are guardians- Fareeha’s guardians- and were shaped with a union of Horseman magic and Vulcan craftsmanship.

“This is hallowed ground.” Wadjet growls. “Leave at once.”

The fact that a little dust devil had the stones to stand up to a Horseman was almost impressive. Death resists a laugh.

“Do you not recognize me?” Famine demands. The dust devils chatter amongst themselves in an ancient tongue, long forgotten to time.

“ We remember you,” Anubis’ voice is soft and low, refined compared to the hostile hiss from Wadjet. “ But you have not been here in a very long time. What do you seek in this hellish waste,
“Horseman?”

“My daughter.” Famine says, voice firm and clear.

Horus twitches. “That’s what the other one said.”

“Other one?” Famine echoes.

“Another deity came by a few hours ago.” Anubis explains. “He was loud and rode a horse, much like the two of you.”

“Was he wearing a cowboy hat?” Death interjects.

“Yes,” All three dust devils hiss at once.

“What was that idiot doing here?” Death looks at Famine and Famine shrugs helplessly.

“He claimed he had a delivery,” Wadjet murmurs.

“We turned him away at the door.” Horus growls.

“We thought it best Fareeha have no visitors. The Angel of Death is very adamant and her agents are everywhere.” Anubis’ dusty tail wags and scatters ashes onto the cracked, dry earth. They are swept up by the wind.

“Famine is Fareeha’s mother,” Death emphasizes the last word. “You can’t bar her entry.”

“Then you would submit to trial.” Horus hisses, his dust particles whizzing much more agitatedly.

“Trial?” Death echoes.

“Combat.”

Famine dismounts from Shrike in one swift, practiced motion. “I accept your trial.”

“Your companion will need to join you if you would grant him entry.” Anubis nods his head at Death.

Death dismounts.

He is not called ‘Death’ for no reason. If the dust devils will not let them proceed, then they will learn exactly why.

He calls shotguns from the ether- solid, almost cumbersome in size, with strong arms and practice necessary to duel wield them effectively. One clip is enough to kill anything- from a forty foot giant to a two inch pixie.

Famine removes the rifle from her back. She inspects it- it’s battered, old, broken, kept together by duct-tape and baling wire. Death is well aware she could conjure a shiny new sniper rifle out of thin air, and yet, she insists on a mortal weapon. Conquest did the same- his morningstar had a human craftsman and, as a result, could not be simply vanished away like Death or War’s weapons of choice.

She decides the rifle is good enough, because she looks away from it, a stern seriousness overtaking her face. Pain gnaws at Death’s stomach, nausea and thirst compounding on top of the boiling heat of the desert sun. She is gearing up for a fight, alright; if he were a normal human he would likely
have withered into an emaciated skeleton by now.

“You feel like Famine,” Anubis says plainly. “But we will not be dissuaded by hunger pains.”

Famine shoots Anubis squarely in the head. Cinders, coal dust, dirt- it explodes outward with tremendous force. Some of it breaks through Death’s armor, specks of shrapnel lodging in his skin and plating. He bleeds ichor, although he doubts the dust particles can cause any serious damage.

Horus and Wadjet let out screams of rage and take flight. Horus dives for Death, chips of sharpened rock serving as the approximate of talons. It has been too long since he’s faced a real fight- Death stands there dumbly until there is pain. The claws cleave through his mask like butter, golden blood spurting from the wounds. Death yells, fires blindly, and Horus escapes into the sky.

“Concentrate!” Famine roars at him, firing a shot at Wadjet. The dust devil gives a hiss, but judging by the way she dives for the Horseman, fangs extended, the bullet missed.

Death throws himself into a roll to avoid Horus’ slashing talons, the dust devil’s furious screech burning his ears. He snaps off a round of his shotguns and receives a pained accompaniment- Horus starts falling, but his body dissolves into particles in the wind before he can hit the ground. The penny and silver dollar fall to the earth with a soft plunk, their glittering surfaces somehow accusing.

Golden blood drips from twin puncture wounds on Famine’s arm. The slow trickle of blood down Death’s cheekbone feels like a tickling hair or a crawling insect.

Wind sweeps over the barren wasteland.

“We’re out of practice.” Death says into the ensuing silence. He dabs at the blood on his face with a forefinger, then pops the digit in his mouth and licks it clean. Horseman blood is too powerful- too volatile- to allow it to simply spill, and wiping it off is no better. He licks a droplet off his cheek and continues, hesitantly: “Three hundred years ago we would’ve killed them before they could even touch us.”

“I know.” Famine says. “I prefer being out of practice to being in a war.”

Another sweeping silence that makes the buffeting of the wind gratingly loud. Death clears his throat.

“Does Wadjet have poison?” Death heads over to her, kneels at her side. He holds out his hands, wordlessly asking to inspect her arm.

“No. None that could hurt a Horseman, anyway.”

Famine holds out her arm for him to scrutinize. The injury is at the center of her forearm. Small wells of glittering golden blood. He lets go, nods his approval. Not that she needed it.

Famine brings her arm up to her face and seals her mouth around the wounds, sucking idly. Death laps up a trickle of blood that’d congregated in the corner of his mouth and stands up.

Shadow Step and Shrike perk when he walks towards them- he grips Shadow Step’s reins in one fist, but is slower and more hesitant when grabbing Shrike’s. Other Horsemen’s horses don’t take
kindly to being manhandled.

He leads the two of them over to Famine, slow and careful not to jostle the bit in Shrike’s mouth. Her hooves are sharp and she can kick like a bastard. “Famine, do you need a moment?”

“The wounds are already healing.” She shakes her head, stands up. “What about you?”

“The cuts are shallow.” He licks at his face again. “They’ve already stopped bleeding. It’s just residue left.”

Death waits for Famine to climb atop Shrike before he mounts Shadow Step. Just in case.

“Her castle shouldn’t be far from here.” Famine says, urging Shrike forward with a light tap of her heels. “But the dust devils are only the first line of defense. We need to be on guard.”

“What’s the second line of defense?”

Shadow Step lets out a sharp snort of warning- it comes to a sharp, sudden halt. If they hadn’t been moving at a meandering trot, Death probably would’ve been thrown clear out of his saddle.

Shrike stops, too. She snorts, urgently.

The earth before them starts wildly swirling, like a quicksand whirlpool. Three figures clamber their way out.

One is snakelike in design, thin and wiry, made from limestone and sandstone. It has large, colorful wings decorated with green and blue gemstones. It can only be Wadjet, although instead of a dust devil, she appears as some kind of golem- nearly three times her original size and much hardier looking than before.

Horus follows swiftly. He, too, is nearly triple his old size, and made of solid material rather than dust and wind. A fist-sized chunk of copper glints in one of his eyes, and an even larger piece of polished silver rests in the other socket. He looks to be made of bronze or tin, claws and beak made of iron. Death wonders if he can still fly like this.

Anubis is the final to appear. His body is made of smooth, cold obsidian, occasionally interspersed with jet and onyx. He had formerly been the size of a poodle, and had increased until he was more akin to a tiger or a leopard. Chips of citrine glint where his eyes should be.

“We see now that you are indeed the Horsemen you appear to be.” Anubis says, soft and lilting.

“Cannot blame us for wanting to ascertain that fact.” Horus grumbles.

“A final challenge awaits you, however.” Wadjet warns. “Being Horsemen does not exempt you from this.”

Famine says nothing. Death follows suit.

“We are going to ask a question. One for each of you.”

“Answer honestly.” Horus advises. “You will find that these new bodies are not as fragile as the ones you defeated earlier.”

“We will know if you lie,” Wadjet hisses.

“I'll go first.” Famine nods jerkily.
“With whom did you sire Fareeha with?” Anubis asks.

“A mortal man whom I admired very dearly.” A muscle in Famine’s cheek twitches. “A chieftain I should have known better than to get involved with.”

Anubis nods.

“Who do you love, Death?”

“No one.” He says, blunt. “Horsemen do not love.”

“Liar,” Wadjet spits.

“Excuse me?” Indignation thickly chokes Death’s words. “How dare-”

“You are a filthy liar,” Horus seethes.


“Untrue.” Anubis says, not unkindly. “Confess, Death, and you may proceed.”

“No.” Death says, quietly. Then, much louder, “No!”

“You cannot proceed until you answ-”

“Famine,” Death barks, “Go ahead without me.”

Famine blinks, slack-jawed with astonishment. “Death-”

“Ride on without me! I’ll stay here.”

Death does not blush.

Horsemen do not blush.

“Very well,” Anubis says. “Continue on your way, Famine.”

She glances back at Death- his fists clenched hard enough to crush coal into diamond, his newly scarred face flushing a dark, fervid red- and urges Shrike forward. She would deal with this outburst when she got back from seeing her daughter-

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait, wait!”

Shrike flicks one of her long, slender ears and stops without prompting. Famine shifts in her saddle, trying to not let her internal sigh become an external one.

The Spirit of the West jerks on the reins of his golden palomino horse, forcing it to a screeching halt in front of Wadjet, Anubis, and Horus.

“You are not welcome here, young god-” Horus begins.

“He’s fine,” Famine corrects.

Horus grunts. “He’s with you?”

“Hah! Hell yeah I am! I got a horse, she’s got a horse, we’re basically family.” The Spirit of the West rambles, jabbing his thumb in Famine’s direction.
"Listen, you walking, talking embarrassment-" Death begins, nostrils flaring in agitation, "Get out of here before you do something stupid and get hurt."

"No can do!" West singsongs. "So, can I just go on ahead or do I gotta-"

"Answer a question for us. What is home to you?"

"Wherever I get a hot meal and a good horse." The Spirit of the West pats the palomino's flank fondly.

"Proceed." Anubis inclines his head towards Famine. "But know that you are being watched."

"That's ridiculous! Why does he get such an easy question!?" Death sputters.

"Your query could be answered in a single word." Anubis replies primly.

Death flushes a deep red, bordering on purple. "Shut it!"

West's palomino prances towards Famine.

"What's got his panties in a knot?" The Spirit of the West stage-whispers.

"I don't know." The lie rolls off her tongue smoothly- it's a half-lie, anyway. She has a decent idea of what is bothering Death and it's both enormously concerning and incredibly amusing.

The two horses move forward at a decently speeded trot; after long enough, Death and Fareeha's guardians are simple silhouettes in the distance.

"This is longer'n I thought," The Spirit of the West says, conversationally. "How long'll this take? Because I got things to do."

"Do tell," Famine replies, struggling not to roll her eyes.

"Huh?"

"What things do you have to do, West?"

"I gotta run my ranch, miss."

"Please. Not miss."

"Ma'am?" He tries.

"Famine." She says, bluntly.

"I gotta run my ranch, Famine." He nods. "I hired some of your buddies to help me out with a little problem of mine."

"Buddies?" She echoes, arching both eyebrows.

"Yeah! Conquest and War, they offered to help me out."

"When did you see them?"

"Couple hours ago. They're riding to my ranch right now."

"That'll be a good opportunity to meet up again. You wouldn't mind if we accompanied you back to
your Domain after we’re done here?”

“Course not. As far as I’m concerned, the full set of Horsemen is better than half.”

“Less dangerous, certainly.”

“Speakin’ of less dangerous, is it okay to leave Death back there by himself?”

“There’s nothing living within twenty miles of Fareeha’s castle. Provided he stays put, no one’ll get hurt.”

“And if he doesn’t stay put?”

“He will,” Famine assures.

“You’re avoidin’ the question.”

“Don’t worry about it, West.”

The air seems to thrum with energy—invisible whispers of magic. The heat from the sun intensifies to unbearable levels. The heat shimmers on the horizon.

“Famine?” West says, voice strangled, “I think I’m startin’ to hallucinate.”

“What do you see?”

“Tower,” He manages. He points into the horizon—She squints.

“That’s not a hallucination.”

“Then what is it?”

“Fareeha’s tower.”

“I’m gonna burn to death before we get there,” West whines. “I’m gettin’ cooked alive, my blood’s gonna start boiling before we-”

“We’ll make it.” Famine says. “We’re deities. We can’t die.”

“Does mean I don’t want to die,” West gripes.

“We’ll make it,” Famine reassures him. “Inside the castle is pleasant.”

“We can’t do this.” West says, abruptly. He pulls his horse to a slow stop, murmuring a low “whoa”.

“You’re going to quit?” Famine doesn’t suppress the twinge of anger in her voice.

“No, I’m gonna walk. Poor ol’ girl’s gonna collapse before we get there.” The Spirit of the West dismounts.

He presses his hand into the soft velvet of his mare’s nose affectionately, receives a tired, miserable nicker for his trouble.

Magic—different from the one that causes the oppressive heat—curls off the Spirit of the West. He runs his hand affectionately through his horse’s mane.
“Let’s get you home, girl.” He says- he rubs his hands together, breathes deep.

The sand beneath their feet begins shifting- Shrike doesn’t need encouragement to canter a few meters, a safe distance away. The palomino sinks underneath waves and waves of golden-orange sand, seemingly unconcerned.

The sand swallows her up and West drags his hand over his face as if to wipe away sweat. Silence reigns.

“What did you do?” Famine says.

“ Took her home. Portaled her back to the ranch.”

Famine pauses for a second.

She leans and offers her hand out to him.

“Uh, no offense, but your horse doesn’t really look like it can carry one person, let alone-” The Spirit of the West begins awkwardly.

“This is a great honor, West. Take it.”

He takes her hand and takes a seat behind Famine. The saddle automatically expands to accommodate his bulk.

Shrike doesn’t so much as flinch under the weight of the two passengers and starts heading for the castle without prompting.

“Always imagined what it’d be like to be on a Horseman’s horse,” West sounds awed.

“What did you imagine it’d be like, West?”

“For one thing, I’d imagined that I’d have to steal it, so a lot more runnin’ and yellin’ involved.”

A laugh.

They proceed together in comfortable quiet- the heat gets worse, definitely worse, but West doesn’t complain and neither does Famine.

The hazy black blur on the horizon thickens and enlarges with time. The castle is more akin to a Rapunzel-esque tower, made of pure black stone, a fluttering blue flag at its summit.

It’s bordering on a hundred and sixty degrees when they reach the castle’s entrance.

“Fuckin’ finally,” West pants. Famine opts to ignore the vulgarity.

Famine dismounts, and the Spirit of the West is soon to follow.

Famine raises her fist, pauses for half a second, and slams it against the castle’s wooden door.
The Spirit of the West and Famine strike a deal with Fareeha.

The Spirit of West rakes his fingers through his hair, thankful gods didn’t perspire. He’d be sweating bullets if that were the case; maybe not even metaphorically, god physiology didn’t always make sense and he was the kind of god to make that kind of phrase literal.

The feather in his pocket is starting to feel heavy. Had it turned to stone while he wasn’t looking? West resists the urge to look at it and instead waits, very patiently, for the door to open.

“It is supposed to open, right?” He checks. The Horseman shoots him a withering stare and he holds up his palms in self-defense. “M’ just askin’.”

“It’s supposed to open,” She says dryly.

“Right.” A pause. “When?”

“Soon. Just be patient.”

“I would be, but the sun’s fryin’ my patience clean off. Why can gods feel heat if it ain’t actually gonna cook us inside?”

“Why do we bleed if we can’t die?” She replies, a shred annoyed. “Why do we feel pain?”

“Good questions,” The Spirit of the West nods.

“They were rhetorical. That’s just how it is.”

“Whoever made the gods has got some sick sense o’ humor.”

Famine flashes him a warning look- they didn’t talk about that kind of thing, gods with capital Gs and creation myths. None of them wanted to ponder existence and how it came to be; deities were alongside mortals in that regard, although that was just about the only existential similarity they shared.

The wooden door abruptly swings open and leaves a handsome young woman standing in the doorway. Her features are proud- strong chin, dark eyes, a swooping tattoo under her eye that makes her resemblance to her Horseman mother all the stronger. Her hair is dark and glossy, cut into a bob, jewelry braided into the frontmost locks. She’s dressed in cobalt blue armor, some strange blend of bird and knight.

“Hi, Mom.” She drones, tone teetering on the edge of flat or sarcastic.

“Fareeha, child, it’s lovely to see you! It’s been so long!” Famine exults.

Fareeha’s stony face softens. Somewhat. She bears Famine’s hug without complaint and looks past the Horseman’s shoulder to stare at the Spirit of the West. He doffs his hat, covers the lower half of
his face with the brim.

The Spirit of the West was one of the only goddamn deities on this earth that bothered to talk to Fareeha on a regular basis, although her three guardians only permitted calls and no physical visits. They were friends. He was probably Fareeha’s closest friend, sad as that was.

The second Fareeha is let out of the hug, she stalks up to the Spirit of the West and punches him straight in the mouth.

Well, the whole ‘closest friend’ thing was a little lax in the recent years. He hadn’t talked to her in a couple decades, so he probably deserved that.

“Ow,” He whines, tenderly cupping his face.

“You cut off all conversation with me!” Her voice is accusatory. “You just left me cold turkey in the seventies!”

“Sorry-”

“The hell you are!”

“Your mom hasn’t visited you in more than a hundred years and you’re not punching her!” He complains.

“She’s my mother, West!”

“What about equality?” He argues feebly, and receives another swift fist to the face. West howls, clasps his hands over his nose—she punches hard.

Fareeha turns to her mother and starts up a short little conversation. He misses most of it due to attending to his busted nose, but catches the tail end.

“- doing here, Mom?”

“What? I’m not allowed to see my daughter if I want to?” Famine says, voice playful. “It is good to see you, habibti. I am sorry I don’t get the opportunity to visit as often anymore, the world is full of so much more hunger and war and death-”

“It’s okay, Mom.” Fareeha sighs. “I just wish you’d let me come with you.”

Famine runs an affectionate hand through her daughter’s hair. “It is dangerous.”

“I’m strong.”

“There is no doubt about that.” Famine says. “You got your strength from me. I just worry…” Famine trails off, looks away.

“What do you worry about?” Fareeha prompts.

“I worry that you won’t have my immortality.” Famine grabs Fareeha’s hand, clasps it between her own. “No Horseman has ever sired a child. You’ll be targeted, your very existence is a challenge.”

Fareeha’s eyes grow dark, determined. West realizes he wants absolutely none of this conversation and halfway considers just jumping on Famine’s horse and making a break for it. He gets the feeling Horsemen’s horses are beyond his sphere of influence, though, so he’ll have to settle for awkwardly listening to what was definitely a private conversation.
“I can handle it.”

Famine breathes in deeply, then exhales. “I know, I know you can. But you have to promise me you’ll stay away from the Angel of Death.”

The temperature seems to drop by like a hundred degrees, which is surprisingly pleasant.

“Mom-” Fareeha inhales, looking like she’s about to start up a rant. Famine holds up a hand for silence and is ignored. “I love her, it’s not fair that you’re cutting me off like this-”

Famine clasps Fareeha’s hands again, tight and pleading. “I know you do, my love, but you must understand- She’s not a good deity, Fareeha. She is dangerous and the only reason that she wants you is because she’s waiting for you to die-”

“Mom!” Fareeha pushes her away sharply. Famine stumbles and West springs forward to catch her before she can fall.

“The hell is wrong with you!” West barks at Fareeha. He gets a sharp elbow to the chest from Famine and the Horseman jerks herself away from him.

*Why do I even bother?*

“Fareeha, I’m trying to protect you.” Famine rubs the bridge of her nose, her face open and genuine. It’s a vulnerability that West would never, ever, ever associate with a Horseman. “She’s going to try to entrap you in one of her contracts, and I’m fearful of what she’ll make you do.”

“What will she make me do?” Fareeha challenges.

“Hurt people for her own gain. She’s playing a dangerous game, Fareeha, and I don’t want you to get involved in it. *Please* understand, *habibti*, this is for you and the rest of the world.”

Fareeha clenches her jaw stubbornly. “I want to go on a trip with you and the other Horseman.”

“I told you my condition- you can’t see the Angel of Death. I am serious about that.”

“She can come to my ranch,” West offers quickly. “Angel o’ Death would never look there, an’ I’ve got a monster problem y’can come help out with, Far.”

Famine’s eyes glitter with suspicion.

“Whoa, don’t gimme that look. There’s gonna be *four* Horsemen there, plus me, plus all my animals and hired hands. There ain’t no way she could get hurt. I promise, Famine, she’ll be fine.”

Famine nods jerkily. “Bring us there.”

“Now, hold on, we gotta get Death first, don’t we?” The Spirit of the West reminds.

“Death is here?” Fareeha looks around expectantly.

“He failed the entry exam. He’s waitin’ a ways back.” West says. “Say, Far, you got water in that tower?”

“Yes. All kinds of food, actually.” She nods.

“Cool. Mind if I grab a drink ‘fore we go?”
“Of course not. I’ll come with you. Mom?”

“I’ll wait here,” Famine says. She climbs atop Shrike, peering off into the horizon.

Fareeha gestures for the castle doors- the Spirit of the West walks in. Fareeha heads in after and closes the door.

They’re in some kind of foyer- small, made of the same black stone. There’s a staircase to the right, a doorway to the left. Fareeha beckons for him to wait where he is and heads to the right.

He twiddles his thumbs and waits for her to come back. The feather feels as though it weighs at least ten pounds; he’s surprised it hasn’t torn a hole in his clothes.

She comes back with a glass of water. He downs it all in one go, thankful for how cool it is.

“So.”

She tilts her head.

“I have somethin’ for you.” He says.

She raises an eyebrow.

“It’s from the Angel o’ Death.”

Both eyebrows shoot up towards her hairline.

“Really?” She asks, excited but trying to keep her voice down. “What is it?”

He reaches into his pocket and lifts it- the weight immediately melts away under his touch, until it’s just a light little feather. He holds it out for her to inspect.

“Is this-?” She asks, hushed.

“One o’ her feathers? Probably. Got any idea what it means?”

“Yes,” Fareeha tucks it somewhere in her armor, a soft smile overtaking her face. “Don’t tell Mom about this.”

“Promise I won’t. But there might be some trouble with that, ’cos I got the feather from War.”

Her face momentarily flickers with panic, then smoothens out. “If they talk about it, say you lost it.”

“What? Why’m I gonna take the flak for this? The Spirit o’ the West is about as good as a deliveryman as it gets. Ain’t you ever heard of the Pony Express?”

Fareeha huffs. “It’s either look like you lost it or face my mother’s wrath- and mine, too.”

The Spirit of the West grimaces. “Yeah, okay. Message received. Let’s go before your mom starts gettin’ suspicious.”

Before he can open the door, Fareeha throws her arms around him in a tight hug. He slackens, sags into the embrace- Her face buries itself in the crook of his neck, and he can feel her mumble against his skin: “Thank you, West.”
“Ain’t no big thing,” He tries to sound indifferent, but there’s a melty kind of warmth in his chest that’s probably unbecoming for a deity. He wraps his arms around her, squeezes her to his chest briefly. When he lets go, she pulls away from him, a soft, happy little smile on her face.

“Let’s go,” She inclines her head towards the door and he nods stupidly.

Famine’s waiting for them when they step back into the blistering outdoor heat. She extends her hand to the two of them.

“Ma’am, you ain’t gonna have room for three people on that beauty,” West says, shaking his head.

“Oh, I know.” Famine grabs Fareeha’s hand and pulls her onto the mare’s back. The Horseman’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “You’re walking, West.”

West grits his teeth and swallows a bitter complaint.

“Yeah. A’ight.”
He's hungry but it's getting harder and harder to catch food.

He prowls forward, on all fours. His movement is slow, ungainly, due to the fact that his torso is so oblong, but he’s attempting to sneak and he can’t do that on two feet. He knows, from experience, that he will be noticed if he stands up. When on tippy-toes, he towers over humans and all the other living things that dwell here.

Here is a strange place. It smells like magic. Deep magic. Young magic, so strong and tactile he can taste it if he licks the air. It tastes like dust, though, so he tries to not do that. He don’t much like the taste of dust, even if the magic tingles on the pad of his tongue.

He inhales deeply, strongly. There is something nearby. Smells of stronger magic, the thickly entrenched Here magic. He pokes his head cautiously out of the underbrush he’s been hiding in.

He doesn’t know many human words or human concepts, but he does know what this is. Trees have been chopped up and smoothened, wood stabbed into the ground so they rise from the earth like the trees they used to be. That doesn’t make much sense to him; why not just plant trees if a human wanted wood there? The trees would do the purpose of the wood- it’s to keep animals inside a location, so they don’t run away. When he first learned that, he was proud of himself for his cleverness, for thinking like and understanding a human.

There are animals in the wooden corral. Big, with a long tail made of dark glimmering hair. Long, flicky ears. Hooves, like a cow. They don’t have horns either, and are a lot skinnier than cows. He knew these things- he had seen them before- but he did not know their names.

His belly growls. Tells him it’s time to eat. He agrees. It is time to eat, and one of these hooved not-cows will do just fine for food. He creeps forward as quietly as he can, trying to shush his whining tummy. He’ll be fed soon.

He lunges- leaps clear over the wooden fence- and sprints, as quickly as he can, on all fours. The not-cows let out shrill, ear-piercing shrieks of fright, and he doesn’t let that stop him. He gains ground, kicking up clods of earth, teeth bared.

He miscalculated, though; these things are faster than cows. They quickly outpace him, and he keeps up a valiant attempt to catch up, but he’s not fast. He chirps in irritation at them, but slowly comes to a gradual halt. The not-cows continue to run, putting him at a far distance.

He is not made for running; he’s made for chasing and clawing and biting, but his targets are supposed to be slow and two-legged, made of nuggety meat and fat. He makes a feeble croon, a bid for the not-cows to come back and crawl into his empty tummy, but they don’t come closer. If anything, they move further away.

He collapses on his back in the middle of the corral. There’s soft grass underneath him.

He shifts onto his belly, stands up on two legs. He yanks tufts of the grass out of the earth and
stomps off. He’ll have to try something else. These things, with their four legs and hooves and lean chest, are too quick for him.

There’s a river near his nest, he could try fishing.

Fear makes him cold for a minute. What if he can’t find anything to eat?

He shakes off the fear. He will. He will find something to eat. And even if he doesn’t find something to eat, he won’t die. His tummy will just hurt. And he’s dealt with all kind of hurt. Like seeing his friends smashed by those big guys in armor—

No. He doesn’t want to think about it. His fists have clenched and he’s crushing his soft grass. He doesn’t want that, the grass won’t be soft anymore if it’s squished. He relaxes his grip and hops over the corral’s wooden planks. He stomps back into the underbrush and tastes the air again.

Magic. It makes his belly hurt less. Even if it tastes like gross old dust.

The walk back to his nest takes forever. He has to move through a bunch of scrubbly trees and waves of golden, water-leached fields. He hears rabbits and mice and voles and crickets and owls and all kinds of little creatures on his way. He pounces but he only ever grabs air. He’s not quick enough to catch anything that isn’t a cow or one of those bok-bok-bok chickies. He wishes he was faster.

You could try catching a people, a mean little voice in the back of his head says. He shakes his head and tries to ignore it. You love catching people. The way they feel all soft and squishy in your claws, the snap when you break a bone, the nice juice inside the bones! They’re slow and fat and tasty. You should try snacking on people. There are homes around here, and where there are homes, there are people. You can stop this pain in your belly.

He growls to himself, tries to avoid clenching his fists again, because he needs to be careful with the grass.

Stop, he tells himself sternly, and that horrible voice goes all quiet.

It’s a long walk back to his nest. The stars shift far in the sky and he’s almost worried he won’t get there before sunset, but he finds his burrow long before the first ray of dawn.

His nest is underneath an old tree trunk in the middle of an empty field; he dug out a burrow a few weeks back, and it contains his few treasures. He has to squeeze in order to fit, but that’s okay.

He drops the tufts of grass in the corner, alongside a few flowers and pretty rocks he’d scavenged. His prize scavenge was a thing he took from a man who smelled overwhelmingly of magic, tasted like dust and cows and old grass. A gun, it was called; he admires the way it shines in the moonlight and likes spinning the little sharp thing at the end of it- a burr, a spur, although he had cut himself playing with it before.

He pads into the very corner of his nest, squeezing himself into the smallest shape he can manage. Tomorrow night he will need to dig a bigger burrow- and ignore his growly tummy pain.

His closest friend in the world flutters from the entrance of the burrow down to him. Gannie is her name; she is soft and sweet, a pretty yellowy in color, with bright green eyes. Her real name is Gannie-meede, but he forgets that a lot.

The sun is rising, she tells him sleepily. He probably woke her up when he came to the burrow. She lives in a tree nearby, where she’s got a nest full of babies.
He twitters back to her; he understands her birdsong and she understands him. *I know.*

*Do you want me to sing to you before you go to sleep?*

*Yes, please.*

She sings about the sunshine, one of his favorite subjects. He’s never seen the sun before, and he never will see it. She sings about how it’s rich and syrupy, how all the colors pop and shine in the glittering rays. She sings to him about rainbows and the dappling shadows sunshine creates when it shines through leaves. She sings about how lovely it is to feel sun on your face when it’s cold in winter, about how hot and blistering it is in summer.

His skin ripples and swishes, hardening. He shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath.

Gannie will watch him until the sun sets again. She will make sure he isn’t hurt.

The sun rises, and he turns to stone.
Just Call Me Ranch...

Chapter Summary

Death, Fareeha, and Famine get a tour of the Spirit of the West's ranch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“An’ heeeeeeeeeeere we are!” The glorified cowboy ripoff trumpets, flinging his hand into the air in a manner that’s likely supposed to be grandiose, but comes across as conceited and overblown.

Death has been to his ranch before. There are few places on this earth he hasn’t ventured.

Every time he comes here it feels as though the world is more obnoxious than it was last time.

“No, Fareeha ain’t been here yet,” The Spirit of the West says. He sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles- almost immediately two horses canter over towards him. One of them was his palomino mare from earlier, the other a glossy black Arabian stallion that Death had never seen before. “So I figured we could all go on a tour of the McCree Ranch.”

“McCree Ranch?” Death repeats dubiously.

“Yeah! Figured a couple decades ago it ought to have a name. Settled on McCree ranch. Now, Far, you ever been on a horse before-?”

“No,” Famine’s daughter slowly draws her hand towards the Arabian stallion’s nose.

“Huh. Guess you don’t know how to ride, then.” McCree scratches the nape of his neck. “Well, my mare Flashbang’s a well-behaved gal, she could take both of us-”

“No,” Fareeha says suddenly. “I know how.”

“But’cha said you ain’t never been on a-”

“I know how.” Fareeha’s brows crease together. “I just- I just know.”

“It’s because you’re a Horseman.” Death says, quickly amending himself with: “You’re half a Horseman.”

Fareeha grabs a fistful of mane in her hand, hesitates half a second, and throws her leg high in the air, using momentum to plant herself on the Arabian’s back. She straightens herself, blinking down at the motionless stallion.

“How do I…?” She ventures. “There’s no reins.”

“That’s the way a horse is meant to be,” The Spirit of the West drawls. “He’ll know what’cha mean if you give him directions. Y’ain’t no Spirit of the West, but I reckon you got a way with horses.”

His eyes slide in the direction of Famine and Death, squinting suspiciously. “Ya’ll can’t convince me that the bit an’ bridle ain’t just for show.”
Death and Famine say nothing.

“Now, a’ight, first thing on the tour. Let’s get movin’, we’ve got greener pastures up ahead.” The palomino starts off at a quick trot, setting a rhythm for the rest of them.

“First thing- We got cattle. Lots of cattle. These here cows got over a hundred acres to run ‘round in to their heart’s content. I dunno how many we currently have- I let ‘em do their thing, except if it’s calving season- except that at least fifteen are missin’.”

“Your cows are missing?” Famine asks.

The Spirit of the West scowls, then realizes who he’s scowling at, and straightens out his face. “Somethin’s been eatin’ them. It’s not wolves or coyotes; whatever this thing is, it kills messy. I find claw marks and broken bones, a stray bite or two on the flank… It tears up the corpses and eats everything in the stomach cavity.”

“Grisly.” Famine comments. “Death, anything to that?”

“I’d need to see a body, and even then, it’s better if it’s recent.”

“I been keepin’ a closer watch on the cows’n horses. Been a month since the last killin’.” The Spirit of the West says primly. “Would that be good enough?”

“I suppose so-”

“Before we do that,” Famine says, “Fareeha still deserves a tour.”

“Right! Right. O’ course.” The Spirit of the West nods, somewhat sheepish. “Okay, folks, keep behind me. Hands and feet on yer horse at all time-”

“Get on with it,” Death says impatiently.

The Spirit of the West encourages his horse forward, and the rest of them follow.

“On yer left, we got cows,” the Spirit of the West proclaims. A multitude of differently colored cows- splashes of brown and white, black and white, tan and cream, and a mix of any of the number-are grazing nearby the wire fence that encircles them. Their fields are a rich green due to a power that West holds over his domain- control of the weather. The temperature is a pleasant seventy degrees, slightly breezy, and Death knows it rains twice a week on a strict schedule.

“They’re all named Bessie.” West informs them. “They used to have names before, but there’s like, a hundred of the gals, so I can’t keep ‘em straight. So they’re all Bessie now.”

“Lazy.” Death mutters critically.

“Hey, you ain’t tried the honest life. It’s hard bein’ a rancher- not all of us can pack up on a horse and wander around ‘til somethin’ interestin’ happens. I got a job to do.”

“You hire people to do the actual work for you.” Death says.

“Yeah, okay, but-”

A man on a horse passes by. He’s just as terribly dressed as the Spirit of the West, wrapped up in a serape and a cowboy hat, adorned with spurs and chaps. His skin is tinged an unhealthy greenish grey, and his pupils and iris are entirely missing. He flickers when his mare gallops past, slightly translucent, and rides onward. He tips his hat to them as he goes.
One of West’s farmhands. A ghoul—A dead man who pledged his allegiance to the Spirit of the West for eternity in exchange to continue what he loved doing when he was alive.

“- I got a managerial position. I got twenty hands on this ranch and like, a bunch o’ cows.” The Spirit of the West says. “Somebody’s gotta keep things in order.”


“It ain’t so silly,” West looks slightly hurt and Death denies the brief twinge of regret in his chest for being so harsh. “I’ve had three hundred years t’get my shit together, y’know…”

“Death is in a bad mood,” Famine says. “Try not to let him discourage you, West.”

“Bad mood? Why?” The Spirit of the West gives Death a curious look and he returns a ferocious glare.

“Upset that War decided to split off from him.” Famine says primly.

“I am not upset. He was being arrogant-”

West chortles, and tries to hide the sound as a cough.

Fareeha either isn’t listening to the conversation or she purposely tries to save Death from public humiliation, because she says “What’re those?” and points off at buildings in the distance.

“Good question, Far,” West lifts up his chin. “That big one there- that’s the McCree Manor. I sleep there- when I sleep- an’ so do the farmhands. I got guest bedrooms for ya’ll- I know Horsemen don’t gotta sleep, but I know you do.”

Fareeha ducks her head slightly.

“Now, now, hey- Ain’t nothin’ to be sheepish about. My ranchers gotta sleep even though they’re immortal.” West soothes. “The other buildin’ right next to it is the coop. Gotta be careful, ‘cos I don’t just got chickens in there. We got cockatrices and they can be downright nasty. We got one male, named Lasso, he’s a big boy an’ he’s bitey. Two females, Bok-Bok and Clucker, an’ they both are awful aggressive. So, uh, don’t go in the coop.”

“You named your cockatrices ‘Bok-Bok’, ‘Clucker’, and ‘Lasso’?” Death asks, partially disgusted.

“Hell yeah I did!” The Spirit of the West trumpets proudly. “We might go visit ‘em, Far, if you wear gloves an’ have me with you. Lasso’s a cuddler if you make sure he don’t bite you.”

“My daughter is not going to get near a cockatrice,” Famine objects fiercely.

“Aw, c’mon! Lasso’s a sweetie if you tape up his beak. And they’re, like, half-domesticated.”

Famine glares at him.

“Okay, we’re not visitin’ the cockatrices.” West lowers his head, conceding. Fareeha looks a little irritated, either at her mother’s insistence or at West’s unwillingness to fight for her right to do something stupid and dangerous. Possibly both. “But, we can go check up on the horses! I got thirty horses right now. Ten of ’em are mine, the other twenty belong to the farmhands. Well, technically they’re all mine- I own ‘em- but the farmhands take care of their own horses an’ they’ve all got awful close bonds with ‘em.”

They pass the manor on their way to the stables. Big, exuberant. Large porch, a balcony, painted a
Two ghouls are sitting at a rickety wooden table on the porch. Both cowgirls, clad in leather and stetsons- one of them pours the other a glass of lemonade and receives a warm kiss to the cheek as a thank-you. They clink their glasses together and drink.

Death averts his eyes.

“Jane, Clara, you’re supposed to be on perimeter!” The Spirit of the West cries indignantly. “God dang it, you guys are gonna have to muck out the stables for the next week! By yourselves!”

They glance at one another and shrug- they drink their lemonade and cuddle close to one another, staring at the skirting clouds in the sky. West doesn’t tell them off again- he sighs and continues on their path for the stables.

“Man,” The Spirit of the West groans, “This is ‘cos I told ‘em to patrol separately, I know it. Those two don’t even care if they get punished so long as they’re together.”

“Who were they?” Famine asks, curiously.

“Pretty decent cowgirls… Both born around, fuck, eighteen… Eighteen fifty somethin’? Fell in love with one another on Jane’s dad’s ranch. Dad learned about it, got pissed. Fired Clara, told Jane she couldn’t see her ever again. Well, they killed themselves, Romeo and Juliet style. I stepped in, asked if they wanted to ranch together forever. Said yes. Now they’re awful happy here…”

He blows a lock of dark hair out of his face. “Sad thing is, their story’s not that uncommon. I took in a lot of folk like that, ‘cos I figured they deserved a second chance.”

Death’s not entirely sure what to make of that.

“Here we are!” The Spirit of the West says proudly. He pulls his horse to a stop in front of a massive barn and dismounts.

There’s a few wooden posts outside the barn- West ties off his horse to one of them, and the Horsemens and half-Horseman do the same.

“Okay, folks. Don’t stick your hands near the horses’ mouths, ‘cos they will bite, an’ I don’t want to have to sew on any more fingers after the pegasus incident, okay?”

“The what?” Fareeha asks.

“Long story,” The Spirit of the West says vaguely. He pushes open the barn doors and gestures for them to come in.

It smells.

Death occasionally forgets that real horses defecate and urinate and all those fun things- Horsemen’s horses don’t. As a result, he forgets that horses smell.

The barn deeply reeks of old hay, manure, sweat- Fareeha and Famine look slightly bothered by the smell, but the Spirit of the West doesn’t even seem to notice.

“There’s not too many in here right now- just the sick ones an’ the ones who were on night patrol yesterday.”

“Sick ones?” Death asks, while Famine simultaneously says “Night patrol?”
West answers Famine first. “Been tryin’ to dissuade whatever the hell’s killin’ my cattle by postin’ a guard. It’s workin’ so far, I think. No incursions in a whole month. An’... Yeah. We get the occasional sick horse. I’m not any kind ‘o healer, so we just gotta wait until they get better.”

There’s five horses left in the stable. One of them, a coal-black horse, glances up as they pass. It bares its teeth—fanged—and opens its eyes, which are a solid red. It growls instead of whinnying, the sound a deep rumble in the pit of its chest.

“That gorgeous mare right there is Reaper. I’m fightin’ the current Mantle over the trademark.” The Spirit of the West says. “The Reaper’s Mantle is a surprisingly nice guy... y’just missed him, he an’ his husband- that griffin, Morrison?- were stayin’ here for this weekend. I reckon they were impressed by my operations.”

“The Mantle was a mortal for forty-three years of his life,” Famine points out. “Anything supernatural is bound to be impressive.”

“Breakin’ my heart, miss.” West shakes his head. “Awright, next up… There’s Peggy.”

In a neighboring stall to Reaper, a pure white pegasus is sleeping. She looks up at the sound of her name, bleary- she ruffles her feathers and straightens out. The Spirit of the West gives her face a gentle pat.

“Peggy?” Fareeha asks. “Like… Peggy-sus? Pegasus?”

“Uh,” The Spirit of the West clears his throat. “Ain’t we already established I’m not a wordsmith?”

“That’s just sad,” Death snorts.

“ANY way. Movin’ on.” West snaps. “The other three are all ghoul horses. Immortal, but need food an’ naps an’ all that shit.”

One of the aforementioned ghoul horses is being tended to by one of the Spirit of the West’s ghous. She looks up at them and waves, then goes back to delicately cleaning her horse’s frogs.

“That’s Sara, an’ the horse is… Ah, shit, Sara, what’s your horse’s name?”

Sara looks back up at them, still smiling blandly. She says nothing.

“Ah! Right, Diamond. My bad.”

Fareeha glances at Death, as if he has any idea what’s going on. He makes just the slightest motion with his shoulders to convey ‘I don’t know’. She looks to her mother, but Famine is equally mystified.

Okay. Then we got Sorrel-” He points to a dark brown mare, spotted with white on her forelegs and a splotch on her forehead, “And Duke, I think?” A white stallion dappled with a multitude of black splotches.

The ghoul makes no noise or visible motion, but West snaps his fingers. “Right! Right. Not Duke, it’s Beau. Thanks, Sara. An’ finally… We got my sweetie Flashbang outside, an’ that Arabian stallion’s called… Sara, help me out?”

Silence.

“Right! Right. We called him Jonah.”
“Can you hear her?” Fareeha asks, finally. “She’s not talking.”

“Oh! Forgot you guys don’t know that- Yeah, the ghouls can’t really talk. I mean, they can talk, but only to me or one another. It was one of the consequences on bein’ stuck in this ranch forever.”

“I have no idea why anyone would take that deal,” Death says. “If I had to talk to no one but you for an eternity, I’d wish I could die.”

“Don’t be sour,” the Spirit of the West frowns. “Right. So, that’s the tour… I mean, there’s more stuff. We got some fields where we grow hay and oats and apples and carrots. We’ve got a couple of goats, a few dogs, an’ o’ course, you ain’t seen the horses’ pasture or the range yet.”

“The range?” Fareeha repeats.

“Sure! Y’shoot stuff there.” He mimes shooting a gun. “It’s, uh, closed right now.”

“Closed?” Death asks. “Why would you close it?”

“None of yer goddamn business, Death.” West snarls, uncharacteristically fierce. “Let’s go to the manor, get you guys settled in.”

Suspicious. Very suspicious. West doesn’t often raise his voice- something about the range…

Death’s eyes snap to West’s holster. There’s a pistol in it, but that doesn’t mean anything.

The four of them troop outside and it suddenly clicks.

“You’ve lost Peacekeeper.” Death says plainly.

The Spirit of the West stiffens.

“S’cuse me?”

“Your gun. You lost Peacekeeper.”

“I didn’t lose her! She was stolen!” The Spirit of the West objects fiercely. Flashbang and Jonah look agitated- ears flicking and postures stiff and wary. Shadow Step and Shrike are unaffected.

Sara comes to the barn door, her expression dark and serious. It occurs to Death that the Spirit of the West has a veritable army of immortals on his ranch, and that while he may not be a Horseman, or have his Peacekeeper, he is still a god.

The air seems to heat up, and it could be a trick of the eye, but the sun, which’d been slanted, is directly overhead.

“Peace,” Famine encourages. “Peace, both of you.”

The horses slowly calm, and Sara turns and heads deeper into the barn. The Spirit of the West exhales quietly.

“It’s embarrassin’,” West mutters, rubbing his arm. “Had my weapon snatched from me in my own goddamn Domain.”

“Do you know who took it?” Famine asks.

“If I had to guess? Same thing that’s been killin’ my cows.” West scuffs the ground with the toe of
his boot.

There is significance in the loss of Peacekeeper; most gods have a primary weapon they use. West’s is Peacekeeper, Conquest’s is his hammer, Famine’s is her rifle, Time dual wields pistols, and so on. There’s a certain chunk of power that’s kept in their weapons, that puts them at a loss if they lose them. For one, they can’t summon a new one at will, the same way an entity like Death or War can.

“We promise we’ll look into it, West,” Famine says. Her gaze suddenly shifts from the Spirit of the West to directly behind him; her eyes suddenly light up, and Death follows her line of sight to—

Two tall figures on horseback. One of them impossibly massive, with a clear, armored silhouette. Conquest, definitely. So the other must be…

War.

Death’s heart does not flutter and he does not jolt with excitement upon seeing the other Horseman.

Famine rushes forward, pushing past West in her excitement; Conquest halts his horse and clambers off. He charges for her and the two collide.

He scoops her up in his arms, the two of them spinning and giggling like newlyweds. There’s a few kisses exchanged that Death watches with a half-exasperated sort of tolerance.

War pads up to his side.

“I hope you’re not expecting me to do that,” he says, inclining his head towards Famine and Conquest.

Pain twinges somewhere in Death’s heart—pain he’ll take to whatever grave immortals go to—and he scoffs.

“As if I’d let you.”

Chapter End Notes

big round of applause to my boy dio and my main man argent

thanks for beta'ing babes <3
War and Conquest get sidetracked. War seems bothered.

They set foot on the Californian shore after a few hours on horseback. It is their first step to land in a while, and the beginning of a glorious adventure! Even Conquest’s companion, War, seems a little happier to be on the shore instead of in the water. That may be due to the fact that his stallion is less nervous in the sand than in the sea, but nevertheless, it is a surefire sign that they are headed in the right direction.

Their adorable little guide, a cattle dog of a kind, slows down when they get to the heart of San Francisco. He raises his nose, growls softly.

“What is it?” Conquest asks.

“We don’t have time for this,” War growls, impatiently. “We have a job we were supposed to go do-”

“Hold, War,” Conquest holds up his hand. “If there is conflict, then we have work to do. Perhaps the dog may smell something we do not.”

War rolls his digits on his reins, drumming the pads of his fingers against the leather. “Fine. Lead on, dog.”

The Spirit of the West’s cattledog gleefully sprints off deeper into the city. Conquest gallops after the creature, War right on his heels.

They wind down road after road, narrowly dodging cars and managing to avoid accidentally running over civilians. The dog is persistent, and quick- a fast little beast! Conquest admires how deftly it weaves and bobs through the cluttered streets, but never manages to outrace the Horsemen and their bulkier steeds. He never sees it stop and wait for them, but it never gets too far ahead.

Conquest catches the scent not long before War- mystical, tingly. The air tastes like shadow, smells of magic, and he can provide a name for this smell. He knows it well- the Lady of the Shadows.

“What the hell,” War says, “Is she doing here?”

Conquest has no answer for him- although it is admittedly curious she is so far out of her Domain. The Lady of the Shadows is a solitary kind of deity, not fond of traveling. Not to say that she doesn’t know anything outside her own dwelling- she is aware of everything that happens in the world, no matter how private. It is said that all of the shadows in the world have her ears. Conquest isn’t sure about that, but he knows that she prefers keeping surveillance from her Domain and not in person.

“I don’t know,” Conquest answers. “But a distressed goddess may be the trouble we need for an exciting exploit!”

“We already have an adventure. No side quests.” War dictates immediately.
“Bah, you’re no fun, War! I am sure that the Spirit of the West will not mind waiting while we assist his sister!”

“She’s not his sister.” War begins, exasperatedly.

“Are they not Death’s adopted children? That makes them family.”

“Death doesn’t have any kids! Adopted or sired from his own seed!” War’s voice jerks up a few tones, pitched with a slight note of hysteria. Conquest nods, sympathetically. War seems so touchy about Death these days, it’s odd. The reverse was also true- Death behaved horribly around War. Conquest had attempted to consult Famine when they got a moment of privacy, but she had just thrown him a look and shaken her head. He gets the feeling that even Death and War don’t know what the problem is, and that the only one that does is Famine.

Ahh, Famine. He misses her. Horsemen were not meant to be apart, especially not when they had a relationship like his and hers.

“- daydreaming again? Conquest. Conquest!” War’s voice pierces his thoughts.

“Ah, my apologies, friend! What is it?”

“The dog’s gone.”

Conquest’s eyes move from the exasperated Horseman to the street ahead of them- they’re set at a dead end, between two buildings. They’re in an alleyway, just wide enough to accommodate the bulk of their two horses. It leads to a painted-over brick wall, wild graffiti under thin layers of paint. Conquest’s eyes curiously roll over a few swearwords, but a scrawled free your mind, written in a blur of red paint a foot above the ground, catches his attention.

Conquest takes a deep sniff. Magic clogs his nose, cloys and thickens in his lungs, and he coughs. “It’s an illusion.”

“Yeah, I got that.” War says. “Thanks. What’s behind it?”

“Our dog.” Conquest says, simply. “We should proceed.”

“I don’t like it,” War shakes his head. “Whatever this is, it’s sidetracking us. Maybe on purpose.”

“You’re paranoid, friend!” Conquest admonishes. “We’re sure to find an adventure behind this magical veil. And, perhaps, a fight?”

War looks slightly less irritated about this whole affair at the prospect of there being a brawl. “We should dismount. Leave the horses here.”

Immortal makes an offended nicker.

“Hush.” War pulls on the pointed red oval of Immortal’s ear. “I don’t like it, either. But a horse and a rider is cumbersome in a narrow alley.”

“Well said!” Conquest nods. Balderich kneels to let him dismount, while War swings off of Immortal’s saddle and takes the height of the dismount with a grunt and a practiced landing. Conquest looks into Balderich’s blue eyes, and gently strokes the soft velvet of her muzzle. “If I find any great tokens of adventure, I will bring them back to you.”

She presses into his touch for a second, then snorts hot breath onto his hand and turns away.
“Onward and forward, War!” Conquest trumpets. War grumbles something under his breath— a rifle is conjured to fit snugly in his hands, and Conquest thrusts out an arm to stop him before he can head towards the wall.

“Such hostility! Put it away.” Conquest dictates.

“You’re not serious. There could be anything behind that wall.” War says, guarded. He makes no motion to holster his gun.

“We’re immortals!” Conquest objects.

War’s stallion looks up curiously.

“Not you,” War barks. “And I don’t like being taken by surprise. The gun stays.”

“It does not stay!” Conquest argues.

The air physically heats up with War’s temper— violent thoughts claw at the edge of Conquest’s mind, commanding he take his morningstar off his back and do battle.

“That will not work on me, friend,” Conquest tells him, frowning. “I know you too well. Put the rifle away. If there is a battle, I will gladly join you, but if there is not, I am not the kind to let innocents get hurt.” There’s a brief pause, and he looks down at the smaller Horseman. “And neither are you.”

“Do you even know what war is? Innocents get hurt all the time,” War says, stubbornly.

“Are wars not fought with the intent to protect innocents? Minimize civilian casualty?” Conquest edges.

“Shut up.” War growls. He’s definitely irritated. Conquest’s insistence that War is not as bad as he believes he is has gotten under his skin.

But his rifle disappears, and he stomps off in the direction of the wall with more annoyance than anger. Conquest amicably goes after him.

War steps right through the wall— as soon as he is fully through, there is no indication that he had ever been there to begin with. Conquest touches the wall, curiously— it offers slight resistance to his hand, like gel or water instead of air, but he can push his hand through with a tiny application of will.

He steps through and is immediately choked with the scent of magic— the Lady of the Shadows had definitely been here, alright.

War is coughing into his fist, blowing breaths through his nose, as if to try to clear the cloying stink of magic out. He shakes his head, furiously— his clothing abruptly shifts and whirls from the muddy green camouflage fatigues to a red, white, and blue jacket, complete with a chrome-brushed visor to block out the chokingly dense magic in the air. Conquest follows suit, putting on his helmet to nullify the overwhelming aroma. It doesn’t work— not entirely— but he can breathe now, at least.

Horsemen are sensitive to magic. It’s supposed to help them hunt for famines, conquests, wars, and death, but in the cases of being near deities, it hurts more than helps. It is probably some kind of cosmic handicap to stop them from slaying unsuspecting gods and goddesses— not that Conquest would do such a thing— set in place by the Divine even further above the Horsemen and every other god.

They’ve stepped into, unsurprisingly, another alleyway. The brick walls are dirty, spiderwebbing
with cracks, scrawled with graffiti. *Free your mind* is a popular theme- it’s written in multiple languages and in different handwritings, prominent amongst the various scrawled names and spraypainted tags.

The alleyway leads to a staircase, and a half-buried establishment awaits them. A subterranean bar- the *Dancing Stingwing*.

The cattledog expectantly awaits them- heeling by the foot of the door, head cocked. The dog’s tail starts to hesitantly wag when Conquest and War get near. Conquest kneels to pet the creature’s head. It allows him, then anxiously glances towards the *Dancing Stingwing*. There’s a soft, cautious growl from the little beast.

“Is the Lady of the Shadows in there-?” War looks up from their intelligent little canine friend, hands lifting, as if to summon a weapon. Conquest gently taps his shoulder, shakes his head, and War lowers his arms. “Fine. But I’m going offensive, not defensive.”

“Understood.”

He pushes into the establishment.

Conquest is immediately hit with a barrage of smells and sounds- the feeling of magic has subsided, somewhat, either cloaked by further magic or suppressed by the sharp bite of liquor in the air. The place is pretty large, all things considered- wooden furnished, old, well taken care of. Probably been in this family for generations, or owned by an eternal or immortal being.

The place is full of people. A young man, in jeans and a tee, wearing a sealskin around his neck. A selkie, a transhuman. A huge, scaly beast with midnight black spines and talons, a craggy face, and a serpentine tail- draconic, but wingless. A drake, maybe? It has articulate hands- it’s capable of drinking out of a mug of beer.

There’s a few faeries zipping around the ceiling of the establishment, each of them carrying a shotglass like a tankard. They appear to be trying to make the other ones spill their drinks, in some game of beer tag. Conquest can admire the desire to mix sport and drink like that.

There’s a handful of transhumans in human form, probably because it’s more comfortable than sprawling out into whatever creature they really were. Conquest can smell a mixture of griffin, werebear, werewolf, were tiger, wereboar, were crocodile, were seagull- the list goes on. There’s a coven of old harpies and nagas in one corner- wrinkled, hair going grey and white, scales and feathers no longer shining. They’re playing bingo and knocking back enough liquor to kill a giant. Conquest is momentarily tempted to join them- he loves bingo- but he turns his attention off them and back to the rest of the bar.

There’s two people occupying one corner- a rotund, muscular man, with silvery hair and a mask on- and beside him, a tiny little pixie doing a handstand and dunking his head in a shotglass to drink. It’s elaborate, and unnecessary, but Conquest admires the effort put into the creature’s drinking nevertheless.

A band of elves- a fair-skinned, white-haired, blue-eyed man, a dark-skinned woman, her hair elaborately braided, and another woman with deep, ink-blue skin, red eyes, and orange hair cut in a mohawk- are performing music. The man is quietly playing the guitar, the redhead is drums and keyboard, and the dark-skinned woman is singing. It’s a soft song, not intrusive in the atmosphere of the little bar.

It takes a couple of seconds after their entrance, but the bar’s warm atmosphere evaporates like mist
Side conversations and music come to a stop. The occupants recognize Horsemen, it seems, even without their steeds. The draconid, the werecreatures, the geriatric harpies and nagas, the elves, the sprites and pixies- the whole lot of them suddenly freeze and wonder which one of them the Horsemen are here for.

There’s two bartenders. One of them is a toady-looking creature, with slimy grey-green skin, bulbous yellow eyes, webbed fingers, and a tweed coat. The other is an insectoid, a spider the size of a great dane, suspended from the ceiling. All of its limbs were rapidly working at cleaning tankards and glasses, but it stops upon seeing the Horsemen, and drops one of the glasses in shock.

The sound of it shattering seems to snap everyone out of their surprise.

The faeries immediately scatter into the ether. Weremice and other small werecreatures turn into their animal forms and skitter away. A werecrocodile edges towards the door, looking nervous. A wizard turns invisible in one corner.

“H-Horsemen!” The frog bartender stammers, his huge lip quivering. He doesn’t seem to know what to say, but the other bartender, the arachnid, clicks and snarls with its pincers as amicably as it can.

It’s asking what they’d like to drink, although Conquest’s grasp of insectoid languages is weaker than it used to be.

“We’re not here for drinks.” War barks, impatiently. He steps through the bar and ignores the creatures that duck under the tables and whimper as he passes. The drake snorts smoke through its nose nervously, and when War gets close to the bar counter, it leaps away and scrambles off on all fours. The selkie, too, hurries away before War gets too close. “There’s a deity in here.”

“Someone do you wrong?” The frog croaks, seeming to find his voice. “I- I ain’t seen no gods, War, sir…”

“Gods!” A sudden, teeny voice choruses from across the bar. “You lookin’ for a god?”

The pixie who had been doing kegstands with a shotglass abruptly zips into War’s face. War seems taken aback- he almost takes a step away from the excitable little creature. “I can smell the Lady of the Shadow’s smell from the middle of San Francisco.”

“Well, I-”

Conquest hadn’t even been aware that pixie’s human companion had even gotten up, much less that he had gotten so close. The pixie’s sentence is interrupted when the human grabs him out of the air and stomps back to their table.

“Don’t listen to him,” The man grunts. He gives the pixie a little shake, and the tiny creature giggles. “Idiot.”

“Wait, no, I swear! I’ve seen her- the Shadow Lady-” He belts. “Tried lookin’ where the sun don’t shine?”

War’s forehead wrinkles with anger- Conquest senses an oncoming fight, and it’s no fun if a Horseman is the victor.

“Thank you!” Conquest cries. “We will try that.”
The pixie’s keeper- the huge, round human- seems to breathe a sigh of relief. His massive belly jiggles with his slow exhale, and he settles down into his old seat, dropping the pixie on the table as if he were a pile of trash that he ought to be putting in the nearest garbage receptacle.

“Conquest,” War seethes, “Stop trying to hold me back.”

“He is hardly as long as your forearm- that wouldn’t be an exciting fight, would it?” Conquest persuades. “Check your temper, War, you may be able to battle everyone in this bar, but that would distract from the purpose of our detour.”

The cattle dog leaps up on the bar countertop- standing tall and proud. The bartender looks as though he would like to protest the dog, but he is silenced by fear. Conquest approaches the creature, gives him an idle pat on the head.

It barks, leaps off the countertop, and trundles to a corner of the bar, where a woman sits.

She is darkskinned- a mole under one cheek, shaved hair on one side with long, dyed curls on the other. Heavy eyeshadow. Long, dark robes. They rush and flow slowly, glittering like oil under the bar’s light. Her eyes are an unnatural purple- heavy-lidded, out of boredom, possibly frustration. The dog sits. Its stare at her is accusational.

“I can’t even drink by myself without getting the Horsemen on my scent,” She complains. Her robes melt into a trenchcoat and leggings, something possibly more comfortable. Her leggings are a neon purple, with the occasional splash of blue. It seems almost unfitting for the Lady of the Shadows, but she can dress as she wishes. “What do you want?”

“We were hoping you may have a quest for us to embark on!” Conquest says, before War can interject with something undoubtedly bad-tempered.

“A quest, huh? Yeah, okay. I got a quest. Here’s a quest.”

She reaches into the pocket of her coat and pulls out a small statue. It’s made in the shape of a gargoyle- fangs and claws and huge torso, rocky and detailed.

“Take this to the Spirit of the West.” She smirks, like it’s some private joke.

War takes it out of her hands- he turns the statue over, inspecting it closely; he even pulls off the visor to scrutinize it with his naked eye. The frog bartender lets out a whimperish little scream and crumples to the ground- Conquest’s attention is momentarily pulled from the goddess and to the poor toad, but it’s brought right back when War chucks the statue at the ground, shattering it into a million different shards of stone that explode in everywhich direction.

“War!” Conquest scolds immediately, but the man whips around, eyes blazing.

“I’m not doing any more fucking fetch and deliver orders- I am a Horseman, not a courier!”

The Lady of the Shadows cackles- War conjures his battle rifle and Conquest lets out a sharp noise of alarm, lunging forward to stop him before he tries to commit an immortal homicide-

- but she’s gone before War can do anything rash, like kill her. Bullet holes dot the seat she’d just been in, and mass panic breaks out at the deafening sound of gunfire in the relatively small, enclosed bar. There’s a huge scramble of people to head for the door. There’s a few terrified screams. The only people who haven’t reacted are the harpies and nagas, who’re still drinking and playing bingo.

War lets out a sharp, bitten roar of outrage at being denied a kill. He slams his fist into the table she’d
been sitting at and the wood splinters in two with an earsplitting crack.

“Conquest, let’s fucking GO!”

He whirls around, eyes bright with rage, and he grabs Conquest’s wrist to try to force-march him out of the tavern. Conquest looks around at the fear and destruction they’ve wrought, and slinks dejectedly after the other Horseman. They hadn’t gotten to claim a victor. There was hardly a battle. All this little side-adventure had done was piss War off and depress Conquest.

That didn’t mean the next one wouldn’t be a million times better! He chins up at the thought- smiling as they exit the bullet-ridden bar, willingly going with War instead of having to be half-dragged behind him.

Conquest didn’t see their canine companion leave the bar, but he’s waiting beside Immortal and Balderich. The second they get atop their mounts, the pup bolts off down the street.

They are quick to follow.

It’s long hours on the road, but they finally come in sight of the Spirit of the West’s ranch. Conquest can feel a great welling of emotion in his chest- anticipation, glee, crests through his body. It’s partially the Horseman instinct to stay together, and partially the sense of emotion that they’re all so hesitant to call love…

When he spots Famine, he throws himself off of Balderich and into a sprint, yelling something that may or may not be actual words. She charges right at him, hollering something equally incoherent, arms wide for the inevitable embrace.

They crash together like waves- he throws his arms around her and picks her up, his body singing with elation, and he spins her around. He can’t help but laugh- a great, booming sound- and she giggles along, throwing her arms around his neck. He kisses her, peppering her cheeks and chin and jaw with tiny pecks, and she nuzzles and smooches right back.

He feels like he could hold her forever, but he completes a spin or two and puts her down, wobbling dizzyly. She laughs, holds out a hand, keeps him from falling over.

“It’s good to see you, Conquest.” She says, in that soft, lilting, amused way of hers. She is so beautiful, he thinks, and there’s a sense of tangible relief, peace, that runs through his blood. He hadn’t realized how taut he had been stretched without her and without Death- there had been a cinching tension somewhere in his gut, like a gradually tightening fist trying to strangle his innards. With all of the Horsemen assembled, it is gone, and he is free to relax.

“And it is good to see you, my lady.” He takes her hand, presses a gentle, fluttering kiss to the back of her palm.

Past her- although he is loathe to take his eyes off of her radiance- Death and War convene.

War walks away after a snippet of conversation, and Death’s shoulders slump.
“I don’t know,” Death says.

“What’cha mean, you don’t know?” The Spirit of the West repeats, incredulously. “You’re Death!”

“The corpse is old. Anything could’ve sunk their teeth into this cow- a month gives the carrion beasts a lot of time to strip away a creature’s flesh, and any indication of what could’ve killed it.”

The Spirit of the West rocks back on his heels- Death stands up, dusting off his thighs. The emaciated, withered carcass of a bull lays mournfully in the shade. It’s been dragged to rest in an alcove created by the knotted roots of an old willow tree, by some outside force. Definitely didn’t die here, not in this position.

This gives Death very little insight, but he’s got some small pieces:

1.) This creature they’re tracking can kill a bull. That’s actually not too easy.

2.) The monster can move a two thousand pound bull. So it’s strong, too.

3.) The killing bite- or, what was probably the killing bite- left toothmarks on the throat. They’re too deep and old to get the real sense of a shape, but the monster has to be bigger than any naturally occurring predator in North America. Each hole in the neck is deep enough for him to push his ring finger in, up to the knuckle. Big teeth. Killer bite.

That’s about all the usefulness he can squeeze out of the corpse.

“You’re sure?” The Spirit of the West asks anxiously. “There ain’t some fancy Horseman magic you can do to track down the culprit?”

Death gives him a withering glare. The Spirit of the West flinches, looks away.

“Yeah, alright, I get it, I got it.” He mutters, sheepishly. “Well… If that’s all you can d-”

“It’s not all he can do.”

War’s atop Immortal- he’s been waiting there, motionless, for the two to finish their scrutiny of the body. Now that it’s over, he doesn’t seem impressed. An uneasy feeling in Death’s stomach offsets the irritated prickle at War’s brusque dismissal of his examination.

“What’cha hidin’, Death?” The Spirit of the West chirps, narrowing his eyes.

“I’m not hiding anything,” He says, annoyed. “War doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I’ve got all this body can give me.”
“I agree. The bull’s corpse isn’t useful anymore. But we’re not just coroners. We’re warriors. We’ll patrol your borders and keep an eye out for this monster.”

War seems a little too eager at the prospect of becoming a sentry. Death knows he’s a restless, impatient soul- by the nature of war, he’s not happy when the world is at peace. The fiery-tempered Horseman was never content to idly travel with his companions. He wasn’t like Conquest- he didn’t go questing and thirsting for adventure or a damsel in distress- but he did like to travel with intent.

The worst thing about it was that the intent was always what he wanted- “I smell conflict brewing in the east- let’s go”- with fierce opposition or supreme reluctance when he had to bend to someone else’s wishes. He was stubborn, pig-headed, always centered around his desires and expecting-demanding- everyone else to just do what he says.

So Death says “No.”

When he says no, War immediately bristles, just like Death expects him to.

“No?” He repeats, angrily.

“No,” Death says, cool as you please.

“We’re here to help the Spirit of the West.” War says. “The sooner we catch this monster the sooner we can-”

“Sooner we can do what?” Death asks, flatly.

War has his lips slightly parted, as though he’d like to say something. No sound leaves him, and he closes his mouth, shifting uneasily on Immortal’s back.

“I thought so,” Death says. The words are provocative. He doesn’t want to fight with War, but he’s been fighting with him for so long that snide comments and passive-aggressive smugness are the default way to address him.

War doesn’t take the bait, and Death’s left with an odd mixture of disappointment and guilt. The aggressive Horseman instead snaps at the Spirit of the West.

“You typically have patrols, you said?”

“Yeah. Hard to patrol so much ‘cos the horses gotta rest an’ my ranchers gotta rest, an’-” West begins.

“You mentioned earlier you had twenty farmhands. How many patrol at night?”

“Two. Would have four, but two’s been enough to deter the monster an’ I don’t wanna deprive any more a’ my ranch hands the sleep they need.”

“I’ll be taking a shift tonight.” War decides. The Spirit of the West looks a little dubious, but he’s not about to argue with a determined Horseman. “You’re welcome to join me if you want, Death.”

Death doesn’t take the bait, either.

Instead he heads over to Shadow Step- who awaits him with a flicked ear and a snort- and climbs on its back. With a mutter and a gesture, he directs it towards the manor house, which is a mile or two from the spot the bull died. The Spirit of the West is right after him, atop Flashbang.

“So,” He says, “You gonna join him, or-?”
“To keep him from doing something stupid, maybe.” He replies snappishly.

The Spirit of the West wants to say something, Death knows that, but he doesn’t want to know whatever the hell it is.

“Yeah, alright,” The Spirit of the West says, quietly. “Uhm, if you can- Don’t kill the monster right away. ‘Cos chances are it took my Peacekeeper, an’ I don’t think it’s gonna just have it on itself. Track it, like, to a den or somethin’. You can take one of my dogs if you wanna-”

“I won’t need a dog.” He says, curtly. “I know how to track, West.”

“Right.” The young deity fidgets. “Mmm. Okay.”

Flashbang’s trot increases to a canter, and West rides off, probably back to the manor house. Death wonders- as a stray, idle kind of thought- what exactly War’s doing. He hadn’t come with them, in the direction of the manor- is he still investigating the carcass? War hadn’t elected to look at it when they were poking around the bull’s time-withered innards earlier.

When they get back to the lavish farmhouse, Conquest and Famine are on the porch. Horsemen do not need to eat or drink, but they are partaking in both. There’s a plate of warm, honey-glazed breads sitting next to them, and a tall pitcher of lemonade. Death does not hunger, but he sees the appeal in food. He dismounts Shadow Step and ties them off to a post outside the porch. It’s unnecessary- Shadow Step is hardly going to run off- but it’s practically second nature now.

He heads up to the table on the porch- formerly occupied by a pair of lesbian cowgirls, who appear to have moved on and been replaced with two Horsemen- and takes an empty chair. It comfortably sits four, but in theory it could have six or seven people sharing the tablespace. The Spirit of the West drops into another nearby chair and takes a handful of Conquest and Famine’s pastries. He pours himself a glass of lemonade.

Death takes a pastry. Flaky, warm. He nibbles the edge. It’s sweet.

“Where’s War?” Famine asks, innocently.

“Where’s Fareeha?” Death asks right back.

“Inside.” She says. “Resting. She’s had a long day. So, again, I repeat: Where’s War?”

“He stayed back.” Death grumbles. “He wanted to take a shift patrolling the ranch.”

“You left him alone?” Famine says, alarmed.

“Yes, I did! I’m tired of him!” He prepares to indulge in a great pleasure of his: complaining about War.

“His sphere of influence is just as dangerous as any of ours-”

“I don’t care! Why don’t you go patrol with him if you’re so concerned!!?”

Famine gives him a look- her eyes smolder with something distinctly unpleasant, violent. He can feel rats gnawing his internal organs, worms wriggling through his torso. Phantom hunger rips through his belly, and Death grits his teeth.

“Not working, Famine.”

He glares at her.

She glares right back.

Conquest clears his throat and loudly sips at his lemonade to dissolve some tension. “Perhaps I will accompany him! I believe we have grown closer since we journeyed together.”

“Conquest, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Famine’s glare relents some.

“Nonsense! We are both strong warriors! Whatever beast is terrorizing the Spirit of the West, I will slay it!”

“Whoa! I ain’t bein’ terrorized, my ranch is perfectly operational!” The Spirit of the West objects, thinly. “Jus’ a few cows an’ Peacekeeper!”

“If it’s not a problem, why did you call all four Horsemen to your aid?” Death asks dryly.

“Um-”

“Off topic,” Famine reminds, gently. “Death, you need to join War tonight.”

“Why me?” He grinds out. “Conquest wants to go.”

“I want Conquest here,” She says, plaintively.

“So it’s selfish. You’re sending me out, with that-” He can’t even think of proper words to express his irritation. “With War, because you don’t want to go, and you want to keep Conquest with you? You can’t make me do a damned thing, Famine. I’m staying here and that blustering, violence-obsessed bastard can become monster food for all I care.”

Famine gives him a Look.

He gives her a Look. He’s not going. She can’t guilt him into spending time with War.

She stands up, abruptly. Takes the plate and pitcher with her as she breezes past Death and the Spirit of the West. The gnawing sensation in his internal organs lessens the further away she gets.

He gets the feeling, however, that she is still angry.

Conquest gets up, and despite his bulk, is careful in maneuvering around the table and the two men still seated. He hurries after her, saying something too softly for Death to hear precisely what it is. They disappear inside the house, and after the too-loud sound of the manor door slamming, he and West are left outside, in the silence.

“So. Jus’ you an me, Pops.”

“No.”

“Okay, okay, Pops was a bit much.” The Spirit of the West agrees, giving a little laugh. “You, uh, you an’ War are real mad at one another, ain’t’cha?”

“Yes.”

Maybe if he speaks in monosyllabic sentences, the Spirit of the West will get the stupid hint and shut up already.
“What’d he do?”

“He’s just… Being him.”

“I’ve seen y’all before, and while you ain’t never gentle with one another, you don’t usually snipe the way you did today.”

“Yes, we do.” He says, sharply. “Don’t talk about things you’re too young to understand.”

“Things I’m too young to understand? I get that you’re, like, a fifty thousand years old’re whatever, an’ you remember when people were jus’ startin’ to slap paint on caves, but I’ve been here a lot longer’n most humans have.”

“Your entire existence is a blink to me, West.” He says, flatly. “I’ve had a lot of time to hate War. And it’s not something that’s going to stop, and it’s certainly not going to be cured in a single conversation.”

“Yeah, well, y’tried talking to him?”

“All we ever do is talk. Traipse around aimlessly and talk about things that don’t matter.”

“No, I mean, like. A heart to heart, or whatever.”

Death snorts. “A heart to heart? He’d probably try to rip mine out. And I’d do the same.”

He casts his gaze away from the Spirit of the West. The sun was starting to set. Orange had overtaken most of the horizon, a cloud or two skirting in the edges of the sky, dyed a pinkish orange by the dusk. Red rays of light cut through the swaying fields of wheat right next to the manor. The wind blows, playing with the golden stalks like a mother affectionately toying with her child’s hair. A tree nearby with a crude wooden swing whispers with the breeze, and the swing gently rocks.

It’s… Serene, almost.

“Y’ever tried?” West asks, gently.

Death’s head is full of lemonade and rural susurrations, a gentle lull in his chest that makes him feel on the edge of sleep.

“You’re not bad, for a kid.” Death says. West’s chest rumbles with a laugh and Death feels a proud, paternal affection stir in him.

“You’re not bad, for a grandpa.”

“Am not.”

“Are so.”

“Am not.”

“Are so.”

Death swats at him, idly, and he giggles. The Spirit of the West gets up, tips his hat back, looks at the sunset with a smile on his face. The young god basks in that glow- this is what he is, what the west is meant to be. Lemonade on a porch just before dusk, the quiet chirp of the first stirring crickets, the bend and sway of a crop of wheat in the wind.
Death feels sentimental, and it’s a dangerous state of mind to be in.

“I’m gonna turn in,” The Spirit of the West says, “Prolly Far an’ Famine an’ Conquest will, too. You gonna come inside?”

“No, I’m not.” Death says, quietly.

The significance is not lost on either of them- his refusal to come inside with the rest of them is basically a confirmation that he’s going to go patrol with War. The Spirit of the West’s mouth quirks in a little smile- he pulls a cigar out from the folds of his clothes, lights it with a snap of his fingers, and blows a cloud of smoke out in a businesslike kind of way. The glowing end of it illuminates his face, which’s been shadowed by the broad brim of his hat.

“Try not to die out there, Pops.”

“Not your ‘Pops’, West.”

“Whatever.” He says, dismissive. He leans up against a broad wooden beam of the porch railing, his cigar glowing like the first star of the night.

Death pulls away from the table- approaches Shadow Step, strokes its nose. He untethers the horse and climbs on its back.

“Yah!”

He’s aware of the Spirit of the West’s stare digging into his back, and he hates that he can envision the young god’s self-satisfied smile.

He heads back to the carcass. From there, he can track War. He hasn’t gone far- in fact, he’s within Death’s sight when he passes by the bull- and evidently, hasn’t done much.

“War!” He shouts.

The sun is slipping low. The last sliver is starting to disappear in the ridge of the hills- the first couple of stars have dotted the sky, and the horizon’s gone from orange and blue to lavender and silver.

War pauses Immortal’s steady trot- twists in the saddle and waits for Death to catch up. His expression is wary, uncertain. He had not been expecting Death to come, that much is blatantly obvious.

“Look who finally decided to show up,” War says, but his tone isn’t as nasty as it could be.

Death snorts. “Figured you might need some help.”

There’s a pause exchanged between them- War stares at him, Death stares right back.

“Thanks.” War says. The tension in the air lessens, almost sighs.

Death nudges Shadow Step with his heels- it snorts, leans into a trot. War is quick to spur Immortal after him, and the two start trotting a circuit around the Spirit of the West’s property.

It’s not exactly a small territory to patrol. The Spirit of the West has a large ranch- over seventy miles, even more if he’s expanded it since the last time Death was here- and they have to run around the rim of that, back and forth, just the two of them, all night. If Death had to take a guess, it’s not the physical patrols that deter this creature, it’s the scent they’re leaving behind. Their smell lets the creature know the territory is guarded, and someone is willing to defend the borders.
There’s seventy-nine miles of sturdy, three and a half foot fencing encircling the perimeter of the ranch, probably equating to a whole forest of chopped trees and enough barbed wire for the entirety of the second World War. It keeps War and Death from having to constantly re-orient themselves to follow the edge of West’s ranch, although it appears to be ineffectual at keeping monsters out.

“Maybe we should split up,” War says. “Cover more ground.”

Death grunts.

He does not spur Shadow Step, and War does not make Immortal go any faster.

The sun fully dips beyond the horizon, and the last of the color bleeds from the expanse of heaven overhead. The stars twinkle, bright and warm.

“We need to talk,” Death says abruptly.

“Thought so.” War replies. Death doesn’t miss how War shifts in the saddle, tightens his grip on Immortal’s reins. The stubborn, hot-tempered Horsemen takes a deep breath, tenses, like he’s preparing for a fight. “So… Let’s talk.”

“You need to stop being a self-righteous, stubborn jackass.” Death says.

War’s nostrils flare, but he says nothing.

“*And* you need to listen to the rest of us. You’re *not* the leader-”

“You’re not, either!” War objects, fiercely.

“I don’t want to be the leader-”

War sneers. “That’s a lie and we both know it.”

That is a lie, and they both know it.

“You need to stop being so goddamn self-centered, War- we’re *all* Horsemen- not *everything* is about you-” Death tries.

“Like you’re not acting just as assholish?” War’s temper flares, and Death feels the overwhelming urge to vault off Shadow Step and strangle the stupid asshole. It’s War’s aura. War’s *aura*, it’s not what he really feels. He forces it down, forces it away, he knows better.

“Name one thing-”

“Literally *anything* you’ve done in the past fifty thousand years-”

“Recently!”

“You’ve been a real prick lately, Death- you’re always ready to leap my throat, you act like I’m about to attack you!”

“That’s because you’re the same way- you’re literally *war* embodied-”

“I’m not going to attack you! You know better than that! After all, who knows about the camaraderie of the Horsemen better than you-!” War objects, fiercely. “You’re the one who’s always beating the drum about how Horsemen are superior, Horsemen share a bond, nobody matters except the other Horsemen, except *we* don’t even matter to you, do we!? You say that everything’s about me all the
time, but you’re the self-centered son of a bitch, not me—"

“We always have to have it your way! I smell conflict this way, everyone- and ignore everyone else’s input.”

War sputters, scoffs, unable to formulate an argument for a second under the weight of his own incredulity. Death takes wicked pleasure in watching him squirm.

“You do the same exact fucking thing—”

“No I don’t!”

“Yes you do!”

“NO I DON’T—”

“Yes, yes you fucking do, Death! We all do it! We’re all hard-headed, mean sons of bitches—”

“Conquest and Famine aren’t!” Death snaps. “Conquest went with you even though you were being a stubborn f—”

“I’m not Conquest and you’re not Famine!”

“Oh, fuck off—”

“Don’t you ‘oh fuck off’ me- I’m fucking glad I’m not Conquest and you’re not Famine, because if I was courting you like he is her, I’d wish I could fucking die—”

Death freezes. He’s got no witty retort prepared- the next angry words crumble to ash in his mouth, bitter and lukewarm.

With the absence of a reply, War seems to shrink.

“Death—”

If he wanted to make the bastard feel guilty, make him squirm, he would draw away. Act hurt. He is hurt, but this isn’t a soap opera and he’s not going to be flinching like a beaten dog. He shouldn’t be hurt, anyway. War had given him worse retorts than I’d rather die than date you- and it’s not like he wanted to date the other Horseman, War is a stubborn, arrogant jerk- and Horsemen don’t date.

“War,” He replies, stiffly.

“I didn’t mean that.”

“I don’t care. I know you hate me already- the same way I hate you, and Famine, and Conquest—”

“Famine and Conquest? They didn’t do anything.” War’s objection is soft.

“They keep pretending that Horsemen- that we- can love. They keep kissing and being around each other and not- not- despising one another. How the fuck do they do it? How do they keep up a facade like that all the time?”

“They’re not acting.”

“How the fuck do you know?” Death snarls.
“Because I-” War abruptly stops. “YAH! Immortal, go!”

The horse suddenly goes sprinting off deeper into the pasture- Death doesn’t wait a second before kicking Shadow Step into a gallop, hooves flying over the ground after the other Horseman.

“What!? What is it!?” Death shouts.

“I saw it! I saw the monster!” War shrieks back.

“What is it?!”

“I don’t know, I didn’t get a good look at it-”

“How do you know you saw anything then!? It’s dark!” Death shouts.

“I know what I saw! Faster, Immortal, faster!”

Death snarls under his breath- Shadow Step throws its head forward and lurches, picking up a burst of speed to follow Immortal. War stabs a finger in the air and cries “There!”, the sound ripped away from Death’s ears by the wind screaming past. He follows the line of War’s hand and spots the monster that’s been plaguing West’s ranch:

Gargoyle.

Of course it’d be a gargoyles.

Chapter End Notes

im not dead
Wings

Chapter Summary

The Angel of Death comes upon a delightful discovery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She feels it as a faint fluttering across her skin. A warm, pleasant crawl, bringing goosebumps up across her flesh.

Fareeha has her feather.

Conquest and War had come through, with minimal to no meddling from Famine.

“Do you feel that?” The Angel of Death asks. Nearby, the Dragon of the North Wind pauses. His blade is levied at the throat of a Shimada elder- the man’s staring up at him with bulging, frightened eyes. His lip trembles, and his hands shake uncontrollably. The smell of urine permeates the air, originating from the wet spot on the front of the old man’s robes.

The stench of copper is thick, as well. Four other men have met their deaths in this room- fallen carcasses, bloody with arterial spray. The Angel of Death momentarily stops to recall the scene; the Dragon of the North Wind broke the doors open and streaked forth, lopping off the head of the nearest elder. The others attempted to scramble for safety. Their blood arced through the air, bits of flesh and bone, slivers of robes cut free and weaving through the air like a dropped ribbon, only to land on the ground alongside the body of a still-warm elder.

They’re in a tiny underground meetinghouse just outside Shimada Castle- a secret little place unknown to all but the Shimadas and the omniscient.

“No.” The Dragon says, tone curt. Hatred burns hot in his eyes. It is taking what’s clearly a great deal of self-restraint to not cut down the quivering man before him. “What am I supposed to be feeling?”

“Fareeha has my feather,” The Angel of Death replies, unable to help a broad grin.

“Genji!” The elder finally finds his voice. The Angel pauses her sentence to listen. “Please- Please, Genji, Genji, I didn’t order-”

He savagely slashes. Cuts his throat and leaves his head connected by just an inch of flesh. There’s no obscene gurgle or a scream- just a spasm and a sudden rushing tide of crimson from the meat of his neck.

The Dragon of the North Wind does not move from the spot, even as the blood seeps to the ground and to his feet. He stands in a thick puddle of the stuff, statuelike, gaze bored into the gore of the elder’s throat. He moves his sword to his side- does not sheathe it- and droplets slowly plip off the blade and onto the wooden floor.

The Angel of Death steps back skittishly as the oozing puddle of blood threatens to stain her feet. She retreats towards the doors of the meetinghouse, where it’s largely devoid of blood. She clears her throat.

“I think it’s clear what our next stop will be.”

He looks up at that-face intense, an unquenched hatred in his eyes. He grips the hilt of his sword so hard his knuckles turn white.

“Hanzo,” He says, voice soft, thick with a barely suppressed rage. The air crackles with a cold electricity- Old World magic. His dragon roils beneath his skin, in a spurt of impatient energy. “We’ll find him. Kill him for what he did to me. Then it’s just Father, and all of the Shimadas will be gone.”

The Angel of Death wrinkles her nose. “What? No. No. Were you listening to anything I just said?”

The Dragon of the North Wind pauses. Blinks, in confusion. He had obviously been expecting encouragement to kill his brother.

“Fareeha,” She clarifies. She folds her arms, pouts. “We’re going to follow that feather and find her.”

“Oh.” He says. “Is this really that important?”

“Yes,” She says. “This is far, FAR more important than hunting down a few dragon-summoners. Fareeha is the key to- Just about everything I’ve been working for.”

“Who… Who is that? Far-ee-uh?”

“The bastard child of Famine. The Horseman.”

“Horsemen can’t have-”

“You’re versed in stories,” She says. “Probably purposely false, Christianized, propaganda. Or stories from word of mouth, which are hardly ever accurate. I can assure you, Fareeha is real, and she’s important to me. And fortunately, I’m important to her.”

Evidently he’s decided that arguing about it isn’t worth it. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Muscle, of course. You don’t expect me to behead every god or goddess that gets in my way.”

“You want me to… Fight gods?” The Dragon of the North Wind says, tone wrought with disbelief.

“You don’t expect me to behead every god or goddess that gets in my way.”

“Of course. If you die, I can return you to life.”

“This is not part of our deal, Angel.” The Dragon reminds. “I was to destroy the Shimadas. Not accompany you in some hairbrained venture.”

She scowls at him. “You’re bound to me-”

“No, I am not. You can chase Fareeha. I will chase Sojiro, then Hanzo, and I will no longer be bound to your service.” He stoops in a slight, but respectful, bow. “Those were the terms.”

“Fine,” She says, sulkily. “Then you won’t have my help tracking them down anymore. You will have to personally find them, using your cunning and not my magic. Don’t rely on me.”

The ultimatum doesn’t work. “That’s fine,” He says, curt. “Goodbye, Angel.”
He darts away, and the Angel of Death is left glaring at his retreating back.

Fine. She can do this herself. She just hopes there aren’t any Horsemen near Fareeha- that could be tricky.

Death is overly fond of hunting her and killing her- her very existence is evidently affront to him, even though she has just as much of an earthly right to bring men back as he does to cut them down before their time. She’s met her death at his hands hundreds of times, but even more motivated into murder is Famine.

Famine is extraordinarily dangerous. Viciously protective of Fareeha and determined to keep the Angel of Death and her bastard daughter separated. There was, once upon a time, an amicable friendship between the Angel and Famine, but not after she stumbled in on the Angel and Fareeha in a less than opportune moment. While Fareeha had been yelling about knocking Famine had been yelling in return, the Angel had hastily retreated. She was, from then on, met with aggression rather than friendship from Famine. It went deeper than just you can’t go around having sex with my daughter- it was worry that the Angel of Death would try to manipulate her daughter for her own ends. Which the Angel is trying to do, but still, it throws a wrench into her plans.

Conquest will do whatever Famine tells him to- she has leashed and collared the proud Horseman with ‘love’, cowed and intimidated him into being her lapdog. Disgusting.

And War… War may be a potential ally. He has the most prospect for manipulation, anyway. He hates the rest of the Horsemen and has no particular grudge relating to the Angel of Death, except he disagrees with resurrecting those killed in battle. War despises Death, wholeheartedly, and the two notoriously argue and bicker about every little thing. It’s a wonder they haven’t tried to kill each other yet.

Though, War might prove a trickier to manipulate than a naive Horseman’s daughter. He’s the most stubborn and most prideful of the Horsemen, and he was highly reluctant to assist the Angel of Death when it came to giving Fareeha the feather.

But he must’ve accomplished his goal, or she wouldn’t know the feather was in Fareeha’s hands.

Oh well. If the Dragon of the North won’t help… She’ll just have to hope there are no Horsemen around.

She closes her eyes, concentrates- her feather calls to her, crying out like a beacon, the same way a dead man’s soul does.

In a moment, she has left the bloodsoaked meetinghouse.

In the next moment, she’s on a soft bed in a warm room. The room’s small- made mostly of wood- with a ratty rug on the floor. A patched quilt, patterned with blue stars on a dusty white background, covers the comfortable bed. There’s a table lamp on a hand-carved wooden nightstand, which bathes the room in a warm but dim orange glow, and a cow skull mounted up above the bed. Overhead, an archaic ceiling fan lazily turns. The door is wood, and there’s a window set into the wall, with thick, creamy-yellow curtains with white cowboy boots embroidered on them. The room has a distinct rustic vibe.

Fareeha is sitting next to her.

“Angela! Angela!” There’s strong arms suddenly wrapping the Angel of Death in an embrace. It’s warm, welcome- Fareeha’s surprisingly solid, sturdy. She must’ve been working out since the Angel
last saw her. She smells good, too - very good, like lavender and vanilla.

The Angel’s heart flutters traitorously in her chest. She may want Fareeha for more than just romance - but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t love her.

Fareeha pulls back, studying Angela with her dark brown eyes. “Angela - I missed you. Where’ve you been? Why didn’t you come find me sooner?”

She’s clenching one of the Angel’s feather in one of her fists - the white plume pokes out from between her curled fingers and palm. The Angel of Death reaches out, as if to take it - at the last second, she threads her fingers with Fareeha’s and squeezes, lightly.

“I needed the feather,” She says. “I needed you to have it so I could get to you.”

Fareeha looks well. She’s changed a bit since the Angel of Death last saw her - grown more muscle, cut her hair shorter, but that’s it. She’s been blessed with eternal youth, or at least, *extended* youth - after all, even the Horsemen had, once upon a time, been young - and although it’s not a godly power, she retains her old beauty. She has those same soft lips, a strong nose, a proud jaw, glossy black hair - she’s still the expressive but repressed young woman that the Angel of Death knew long ago.

The Angel of Death tucks her hair behind her ear. “Your mother has made it very, very difficult to find you, reach you. I’m sorry it took so long, but - I’d like to think it was worth it.”

Fareeha scowls. “Mom has been difficult for a long, long time. I’m tired of it. She’s just *now* letting me out of my damned tower! And even *then*, I’m being babysat by all the other Horsemen and the Spirit of the West - It’s *bullshit!*”

Fareeha drops down onto the bed, glaring up at the ceiling.

“I could take you out,” The Angel of Death says, slowly. “Just you and me.”

“I wish,” Fareeha sighs. Turns over, onto her side, facing away from the Angel of Death. She strokes Fareeha’s side, sympathetically.

“I’m serious. I can take you out of here. Away from Famine and the other Horsemen.”

“How?” Fareeha asks, voice hollow, thin with frustration. “If we try to leave, they’ll spot us. Stop us. And Death *hates* you. So does Mom. They’ll kill you, and I don’t… Want to see that.”

“I won’t be dead forever,” The Angel promises, softly. “But no, that won’t be a problem. I could take you to my Domain. I could take you there. Immediately. No chance that Famine or anybody would stop us or hurt me.”

Fareeha hesitates. It’s clear she’s going through a little internal struggle - trying to wonder if it’s worth going with the Angel of Death or if she should obey her mother.

The Angel is quiet. She wants this decision to be Fareeha’s. She… Kind of wants Fareeha to say *yes, I’ll go with you*, all of her own volition, with no poking or prodding or underhanded tactics.

The Angel of Death won’t admit it, even to herself, but she wants Fareeha to love her and trust her enough to leave her mother to go with her.

“Let’s do it,” Fareeha says.
The Angel grins, triumphant-

And a sound catches her attention. It’s a soft *creeeeaaaaaak* from the door, and the sound of quiet, hasty bootsteps retreating down the hallway.

The high of her triumph immediately crashes down as she realizes what that means.

“What was that?” Fareeha sits up in alarm.

“An eavesdropper,” The Angel of Death says, pushing herself off the bed and onto her feet. “Take my hand. We’ll need to go before they can stop us.”

Fareeha scrambles to her feet- The Angel of Death grabs her hand, and cups her face.

They smile at one another and, in a mere second, they’re gone.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

STILL. NOT. DEAD. BABES.

you can follow me at [https://legendary-bard.tumblr.com](https://legendary-bard.tumblr.com) if you want
Mystery

Chapter Summary

West warns Famine, and Conquest divulges a little bit of history.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Thump thump thump thump thump thump.*

The Spirit of the West sprints down the hallway, each booted footstep sounding a repetitive tattoo on the wooden floor.

*Shit. Shit, shit, shit-*

Famine’s going to be so mad. So, so mad.

“FAMINE!” He all but flies down the stairs- takes them three at a time and manages to not slip and break his neck. Famine and Conquest are sitting in the foyer, enjoying some evening tea- when he stops in front of them, panting, the two stare.

“We got a problem!” West pants.

“What problem, West?” Famine asks. She eyes him with a deep frown.

“I’m pretty sure the Angel of Death just kidnapped your daughter,” He blurs. She gets up, puts down her tea cup, and *glares*, with the unholy fury of a protective mother. The Spirit of the West tries not to cringe. He thought he’d get at least a couple minutes of denial, but she immediately believed him and immediately looked completely pissed.

“How. Did this. Happen.” Every word trembles with an attempt to suppress rage.

“It’s not MY fault! Look, I was just going to her room to check on her and I heard voices-” He blusters. “I heard her talking so I crouched down and listened, they talked about how much they missed each other and Fareeha said she wanted a way to go explore the world without you guys breathin’ down her neck, and then the Angel of Death was like ‘oooh I can help’ and then I was gonna run off to go get you before they did anythin’, but then they heard me-”

“Shut up, West! Did she say where she was taking Fareeha!?” Famine demands, impatiently.

“Her Domain!” He says, hurriedly. “Prolly so they could make a break for it without us stopping them-”

“Why didn’t you stop them!” Famine marches up to him. The Spirit of the West has enough self-preservational instincts to remain stock-still while she grabs the front of his serape, ‘cos if he tries to make a break for it, she’s gonna *kill* him. She’s a good half a foot shorter than him, but it doesn’t feel like all that much when her glare could melt the ice caps.
“I- What’cha mean, Famine?” He asks, weakly. He throws Conquest a look, as a quiet plea for assistance, but the old Horseman doesn’t move. His gaze is stony, unreadable. Shit.

“I MEAN, why didn’t you go in there and tell Fareeha what a terrible idea going with the Angel of Death was!? And-”

Suspicion burns in her eyes. “How in the hell did the Angel of Death even get here? How did she know about Fareeha being at her ranch?”

“I don’t-” He stammers, “I don’t know-”

“Yes, you do! What did you do to my daughter, West-?”

“Nothing! Nothing, I swear, I just- I gave her one of the Angel of Death’s feathers-”

He gets slapped. She lets go of him at the same time, and for such a tiny old woman, she hits hard. He staggers back.

“You- you idiot! What on Earth would possess you to do something so- so reckless!? So moronic!? You know that the Angel of Death has no good plans for my daughter! You- you-” She raises her hand to strike again, and Conquest’s voice gently rumbles out:

“It was my fault, my lady.”

Her fingers curl into a fist, and her hand lowers.

“Your fault? What do you mean?”

“The Angel bequeathed the feather to War and I for delivery. We gave it to the Spirit of the West for him to courier, because he would get there faster.” He stares fixedly at his lap as he speaks, head lowered in shame. “I didn’t believe she would try anything like this. I am… Sorry.”

Famine looks like she wants to be angry- West really hopes she won’t be mad at either of them, because hell hath no fury like a Horseman scorned- but she simply shakes her head and sighs.

“It’s fine. It’s fine.” She breathes out, trying to calm. “All it means is that we need to gather up Death and War and ride to her Domain.”

“Where’s that?” West asks. He doesn’t commingle with the other gods- at least, ones that aren’t American.

“Switzerland,” Conquest says, uncomfortably. “We went there. Once. We haven’t been back ever since.”

“What happened the last time you went there?” He says.

“A massacre.” Conquest looks away. So does Famine. The Spirit of the West feels like he’s stumbled upon some kind of dark, horrible secret, and with some trepidation, he says, “What do you mean, a massacre?”

“I mean, a massacre.” Conquest’s gaze bores into his teacup. “We were riding through what is, now, western Austria- this was many, many years ago. Before Hadrian’s birth. On our way through to what would become Switzerland, Death felt a disturbance. He split from the group and we pursued him, as quickly as we could. Not even War’s stallion could keep up. Death charged into the Angel of Death’s Domain and butchered her servants, her resurrected, and finally, her herself. The whole
place was awash in blood, with stench so thick you choked on the crimson vapor of the fallen with every stir of your chest. The mounds of bodies- stiff, contorted, agonized- stood as monuments to Death’s superiority. When we had come upon the grisly scene, he stood on the steps of her home, with her heart in his hand, dripping fresh blood. He gazed at it with such intense hatred I was afraid for the rest of the world, what his sphere of influence might do. He looked at us, when we dismounted in front of him, and he smiled. ‘I wonder if she’ll come back,’ he said, ‘Even if she does, it won’t matter. She won’t do this—’ and he gestured, to everything that the Angel of Death had built and he had destroyed, ‘Again.’ The rest of us didn’t know what to do. Even War was entirely silent. Death mounted Shadow Step, and we rode off. It took us weeks to discuss what had happened. It took us seconds to all agree that Death would never be allowed back there.”

The Spirit of the West takes a moment to digest that.


“The Angel of Death and Death will never get along.” Famine says. “It was never the question of why he did it, it was how could we keep him from doing it again. War has a similar relationship with creatures dedicated to peace- like the Iris and her Shambali monks. But enough of old history. None of this matters, all that matters is going there and getting my daughter back safely.”

“We need to get Death and War,” Conquest rumbles. “If we are going to knock on her door, we will need to prepare to break it down. Best we have every Horseman at our side.”

“Forget it! I’m going now—” She strides, hurriedly, for the front door.

Conquest looks to her- then to West, who holds up his hands defensively- and clutches his teeth. He dashes in front of her, spreading his arms out and pressing his back flat to the wooden doorway.

“Get out of my way.” She says.

“No. You are angry- and rightfully so- but you are not thinking right, Famine,” His tone is manages to not come off as condescending or chastising- just warm, genuine, concerned. “Charging off now is dangerous! We don’t know what kind of allies the Angel of Death has gathered. Or what she intends for Fareeha.”

“She’s going to try to kill my daughter! The Angel of Death only uses servants who are un-dead!”

“Have you considered that maybe they’re two young lovers who need time by themselves? That there are no nefarious schemes or dastardly plots?”

Famine pounds her fist against his chest- her hands are clenched, tightly, her single eye starting to well with tears. There’s a slight but defined tremble to her old frame. The hit was ineffective, but not for lack of trying. Conquest sharply exhales in pain when her knuckles connect with his armored abdomen, but stands, strong and sturdy.

“I’m not losing my daughter to her, Conquest. I can’t. She’s…” Famine breaks off, trying to simply breathe. “I know you three will always be by my side, come blight or butchery. But I don’t know if she can, and—”

“I understand, my lady,” He says, voice tender. “I understand why you are upset. I understand why you are scared. But charging in blindly will not help.”

She laughs, though it’s watery, trying and failing to veil tears. “I have told that to you so many times- it’s weird, hearing it from you.”
The tension in the air thins. The Spirit of the West breathes a deep sigh of relief, and the feeling of rats gnawing on his gut recedes.

And a split second later, he feels a sudden sharp jolt, like he’s been kicked in the chest. He flinches, on reflex, as do Famine and Conquest. After the worst of the kick fades, he feels a sudden sense of weakness- that makes him want to puddle to the ground in a useless pool of goo. Or crawl into a ball and die.

“What the hell is that?” The Spirit of the West croaks. “Famine-”

“I’m not doing that,” She looks slightly winded. “That’s… That’s Death, I’d recognize his sphere of influence anywhere.”

“He said he’d go patrollin’, what’s he doin’ back here?” West asks.

“He is not back here. He’s far away. Far, far away. Outside your Domain, I believe.” Conquest suppresses a shudder, and West has to try not to shake, because whatever scares the biggest Horseman around is probably something to be afraid of. “I have not felt him like this in… Years. Many, many, many years. He is angry. He is very, very angry.”

“What’s he got to be so mad about?” West glances at Famine, trying to suppress the urge to get into a fetal position and wait for his last breath to leave his body. He’s never felt Death’s sphere of influence like this before- and he’s seen him during fights and when he got really, really fucking mad. “You think he knows about Fareeha?”

“No,” She shakes her head, though her face darkens at the thought. “How could he? This is something else. Something completely different.”

Conquest pauses. “Do you think it has to do with the monster they were hunting? Maybe they found it.”

“Death wouldn’t get this furious at a monster,” She dismisses.

“Then what?” West asks. “What the hell else could he be so pissed at?”

All three of them glance at one another, and without saying a damn thing, they all come to the conclusion together.

War.

“We need to find them,” Conquest breaks the silence first.

“Shit, I’ll saddle up a horse- I’ll get all my ranchhands together-” The Spirit of the West begins.

“No,” Famine says. “This is a Horseman issue. It’s out of your hands, West.”

“But- what about my monster?” The Spirit of the West objects, thinly.

He knows what he says is entirely the wrong thing to say the second it comes out of his mouth- he cringes under Famine’s immediate glare.

“That’s not our problem,” She barks, tone cold. “We’ll deal with your issues as soon as my daughter’s safe and we know that Death’s not about to decimate the nearby human population.”

He looks away.
Conquest steps away from the door- holds it open for Famine, who heads out into the night with a faint “Goodnight, West.”

“Thank you for hosting us, Spirit of the West,” Conquest says, abruptly. “We will be back to deal with your monster as soon as all of this is dealt with. I swear.”

The Spirit of the West says nothing, and Conquest steps out, the door shuddering shut behind him.

West sure hopes that Death and War are gonna be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter should be up soon! I'm trying to do Friday release schedules, but they may be a little late or early.

CH 13 is already completed, so if you're looking for a way to make your Monday more enjoyable, it'll be posted on the 29th, with chapter 14 to (hopefully) follow on that friday.

also!! not to be That Bitch but i'd love some comments n stuff
Death and War hunt the monster.

“War! KEEP UP!”

Hooves thunder mightily against the grass. Immortal throws his neck forward, lurching into a whole-hearted sprint, chasing Shadow Step’s tail. The only light comes from the moon- a whisker-thin shred of silver- and the stars, which seem cold and distant tonight. Riding this fast, in this kind of darkness- it’s dangerous. While their horses are fleet of foot and fleet of mind, they can’t keep up this breakneck pace, not safely. One sour step- either a awkward tread or an accidental hoof landing in a rabbit’s warren- could tip a horse over and break bones of both stallion and rider. Whether arms or necks, didn’t matter.

“IT WON’T GET AWAY, DEATH! SLOW DOWN!”

Death has no reply. His horse tears ahead, strained to the last of its strength, and War snarls. He can’t afford to lose Death, can’t afford to slow Immortal’s stride- he clenches the reins and yells YAH, jabs his heels into his stallion’s belly. Immortal screams, frantic, and forces himself to move faster, pushes limits that War’s never tried to test.

They’re gaining on the gargoyle too quickly. They’ll need to slow down or they’ll overshoot it, give it a chance to spin around and run into the dark. They’ll lose it. War tries to yell that to Death, but it’s caught by the wind, muddled. Either that, or Death ignores him wholesale.

“Immortal! SLOW IT DOWN!” He sits back, deep, in the saddle- loosens his hold on the reins. Immortal gets the picture- he pulls his head back, slowing his gallop to a canter. Death tears ahead, and as War predicted, the gargoyle digs its claws into the earth and sharply turns a hundred and eighty degrees, bolting in the complete opposite direction. Death snarls something- a curse, a threat- that’s mangled by the air blowing past. War leans right, encouraging Immortal to turn. The turn has to be slow, to not crash and burn due to the momentum of a fully grown stallion- in the time it takes for Death to get Shadow Step to stop, and the time it takes War to slow and swing Immortal around, the gargoyle’s gained quite a bit of distance.

“God dammit!” Death roars. Shadow Step whinnies, high and panicked. All of the sudden the horse trips- body bowing and legs whirling- and there’s the inevitable crash. Shadow Step’s scream cuts out it slams into the ground and the air is forced from its lungs. Dirt and grass spray everywhere as it tumbles, limbs flailing, trying to get back up. Death is thrown from the saddle after the initial impact- Careful analysis gets thrown by the wayside. War jumps out of the saddle and darts towards horse and rider.

“Death! Are you alright!?”
The Horseman picks himself up from the dirt— he rocks back and forth, unsteadily. Head wound? Shock? A million different possibilities whirl through War’s mind, and although he knows that Death has to be okay— he’s immortal, he can’t be hurt, not permanently, not fatally— there’s a fist-sized cyst of worry in his gut.

Death stumbles up to Shadow Step. The horse nickers softly— shifts in the dirt, rolling onto its belly. Death sticks out his hand and Shadow Step sticks its snout into his palm, an affectionate way of saying *I’m okay.*

Death sighs in relief. Shadow Step gathers up its legs underneath itself, and stands up. It takes a few cautious, unsteady steps, that grow more stable and confident the more it takes.

If Shadow Step were a horse— a real, flesh and blood horse, and not a horse belonging to a Horseman— the beast’d be broken so badly in that tumble it might need to be put down for its own good. But Horsemen’s horses’ injuries heal even faster than their rider’s.

War skids to a halt in front of Death. “Are you okay? You could’ve been *hurt—*”

Death turns to look at him and War falters in the wake of his expression. Death looks furious. Completely, utterly, wholeheartedly furious.

“What the *hell* are you *doing* here, War!? Why didn’t you chase the gargoyle!!?”

War sputters. “Chase th— You fell out of saddle! Your horse tripped! I had to make sure you were okay—”

“You *knew* I was going to be okay! We’re Horsemen, we don’t get killed, and there’s no injury we can’t heal from—” He glances around, more and more anger gathering on his face with every second passed. “Now we’ve lost the damned thing and it’ll *know* that we’re hunting it!”

“What do you *care!*?” War snaps in reply. “*You* didn’t care about hunting it earlier— You were happy to just sit there and let me go by myself!”

Death glares at him. “This is your fault.”

“It’s not my damned fault, Death!” He strides up to the other Horseman, bristling.

*You let it get away!*” Death shouts.

Death shoves him.

War stumbles back.

They both realize at the same time what’d just happened— Death has a millisecond to look surprised, and War takes half of that to get *angry.*

He balls his hand into a fist and sucker-punches Death in the nose.

Death, in turn, staggers. He clutches his face with his hands, and to his credit, is completely soundless through the whole thing other than the crunch of his cartilage under War’s knuckles. He takes a second— blinking, looking like he’s trying to figure out what happened— then swipes his thumb under his nose. The golden ichor that sticks to his fingers is damning.

War’s world is slowly starting to implode around him.

Everything feels surprisingly calm.

“- I ought to -”

The stars twinkle in slow motion.

“- Famine and Conquest-”

The grass sways.

“- Put up with you-”

The crickets have stopped chirping.

“- Better off without your pigheaded, warmongering, stupid fucking-”

War lunges. Grabs him by the throat and squeezes. Death’s hands immediately fly to his wrists, nails digging in, trying to pull him off. Death’s lip is curled in a snarl- his brown eyes smolder with rage and his teeth flash white. There’s panic and anger on his face, in equal measures.

“I wish I wasn’t even a fucking Horseman sometimes!” War shouts. “You know that!? Having to put up with your piss-poor fucking attitude- having to put up with your stubborn ass, your stupid problems, YOUR hatred of all the other gods, YOUR goddamn demands, YOUR arrogance about Horseman superiority, YOUR bitchy mood swings and YOUR fucking cat fights, YOU fucking instigating and TRYING to piss me off-”

His fingers close tighter and tighter around Death’s throat. He wishes, in a stab of sheer and utter hatred, that he COULD kill Death. Have him gone forever.

“- What the FUCK did I do to you that makes YOU treat me like I’m your goddamned enemy!? For all your preaching and preaching and preaching about Horsemen unity, Horsemen superiority, you treat me like I’m the goddamned Angel of Death- So fucking tell me. What the fuck is your goddamned problem with me!?”

Death is quiet for a second.

And War feels it. He lets go of Death, his hands starting to twitch and shake uncontrollably.

“You want to know my problem?” Death asks. His voice is wrong. Warped, mutated, reverberating.

Fear bolts down War’s spine- a cold, icy kind of thing. The grass around Death starts withering. Turns ashy white, limp and still, dead.

War loses the feeling in his fingertips.

Death takes a step towards him. His face is wrong.

There’s six eyes blinking at War, fanning across Death’s face, pupils pen-thin and bright red. His sclera ripple and spread, dyeing jet-black, like ink spilling onto parchment. Teeth- too many teeth for his mouth- extend from his jaw, bristling like a porcupine’s quills. Black smoke starts wisping off of him, like a pot that’s been brought to boil- his skin bubbles and churns, like there’s something angry inside that wants to get out.

Death takes another step towards him. His whole being is wrong.

War can feel death radiating off of him. The grass dies in his wake. The wind goes silent. The moon
seems to shrink and the stars are snuffed out by the overwhelming weight of Death’s aura. The crickets are gone because they’ve fled, fled from death. Rabbits and voles and ants and pillbugs buried underneath the ground die soundless, swift deaths, merely from being near him. War feels like he’s suffocating- like someone is trying to smother him, kill him, and a tiny voice in the back of his mind says that it’s a good thing. That he should curl up and die.

Death takes another step forward.

War realizes, in a split second, that punching Death, choking Death, and yelling at him were all terrible, terrible ideas.

He turns and runs.

He sprints up to Immortal, lunges at him and scrambles into his saddle, slams his heels into his sides and screams YAH even before his hands touch the reins.

They’re out of there like a shot. And forget danger, forget safety- he pushes Immortal to whatever limit they’d reached tonight and fucking shatters it.

“GO! GO!” He screeches. He throws his arm around the base of Immortal’s neck and hugs him tight- face buried into his mane and eyes squeezed shut. Everything feels so cold, and he has no idea if it’s the night chill or if Death is freezing the very air. He can’t open his eyes to see how close Death has gotten- the wind’s rushing by too fast.

“WA-AR!” Death’s voice rings clear, even at this speed. “YOU’RE A COWARD, WAR. I NEVER KNEW YOU TO RUN FROM A FIGHT.”

War’s stomach churns. He can feel sweat beading on Immortal’s coat- his deep heaves for breath are caught in the wind, but War can feel the frantic swell and collapse of his chest as he tries to get air. They won’t be able to run forever- Death is right behind them and he doesn’t seem to be slowing down. And the further they go, the longer the tract of dead animals and foliage will be.

“COME SEE DEATH UP CLOSE.”

War turns his head to look. He knows better than to do it, but he does.

Death isn’t the only one who’s changed. Shadow Step has, too. Death rides on a pale horse- stripped of flesh and muscle, bone knitted together to make a skeletal beast. And beast is the appropriate word- there’s a spark of purple light in its eye sockets, burning menacingly. Shadow Step’s normally flat teeth are curved into fangs, and great volumes of smoke plume from its jaws with every breath. Its rider is a tornado of whirling, menacing smoke, with the only solid part of him being twisted black talons clutching Shadow Step’s reins. Red eyes burn, cutting through some of the smoke.

He shouldn’t have looked back.

“Death, what the hell got into you!?”

The only reply is a rumble of laughter- rolling through the air like mist. War shivers and clutches Immortal’s neck tighter.

The run doesn’t last forever. Can’t last forever. Either Immortal starts slowing down or Shadow Step finds a burst of speed- War opens his eyes a slit and he and Death are neck and neck.

War stares into the pinpoints of light amidst the swirling blizzard of darkness. He’s transfixed, for just a moment.
A clawed hand stretches out towards him.

His entire body feels cold. He can’t feel his hands. Can’t feel his feet. His thighs are shaking and his entire face is numb.

His heart stops beating. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t know, but it’s been pounding in his ears for so long that he notices when the drum beats stop.

He doesn’t get worried until he misses the next beat, and the beat after that.

Their horses are less than six inches apart.

He sees Death’s hand touch his arm.

He doesn’t feel it and that terrifies him.

Then things start going black.

*That’s bad,* he realizes, in stunning clarity. *Oh, shit.*

♫

When he wakes up, he has *no* idea how much time has passed.

He’s died before, of course, especially in the past when wars were rampant and he was at the peak of his strength and confidence. It’s a whole lot of nothing while his flesh tries to wind back into normalcy and his body threads itself together.

Resurrections take anywhere between a few days and several decades, judging by the severity of the injury. A slit throat is much easier to recover from than being burnt to ash.

His heart had stopped, which should’ve been a relatively short fix. Although, he’d presumably fallen off his horse when he died. And at that speed, he’d be lucky if he only broke a few bones.

He blinks. Everything’s blurry at first, but comes into focus.

He’s outside. There’s an inky black sky overhead and a scattering of stars; a streak of pink and blue at the edge of the horizon. Sunrise, not sunset. Everything’s a hazy grey, more distinctive than they would be in the depths of night. No colors have filtered in, yet, though- the sun’s not prominent enough.

He’s lying on a bed of grass and clover. In a field, presumably the same one he’d died in. That makes sense. Nobody would’ve moved his dead body, and Death would hardly be in the state to drag him off somewhere.

He sits up. No aches, no pains. In some ways, dying and shutting down for a few days is the easy way out. No waking up sore.

He gets, unsteadily, to his feet. Blinks when his vision swims. He glances around.


This is a lot more serious than some stupid gargoyle. Death could be out there, by himself, killing people.

And if people are gonna get killed, they better damn well die in battle, not because Death couldn’t control his emotions.

He looks around. Right next to him there’s a trail of browned, withered grass in a line, about five feet in width. It seems to stretch on forever. It’s undoubtedly due to Death’s influence- he was killing everything around him.

And fortunately for War, it’ll lead right to him.

He starts walking.

He goes on like that for a while- he trudges forward until the sun lazily drags itself past the horizon. The pink and orange stripe on the edge of the sky blooms until the heavens lighten to a baby blue, and dawn becomes morning. He hauls himself over miles and miles of plush field, grass crunching beneath his boots and the world waking around him. A few rabbits come up to lick dew off grass stalks. It’s a sign that Death had calmed on his way, and a welcome reassurance that, at least, not all life has gone extinct since War’s death.

The rabbits scurry for the safety of their dens at his passing. A raven croaks overhead, heralding the return of the sun.

And, eventually, War loses the trail of dead grass. He’s noticed that it’d gradually started thinning over the past couple of miles, but eventually, it stops.

War stops, too.

His legs are starting to ache, and he’s pretty sure that if he stops for too long, he won’t be able to get going again.

Which way should he go?

This is pointless. He could’ve headed anywhere from here- even doubled back and went back to try to find me.

Frustration brews in his stomach and he pushes it down. Anger won’t help. This time there’s no enemy to punch, no villain to put down; his war-like tendencies are only going to get in the way. He just has to keep walking.

But where? Which direction?

He circles the end of Death’s trail. Looks for broken, crushed grass stalks; Death and Shadow Step should leave some kind of trail to track.

He finds a damaged clover patch- four sturdy imprints in the turf, roughly the size and shape of a horse’s hooves. He follows them- and finds a trail.

There. Keeping cool paid off.

Trailing the hoofprints is a lot harder than following a stripe of dead greenery- he loses track of the trail and ends up following deer or bunny footpaths, and loses it altogether a couple of times. He’s forced to backtrack and make guesswork, oftentimes having to forge forward with no tracks with only a hope that he’ll find a clearer set of prints further on.
It’s slow, *tedious* work, and with the sun hitting its zenith, it gets *hot*, too. When he’s forced to backtrack for the fifteenth time, all that frustration and heat gets to him—his sphere of influence explodes outward, and the sound of rabbits mauling one another and birds slashing at one another with their claws is the immediate reply.

He sucks in a deep breath, balls his fists, summons up every last dreg of resolve he has, and wills his frustration to evaporate with his next exhale. He looks down at the tracks, wishes he was a goddamn bird so he could get a better view, and forges in another direction, searching for more hoofprints.

He finds them.

And he keeps going.

Eventually he finds an asphalt road. It’s old and grey, cracked and choked with weeds, riddled with potholes and in dire need of maintenance. The edge of the road is muddy and caked with hoofprints. Recent hoofprints.

They’re relatively close together and shallow. Walking pace. Death wasn’t going anywhere in a hurry.

But where *was* he going?

Death’s trail follows the road. War walks after it.

The sun makes its slow journey from its apex to drown in the western horizon. War swelters in the heat and wonders if it’s even possible to catch up with Death. He’s on horseback, and War’s on foot. And, although he hadn’t considered it until now, who knows how long it’s been since these tracks were made. And who knows how long he lay dead in that field. Could’ve been weeks.

*No, couldn’t have been. The mud that Shadow Step left tracks in is still soft.*

Although it’s baking in the sun. It’ll be dry soon.

*At most, it’s been three days. At least, it’s been twelve hours.*

They left at sunset to chase the gargoyle. They fought around eight or nine. War must’ve died around then, too. And he woke up come morning—maybe eight or nine hours, not twelve, since he rose before dawn.

A car drives past. A pick-up truck. It’s the first vehicle he’s seen on this road, and he’s been walking for hours. He catches a brief snippet of soulful guitar from the radio as it blows by. In a matter of minutes, it’s swallowed up in the distance.

This is *pointless.*

How long is he going to be walking after Death? What’s he going to do if the trail ends and he’s stuck in the middle of nowhere with no horse and no chance of finding the other Horsemen?

Worse comes to worse, he can do what Death did—take the reins off of his sphere of influence and cause everything within a few miles radius to go into an uncontrollable, bloodthirsty rage. That’d certainly attract the attention of the other Horsemen or nearby gods, but it’s a drastic measure and he’ll be chastised for it when the others come get him.

The others. What are Famine and Conquest doing now? Hunting for Death, too? Hunting for *him*? They must’ve felt Death spiral out of control. Must’ve felt his energy radiating even as far as the
Spirit of the West’s ranch.

What’s *Death* doing right now?

War’s heart squeezes and he looks down at himself in surprise. That’s not… a normal reaction. That’s concern. Genuine worry. And some other emotion he’s not quite sure of.

*It’s Death who should be concerned, not you,* he thinks. *Because I’m going to fucking kill him when I find him. He killed me. A Horseman. This is madness.*

The surrounding landscape starts to change on his way. The ranges of plush grass become steep hills and rocky slopes, a handful of trees scattered here and there. He passes by human homesteads—rundown farms with sheds made of rusting tin and properties caged up with decrepit wired fencing. He spies a horse or two in some of the yards. He momentarily contemplates stealing one, but decides against it. It’s harder to track on horseback than on foot, even if it’d be faster and he’d get to rest his legs.

Speaking of his legs—he can’t feel them anymore. They’re completely leaden. They had started burning with an unholy fire around noon, but slowly it’d started to fade to numbness.

That’s what happens when you’re old and used to a horse carrying you everywhere.

He shades his eyes and glances at the position of the sun. It’s low, now. Starting to become sunset. Big smears of auburn burn the edge of the sky, and the first stars start cropping up.

*Pointless,* a little voice in his head chants. *Pointless pointless pointless pointless. You’ll never find him. You’ve lost your horse and all your friends.*

Soon it’s going to be too dark to follow the hoofprints. He’ll have to make camp or find a light source. The latter is the more attractive option. Every second that War waits is another second for Death to get further and further away.

He should break into one of those ranch houses. See if they have a lantern or a flashlight, or the necessary components to make a torch. Not like they’ll stop him.

He comes to a point where the prints vanish. The hoofprints just **stop** in the mud, but there’s no horse, no Death.

Panic rises in his throat and he feels a strangling in his chest. No, no, no, he did **not** come this far just to be thwarted by a missing set of tracks. He backtracks, carefully picking over the hoofprints he’s been following. He does this **three times,** and searches the area in a wide radius, but he finds **nothing.** No smears of mud on the road from muddy hooves, no tracks on the opposite side of the asphalt path, no tracks leading backwards, no tracks leading away from or onto the road—Frustration makes his jaw tight and he really has to try to calm down once he hears animals in the brush start fighting one another.

*Pointless.*

Feeling hollow, War forges forward. Death had to have gone *somewhere.* He wouldn’t just **disappear** without a trace.

In the last embers of the dying sunlight, he sees a spot of red off in the distance, breaking up the greens of the trees, bushes, and grass by the road.

It’s not related to Death. It’d be black, like his cloak, or white, like his horse. And it could even just
be something reflecting the reddish orange shafts of light from the setting sun.

But it’s a tiny sliver of hope. He forges forward.

And it becomes pretty obvious what it is pretty quick.

“Immortal!”

He breaks into a sprint and his stallion glances up, ear flicking. Immortal receives him by lowering his head, offering out his muzzle for a touch.

“Blood of the gods- Where the hell have you been!?” War barks, after he’s gingerly stroked Immortal’s nose. “Was it you? Was I tracking you the whole time, not Death?”

Immortal makes a tiny little snuffling sound.

“Gods damn Death-” He strides up to Immortal’s side, uses the last of the strength in his failing legs to leap onto his back. The union of horse and rider feels right- the comfortable broadness of Immortal’s back is soothing, and he settles into the saddle with a relaxed ease. “Killing a Horseman over a disagreement. He’s lost it.”

Immortal starts walking with no instruction- no push of his heel or verbal command.

“Where are you going?” War demands.

Immortal doesn’t reply. He just keeps walking. He swerves off-road, into rocky terrain and curving, mountainous hills.

Sunset becomes night, soon enough. They ride in pitch-black dark, but Immortal keeps a steady pace. Wherever he’s going, he knows the way even in the nightly gloom and through rough turf. War has lived with the horse long enough to put his faith and fate in Immortal’s hooves. He sits there, motionless, and lets Immortal take the lead.

And he’s rewarded for it.

At the end of this whole, ridiculous romp, he and Immortal come upon a lone silhouette on horseback. The shape stands on a rocky plain, dramatically perched near the edge of a cliff, overlooking the countryside below. War’s almost afraid the figure will bolt if he says something, but he wets his lips and calls into the night:

“Death?”

The figure takes a second, then dismounts from its horse.

War climbs off of Immortal. The stallion knows better than to follow and stays stationary.

War slowly, painfully walks up. It becomes evident pretty soon that it’s definitely Death- it may be dark out, but the clear cut of his shoulders, the strong torso, the broad outline of his coat muddling the shape of his legs- it’s as clear as it would be in daylight.

“War,” Death replies.

“You are a bitch to track down,” War says. “Took me all day.”

“Thought you’d be dead longer than that,” Death shifts. There’s tension in his voice. “You here to kill me?”
“No.”

“That’s not like you.”

“It’s not like you to kill other Horsemen,” War says. Frustration, rage bleeds out of him with every word. His tone is mild, even gentle. “What happened back there? I’ve said worse things than that and you haven’t lost control before.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. I died-”

“And I’m sorry! I’m- very, very sorry. I forgot that my influence could hurt you. When I grabbed your arm, I wasn’t trying to get you killed. I was trying to get you to slow down so we could talk, not to kill you, I wasn’t thinking right, I swear.”

War’s inclined to believe him, actually. All that stuff about COME SEE DEATH UP CLOSE- when a sphere of influence gets out of control, it influences you, too.

It was insanity. Temporary insanity, and War just regenerated. No serious harm done, except…

“Death, you didn’t answer me earlier.” War says, squaring his stance.

“What do you mean?” Uncertainty flickers through his tone.

“I asked you, what’s your problem, then you lost control. You- Look like you’re together now, so- Answer it for me. What’s wrong?”

Death moves closer, until they’re almost nose to nose. War is only a shade taller than him- this close, their noses are an inch from touching.

“You,” Death says, hoarsely.

“Yes, I know, me, but what specifically, about m-”

He’s interrupted by something touching his mouth.

At first he thinks Death is trying to cover his lips with his hand to shut him up, and a hot feeling of indignation goes through him, but then there’s slight movement. Something brushes his cheek and the pressure at his lips doesn’t feel like fingers.

Hands touch just under his shoulder blades- then slide downward, to rest on his hips. A thrill leaps through War’s spine and he realizes that those are lips, Death is kissing him-

And everything comes together like the blending of four melodies into a perfect harmony; like the last domino to strike the floor, like the final stroke of paint over a canvas.

War throws his arms around Death’s neck and kisses him as the first rays of dawn begin to break.

Chapter End Notes

oh wrow
( comments appreciated! )
Memories

Chapter Summary

Death and War investigate a body.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They don’t talk about it.

*War pushes off Death’s hood and rakes his fingers through Death’s hair. He presses himself against Death, with a shocking desperation. Death is surprised at just how sturdy he is, how strong and solid he feels against Death’s chest.*

War’s looking straight ahead.

*War doesn’t know what he’s doing. Neither does Death. Their hands never stop moving- cupping flesh, touching skin, mapping out the other’s body. They’re finding the curves for their palms to rest easy on, locating the most comfortable spots to touch, all without indication or direction. It is wild. But most of all, it feels like freedom.*

There’s a fog swirling around in the air- cold and wet.

*Freedom. Death has been suffocating under his own self-imposed yoke for so long he barely even knows what it feels like to be free. It’s good. Unspeakably good. He’s been so conservative and patient, bottled everything up until his emotions were volatile and ruinous, threatening to burn the whole world down. In the wake of all of this- in the wake of his fear and useless rage and agonizing hesitation that he’d held onto for centuries, for millennia- he wonders why in the name of all the gods he didn’t simply do this sooner.*

A sharp breeze blows. War shivers and Death is struck with the inexplicable urge to offer his coat, despite the fact that he’s shivering, too. War glances at him in concern, the first time he’s looked at Death after their entanglement, and Death wonders if he’s got the same urge.

*It’s not even the actual act that feels good. War’s lips are dry and thin, and the taste isn’t pleasant. Sometimes War’s hands move in the wrong ways, touching sensitive spots that make Death twitch or jolt unpleasantly. It’s him that makes it so good- the nearness of his body, the solidness of him, the fact that this is undeniably real. This is War, who’s hated him since their creation, kissing him, touching him, loving him-*

A corvid flutters overhead. It caws a warning. Death slows his horse- takes a deep inhalation in the air. He smells magic. War sniffs, wipes his nose. Immortal goes from a trot to an ambling walk.

*Death is scared if their lips break apart for even a second that War will push him away. That he’ll realize that what they’re doing flies in the face of their behavior for so many eras and reject Death wholesale- condemn Death for his behavior and proclaim this kiss to be a mistake.*

“Ravens,” War grumbles. “I’ve been seeing a lot of them lately.”
War’s fingers stray low from Death’s hair to his back, near his shoulder blades. His fingers dig into the leather of his coat, hooking desperately with his nails. There’s a carnal kind of hunger, a heat, building from War’s body. Death’s aware of him growling, rumbling like some kind of animal. It figures that a deity like War would be hostile, territorial, in love.

“A lot of them?” Death repeats, trying to keep his tone neutral.

War hesitates for a second, and Death’s heart feels as though it may shatter like glass - he stands teetering on the end of a whisker-thin precipice, and War could very easily breathe and topple him off. Instead of thinking, instead of forcing Death away, War licks into Death’s mouth, both curious and questing. Death permits this - it’s an odd, foreign sensation, but not wholly horrible. Tongues are for tasting, but theirs touch, with intimacy that feels almost shameful - like it should be locked away and hidden and enjoyed exclusively in private.

“Saw a few on my way to you.” War grunts. “And that scent of magic makes me think it’s not a coincidence.”

Death feels War’s thighs suddenly buckle - War’s mouth opens in a brief ‘o’ of surprise, his tongue peeking from between his teeth. He crumples, soundlessly, as his legs give out. Death manages to sling an arm around his waist, rescuing him from crashing to the rocky ground, and they’re placed in a facsimile of a tango’s dip. War, probably as a reactionary, instinctual motion, has thrown his arms around Death’s neck.


War looks up at him, his lips slightly parted, a little wet - his blue eyes are shining with something akin to wonder, an expression Death’s never seen on his face. He feels an abrupt, raw pain in his chest - like there’s a void that’s suddenly been cut where his heart used to be. He aches for War, a terrible kind of longing that threatens to consume him.

“I had a run-in with her already,” War says, tone dark. “I won’t be toyed around with, Death. I don’t care how you feel about her, if she gets in our way, I’ll smash right through her.”

His eyes are so gorgeous.

“She won’t,” Death assures.

War’s deep scars don’t make him look ugly. Not at all.

“She’d better not,” War threatens.

War shakily attempts to find his footing again - his thighs visibly quake with the effort. He straightens up, solidly planting one hand on Death’s shoulder to steady himself. Some of that wonder has dimmed now that the initial surprise has worn off - he looks rattled. Death hopes it wasn’t by the kiss.

“She won’t,” Death repeats. “And we don’t know it’s her. It could just be a coincidence.”

War doesn’t push away. He doesn’t punch or fight - there’s no immediate uncertainty or regret on his face. He stands there for a second, wobbly, tightly gripping Death’s shoulder.

“After the week I’ve been having,” War grunts, “I don’t believe in coincidence.”

“Help me back to my horse,” He says. He doesn’t sound angry - a little dazed, punch-drunk. No negative emotions, but no positive ones either. Death attempts to be optimistic. It wasn’t rejection. In
fact, there was enthusiastic reciprocation, up until the part where his legs gave way.

Death looks to the ravens circling overhead. Their number is suspect- a mass of them have built to the east, a swirling vortex of glistening black feathers.

“Where are we going?” Death asks, clambering onto Shadow Step’s back.

“I don’t like it,” War mutters, mostly to himself. The leather of his gloves creaks as he strangles his reins.

“Wherever we want to,” War says.

“I don’t, either,” Death agrees. “We could do the smart thing. Walk away from it.”

“What about Famine? And Conquest?”

“We could,” War nods. Death thinks that's probably the first time they've agreed on anything. “This is your call, though.”

War glances back at him. “They’ll catch up eventually.”

“My call?” Death echoes. “Why’s it mine?”


Death pauses- stares at him, maybe with a little more surprise than he intends. War stares right back, but can’t hold his gaze for long. He tips his chin low, eyes downcast in completely uncharacteristic submission. Death wonders if War had resolved to exchange power for pleasure- aggression for amour. But that can’t be right. War is, fundamentally, an argumentative, bastard creature. As soon as he sights something that will serve his own self-interest, he’ll snap back to aggression and bullying to get his way.

That’s just how it is.

Maybe he’s trying to be nice. Considerate. The thought flits through Death’s mind and is nearly laughable. War, clumsily trying to be sweet and thoughtful. It’s like imagining the Spirit of the West in frills and ribbons.

“Are we going to go investigate or not?” War asks, cutting off his musings. There’s a little heat to his tone, making his words flare with irritation. The sound of War being chagrined is familiar- more comforting than him attempting to be kind.

“Of course,” Death soothes. Lightly digs his heels into Shadow Step’s sides, gets a snort and has its walk accelerate to a trot. War speeds Immortal and they gradually get closer and closer to the circling birds.

The fog gets thicker on their way- the scent of magic gets thick and heady. Death transitions one hand off of his reins and summons a sturdy shotgun, keeping an eye and ear out for trouble. War glances at him, clearly thinking that’s a good idea, but can’t copy it because he requires two hands for his chosen weapon and can’t afford to take both hands off his horse.

When they reach the spot, there’s a great gathering of ravens. Hundreds whirl overhead and hop around a body on the ground, squalling at one another and fluffing up their feathers. When the Horsemen get too close, they box their wings and soar off with caustic warning cries.
War and Death dismount in tandem.

The body’s plain. A man, white, middle-aged, overweight. He has hundreds of tiny, postmortem cuts all over his flesh, doubtless the work of the ravens; mounds of white-and-black bird shit dot both his corpse and the ground. Death draws closer- rolls him off his side and onto his back, inspects him closely.

“Mortal,” He says. “Dead three, maybe four, days. No visible injuries.”

War sniffs the air. “Smells like magic. Sorcerer kill him or something?”

“Doubtful,” Death shakes his head. “Magic’s radiating everywhere, not just from his body. Those birds, too. They’re not natural.”

The ravens have settled on the nearby trees and telephone poles- beady black eyes seeming to stare right through the two Horsemen. Death won’t deny the spike of unease that spears through him, but he’s not afraid. Whatever magic permeates the air, it can’t kill a Horseman. Not permanently.

War summons his rifle, glaring out at the unblinking birds. Evidently they unnerve him even more than they do Death.

There’s a sudden pounding in the air, a rapid series of barks that shatters the stillness and quiet- a dozen ravens fall dead, blood and feathers gushing, and the rest of them scream, alarmed, and take to the air in panic. War’s accuracy is devastating- he has twenty-five bullets in his clip, and twenty-five corvids fall in a lifeless heap. He reloads and takes out another twenty-five- and by the time he slots in a third clip, they’ve fled War’s line of sight and half a hundred birds are dead. There’s a new stillness, more stifling than the last one, and War glares suspiciously at the sky.


Death doesn’t reply to that. He sets the corpse aside, takes a deep lungful of air as he strides over to his horse. It’s just magic. Old magic, that of a god or an immortal being, and unusually powerful; it’s got something to do with the ravens, with the fog, but that’s all he can get. It’s strange- usually a Horseman’s nose can solidly pinpoint the source of magic, but this time, it can’t. It’d be like the human equivalent of going from being able to pick out every hue in a rainbow to the greyest kind of colorblindness.

The two of them stand there for a second- Death with his hands poised on Shadow Step’s neck, about to mount, War standing as a watchful sentry, waiting for the ravens’ return.

“You scared them off,” Death assures him.

“No, I didn’t,” War antsily shifts his grip on his rifle. “I didn’t realize it at first, but they were bait. This man was bait. We just walked headfirst into a snare.”

Death’s guts suddenly twist into knots- he’s practically hit over the head with a sudden burst of powerful magic. His head snaps up and he’s about to call a warning, but War interrupts him first.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” The hot-tempered Horseman roars. “Blood of the gods, can’t we go five feet without tripping over another fucking deity?”

And, from the thick swirls of mist, three slim figures take shape.

“Sorry to bother,” The first says. Her voice is cold, sharp, cutting.
“It’s urgent,” The second insists, but her tone is dispassionate, like she’s obligated to be here and wouldn’t be otherwise.

“And you owe me one for killing all my ravens,” The third adds. She sounds like she’s pouting, but in a mocking, playful kind of way.

In the face of three major goddesses, Death’s only thought is that he should’ve kissed War in that wondrous, tender moment after he caught him.

Chapter End Notes

I can now solidly say yes, chapters will be coming out every Friday from now on.

Also, whoof, I wonder who those three are...
Reunion

Chapter Summary

Two Horsemen are asked for help. They refuse.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

War is exhausted.

He’s had a hell of a couple of days.

He’s interacted with multiple gods in a very short span, all of them either needy or unpleasant. The Angel of Death, the Spirit of the West, the Lady of the Shadows- he is getting tired of helping ungrateful deities when the outcome always ends up being far, far worse than the simple jaunt he intends. His legs are still tired from his trudge across the countryside, and his brain’s whirling with all kinds of confusing thoughts related to Death that he’d like to turtle up and avoid.

He buries the urge to smash his fist into the Lady of Shadows’ smiling face- instead grips the stock of his rifle hard enough to snap bone.

“What the hell do you want,” He says, aggression bristling in his tone.

“We w-” The tallest of the number begins.

“I don’t care what you want! Let’s go, Death, I’m done with this.” He sharply jerks his chin in the direction of the horses.

Death’s head jolts upward, surprised, as though he weren’t expecting War to address him. War doesn’t wait for him to move before he stomps up to Immortal and throws himself onto the stallion’s broad back. He spurs Immortal and trots away from the three goddesses without so much as another word.

Death hurries after him, suddenly lunging into motion. “War-”

“No. No, I am not doing this shit again,” War spits.

“I completely agree with you!” Death assures quickly. That calms War’s temper, a bit- he’d spitefully been not looking in the other Horseman’s direction, convinced that he would want to assist the Lady of the Shadows. Death always had a deep affection for her, and upon introspection, War had been just the slightest bit jealous of it. “But, what if it’s important?”

“Important how?” War demands. “My help can not be bought and sold, and I do not bargain in favors.”

“War, get your head out of your ass,” Death snaps. “Three gods wouldn’t congregate unless it was important.”

War opens his mouth to argue and Death cuts him off preemptively.
“Shut up, War,” He says. “Let’s see what they want, then we can turn up our noses and refuse to help.”

“I fucking hate you,” War snarls, low in his throat, but he stops his horse and dismounts. He briefly meets Death’s eyes on his way down- chocolate brown, regarding War with a guarded uncertainty.

War digs his fingers into Death’s back. Blood of the gods, this feels right, so right. He doesn’t even know he wanted this, that this was something a Horseman could want. His first thought is that Death is playing with him- pranking him somehow. But when their tongues tangle and they break apart to breathe and Death pants out a tiny little hah, the sound soft and wanting, the idea that this is a joke crumbles and blows to dust in the wind.

War quickly averts his gaze.

He turns back to the three goddesses. He recognizes the lot of them.

Pain. The Huntress. The Lady of the Shadows.

Pain and Death have a rocky relationship- Death dislikes her for something she did a long time ago. The brunt of his hatred has softened with time, but Death holds onto his grudge. War regards her with polite disdain- in all honesty, he probably hates her more than Death does.

The Huntress is respected by both of them. War can begrudgingly concede that she is a dangerous force to be reckoned with. She and Death are casual friends, but he doesn’t regard her as the same caliber as a Horseman and won’t make any active effort to seek her out.

The final is the Lady of the Shadows. She always makes War feel prickly. Maybe it’s her smug smile or her batting lashes that unnerve him, but Death likes her. Death likes her a lot, the same way he likes the Spirit of the West. He goes out of his way to enter her Domain every so often and make sure everything is okay.

Pain is the tallest of the bunch- slim and aged, to the point where she looks frail, like if she’s pushed over she won’t be able to get back up again. She’s robed in black, with heavy sleeves, the cuffs flared with a multitude of jet-black feathers. She has odd eyes- one blue, the other crimson- and short-cropped hair, red and wavy. Her face is thin and pointed, cheekbones hollow and nose long, expression severe. Pain’s hands are dyed a blackish purple- like she’d placed each individual finger in a bottle of ink and let it dry. Her nails are long, hooked and scraggly. They could do some real damage if slashed outward- War has experienced it firsthand, although the scars are gone and the memory is faded.

The Huntress is a little more youthful- she’s thin, but not with the same gauntness as Pain. She’s tall mostly due to her long, willowy legs. She has curves that War begrudgingly acknowledges are attractive, but won’t admit aloud.

Would Death get jealous if I did? He wonders, uneasily. He shakes off the thought.

The Huntress has her hair tied back in a ponytail- her eyes are bright yellow, sharp but sullen. She’s wearing a black coat and a red vest, high-heeled boots that only accentuate her tallness. Her rifle’s strapped to her back- peaceful intentions, it seems, or they would’ve been sniped as soon as they entered the clearing with the body in it. Her posture is defiant, legs wide and arms folded, not looking directly at either War or Death. She doesn’t want to be here, War knows that much, and it’s disturbing him because it probably means she’s the one that’s in trouble.

And the final one. The Lady of the Shadows. She’s got her trench coat and leggings from earlier- too
much garish blue and purple for a deity that’s supposed to be all *somber* and *shadowy*, in War’s opinion- and the usual hairstyle. She’s not smiling or winking or being a general nuisance, which concerns War even more than the intensity on Pain’s face or the reluctance in the Huntress’. Whatever they’re here about… War feels he has to concede to Death and admit it might be important.

Pain looks unimpressed with his attempt to immediately leave her and ignore all her problems. War shoots her a glare to let her know the unfriendly feeling is mutual.

“Ayy, Death, you’re looking good-” The Lady of the Shadows has strolled up to him, giving him a quick once-over. “Much more *relaxed* than usual, I think, you’re usually so wound up, you know?”

“Cute,” Death says, unimpressed. “What do you want?”

“Yeah, see, I just tagged along,” She says. “I’m not really involved in this, they just brought me along ’cos three goddesses looks more important than two.”

Pain throws *her* a furious look.

“Whoops,” The Lady of the Shadows shrugs, but there’s a quirk of her mouth that suggests it’s a passive-aggressive dig at Pain. War misjudged- evidently the Huntress isn’t the only deity who doesn’t want to be here. “Was I not supposed to say that? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Never *mind,*” Pain growls. “We need help. Specifically help from Horsemen.”

“What? What do you want *us* to do?” War demands. “And more *importantly,* what do *we* get in exchange?”

“We’re hunting a beast,” The Huntress says. “One far more ancient and dangerous than the gargoyle you were chasing.”

“Why can’t you kill it on your own?” Death asks, impatiently. “You’re a *hunting* deity, this is your *only* job.”

“And you’re Death,” Is the smooth reply from Pain. “If we want to make sure our prey actually dies, you’ll be vital to our cause. And a second Horseman won’t hurt.”

“No,” War says. “*No.*”

“Maybe if we told you what you were hunting you’d be more… Agreeable?” Pain suggests. “It’s a yeti. *The yeti*.”

“You want us to hunt a yeti?” War has an uncomfortable, creeping suspicion that he knows who ‘*the yeti*’ is and it *deeply* unsettles him. He presses his lips into a thin line. “No. *No.* Death, back me up. We shouldn’t get involved.”

“We’re not getting involved,” Death confirms. “This *isn’t* our job.”

Pain looks surprised- she had obviously been expecting the Horsemen to rise to the challenge presented. She opens her mouth, clearly attempting another round of persuasion:

“No,” War cuts her off. “Absolutely not. We’re going.”

“Wait,” The Huntress says urgently. “Wait, we can make an arrangement-”

“Not this time,” Death replies, coolly. He climbs on Shadow Step and War nearly swoons. Holy shit,
he’s agreeing with War, he’s denying their requests for help, they’re going to ride off by themselves and not get involved in a new tangle of another gods’ problems-

“Death,” The Lady of the Shadows calls. War’s heart/seizes. If she tries to persuade him, Death will say yes. He likes her, respects her opinion, adores her; moreso than War, even with the unspoken moment they had just shared.

“I think you should go check in with Famine and Conquest,” Is what she says, instead of advising him to participate in a hunt. War breathes a sigh of relief.

“Famine and Conquest?” Death echoes. “What’s wrong with them?”

“I get the feeling they’ll want to tell you themselves,” The Lady of the Shadows shakes her head, curls bouncing with the motion.

What does that mean? War and Death exchange a worried glance. What could’ve happened to the two of them since Death and War had been gone? It hadn’t even been three sun-ups since they’d left Famine and Conquest’s side; how big of a disaster could occur in only three days?

They spur their horses. The sound of the three goddesses starting to argue with one another- mostly objecting to the Lady of the Shadow’s incredibly soft stance when it came to persuading the Horsemen- becomes the ambiance until they ride far enough for it to be out of earshot.

War glances to Death.

“Thanks.”

“For what?” Death doesn’t look at him.

“You had my back. You- Didn’t try to go hunting with them.”

Death snorts. “Nobody wanted to be there. Pain didn’t want to ask us for help, the Huntress had to swallow her pride, the Lady of the Shadows had something else to be doing, and the two of us have enough on our plate as it is.”

There’s a long silence that stretches between them. War stares at Death- at his strong jaw, at the slant of his nose, at his neutral expression, at the way the sunlight looks on his dark skin.

He looks away. His heart has started pounding, and it scares him.

He has no idea what he’s feeling. It can’t be love. Horsemen can’t love. Maybe infatuation? Respect? Gratitude? But then why does the sight of Death excite him so much? Had it always excited him like this, and he never noticed? Or denied it? Or maybe it was the unbridled emotion charging their kiss.

He’s shied away from that word, even in his head. Kiss. They kissed. And not a quick peck, either. He was clutching at Death like he was the only thing keeping War from the void- and Death was doing the same. Both of them were leading and following at the same time- both of them were fluttering their hands over the other’s skin, uncertain and shy, and their lips were pressed together, warm and weird and-

War’s realized that he’s breathing high and fast- he clears his throat, shakes his head, tries to calm his breathing and his heart.

“Death,” He says, tone soft and careful- “We should talk about… That.”
“The goddesses? I thought we agreed we’re not helping them.” Death sounds wary.


Death’s mouth falls slightly open and his eyes grow round- he blinks, then straightens up.

“The kiss?” Death’s voice is a tentative whisper.

“Yes,” War says. His voice isn’t much louder- despite the fact that there’s no one around for miles and miles, he feels like he should keep his volume down. “What exactly… We feel. For one another.”

Death hisses a soft oath under his breath, in a tongue long forgotten to time. He looks to War and nods, shy, demure-

“MY FRIENDS!” Conquest’s voice tears clear across the countryside. War and Death startle, instinctively halting their horses.

Balderich and her enthusiastic rider gallop hard up to the two Horsemen, Shrike and Famine in tow.

“We have so much catching up to do!” Conquest bellows, excitedly.

War and Death exchange a glance.

Conquest has no idea.

Chapter End Notes

Buncha stuff in the author's notes:

1.) Tomorrow ( at the time of posting this, but it would otherwise be the tenth of February ) is Out in the Big Wide Wood's first anniversary! If you've been considering a re-read, now's the time.

2.) The chapter next week likely won't be going up as the 14th is my birthday, so I probably won't be working on anything. :^) Rest assured, though, the next chapter WILL be on-schedule and we'll get back to the Fareeha-Angel of Death plotline! ... Or we won't. We'll see.

3.) The last chapter didn't garner as many views or comments as the one before it- so I'm wondering if Sunday night would be a better update time than Friday mornings. I'd appreciate it if you guys took this- http://www.strawpoll.me/15036210 or leave a comment about what update time you guys'd prefer!

4.) Thank you guys for reading! We're almost at 6000 views which is a WHOLE SHIT TON!!! i can't believe i've had some of you as eager fans for almost a year now!!

5.) i would very much appreciate comments! they're the lifeblood of an author!
On the Road

Chapter Summary

The four of them ride east.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I knew it,” Death hisses, softly. “I knew the Angel would do this.”

“I didn’t think she would do it so blatantly-” Famine begins. “I- I wanted to believe that she had the purest of intentions.”

“I still hope she does,” Conquest rumbles, uneasily.

“She doesn’t. She’s going to kill your daughter, Famine.” When he receives a pointed glare from Conquest, he refuses to yield. “Stop looking at me like that. It’s true, and you know it. She kills men and women and steals them for a service. And if she dies again- by the Angel’s hand or anyone else’s- she’ll resurrect her again and farm favors off of Fareeha until whatever goal she has is complete. Then she’ll toss Fareeha by the wayside and do God knows what to the rest of the world.”

“All of this is conjecture based on the assumption she’s not immortal,” War breaks in. “If she is, the Angel of Death can’t possibly use her. Fareeha will be worthless for whatever scheme she has in mind, and none of that will happen.”

“Are you willing to take that chance?” Death presses, harshly, with a quick glance thrown at Famine.

“I’m just saying we don’t know,” War murmurs, defensively.

“It doesn’t matter!” Famine snaps in reply. “My daughter was kidnapped by a madwoman with a penchant for manipulation and necromancy-”

She wholeheartedly expects War to keep arguing. His aggression and stubborn pride dictates that he cannot back down from an argument, and he won’t stop until he has the final say. That’s just how the stubborn bastard is.

“I didn’t say-”

Instead of doing what she expects, Death interrupts War after three words.

“Give it a rest, War.”

Famine anticipates his argument.

“Fine,” War concedes, uncharacteristically… Agreeable. “Thinking back, it doesn’t matter if she’s immortal or not. We should try to rescue Fareeha regardless. We don’t know what kind of destruction a Horseman’s child could wreak, and now that I’m thinking of it, the Angel of Death doesn’t even need to strong-arm Fareeha to do her bidding. Fareeha loves her. She’ll do what the Angel says.”
Famine bristles, indignantly. “Fareeha does not love her. She was exploited, twisted, by the Angel. It’s not love.”

“Let’s not pretend any of us have a grasp on what love is,” Death interrupts. “I won’t listen to speculative talk on what’s love and what’s manipulation when we don’t even have a solid understanding.”

The outburst is not wholly unexpected- but it has a wicked, cutting edge that borders on tremulous emotion. Famine arches an eyebrow as War glances down at his lap and unthinkingly squeezes his reins.

Famine’s not so distracted by Fareeha’s disappearance that she doesn’t notice peculiarities in their behavior. They’re not arguing, for one, not viciously. War hasn’t said anything as aggressive and brashly as he usually would, and Death seems less… subdued than usual.

“I believe that we should head to Switzerland at once,” Conquest cuts in, lifting his chin. “We should not abide any longer. We need to go and put a stop to this! The sooner the better!”

That’s fine by the rest of them. For once, nobody wants to just sit there and argue.

There’s no talk, the whole way. They gallop across a mostly flat plain through the Midwest- War leading the pack with Immortal, Death and Famine at each others side, and Conquest in the back.

Famine’s mind conjures up all kinds of horrible things on the way. Fareeha is young, and innocent, and the Angel of Death is tens of thousands of years old. She could have any number of horrible schemes in mind.

The Angel of Death orchestrated Pain’s fall from grace- carefully needled her in all the wrong places until she lashed out at the Horsemen and other deities, pushed at Pain until she unleashed a wave of terrible suffering that rocked the whole planet. After all the initial tempers cooled off, people will still hurt. War bore scars, Conquest and Famine had suffered, and Death had been sent into a vicious frenzy the likes of which Famine wouldn’t see again until Death and War chased the Spirit of the West’s monster. Once all was done, Pain was demonized and made an enemy out of dozens of gods, and was cast into shadow and obscurity. And all the while, the Angel of Death was pulling the strings and snickering as she replaced Pain in the pantheon.

Famine has concrete evidence for the Angel of Death irrevocably harming Pain; she doesn’t have it for the Lady of the Shadows or the Lady of the Hunt or the demigod and former hero Doomfist- but she suspects that she was responsible for their sour reputations, as well.

A wave of magic washes over them, faintly, as they ride through a forested region. It’s dense with pine trees and thick, weedy grass- picturesque with northern beauty and quiet, untouched by humankind. There’s faint, chilly mist, which is quickly dispelled when the sun inches from dawn to morning. Warm sunshine casts brightly in this region- Famine feels a faint buzz of restfulness, clarity, and the other Horsemen blink, energized just from their surroundings.

The horses slow as their riders spy a crack in the earth, like a lightning bolt forking through the ground.

It’s a canyon. A massive canyon. Its length stretches as far as the eye can see, to the left and right- and no matter how fast their horses are, the gargantuan split in the earth is a hundred feet wide and nearly that deep. A fall like that will kill a horse, and a Horseman.

They stop, ten feet from the lip.
“Good morning!”

The sound has all four Horsemen’s heads snapping up.

It comes from a faun, carefully picking his way towards them, every step of his hoof measured and delicate. He looks young—pretty in an average kind of way. His furry haunches are thin, pale and white, his eyes a fragile, faded pink.

“Are you lost?” The faun asks, politely.

“No,” Death says, before anyone else can say anything.

“Do you know where you are?”

Before Death can say anything, Famine interjects. “No, we don’t.”

“You're in my master's Domain.” The faun provides, helpfully. “You're on track to cross the Appalachian mountains. The trees obscure them, but they’re dead ahead.”

“Your master’s Domain? Who’s your master?” War ventures, suspiciously.

“He’s a minor god of intelligence- there are dozens like him. A name would be lost on you.” He straightens his stance. “He saw you were coming and told me to gift you a few things while you were on your way.”

The four exchange glances. Refusal of a gift— from any caliber of god— is rude.

“Alright,” Famine ventures. “What is it?”

“Knowledge,” he replies. “He told me to tell you that the events that are about to unfold won’t go the way you think they will- and that none of you should take it personally. Humiliation is only humiliating if you make it.” He clasps his hands together, glancing at the four of them with a carefully neutral, but expectant, expression.

“Your master couldn’t be less cryptic?” War complains.

“That was all he had,” the faun says, ruefully. “He’s no Shambali monk. Can I help you in another way?”

“If you can tell us the shortest way around this canyon, that’d be appreciated,” Famine says, cautiously.

“Around?” The faun blinks. “I think we can arrange for you to go over.”

“Horsemen are powerful, but our horses can’t fly,” Death says. “Unless there’s a bridge-”

The earth suddenly quivers and trembles; the horses rear and whinny, startled. Shrike’s ears pin back, and she skittishly rocks back and forth.

All of it happens very quickly- the massive maw of the canyon snaps closed, like the jagged fangs of some beast or the steel jaws of a bear trap. Millions of tons of earth surge together, clashing with a discordant, impossibly loud slam that shakes the very world.

The quiet after the deafening crack of stone on stone feels almost as deafening as the sound itself. Every Horseman is shaken, clinging to their horse.
The power to shape and manipulate the earth— to move rock on that scale— belongs solely to a deity in their Domain, or a God, with a capital G.

“It’s safe,” The faun assures. “You can go.”

Famine is the first to shake herself out of the stunned reverie. Horsemen are powerful, but occasionally she forgets that gods in their Domains reign supreme.

*Which does not bode well for Fareeha’s rescue from the Angel of Death.*

The sobering thought is really what snaps her out of it. She spurs her horse, trotting forward. The canyon’s two edges meet almost evenly— leaving an inch of space between the two sides that the horses can easily move over.

Conquest is the next to shake out of his surprise. He’s followed by War and Death, who get over it at roughly the same time.

As soon as they cross to the other side, the canyon’s edges slowly peel apart, the eastern side taking the Horsemen with them. In mere moments, the hundred foot gap in the earth has been reformed—with the Horsemen solidly on the opposite end.

The faun remains on the western side— too far apart to comfortably speak with without yelling. The faun waves to the Horsemen, warmly, and carefully drops onto his rump, inching forward to allow his hooves to dangle over the canyon’s rim.

Famine shudders. “He’s no servant.”

“He’s the lord of this Domain,” War confirms, warily. “Anyone know his name?”

He looks to Conquest, then Death, then Famine. All of them shake their heads.

“What do you think he meant by ‘humiliation is only humiliating if you make it’?” Death sounds guarded.

No one is willing to venture a guess.

“I’m more concerned by the ‘this won’t go the way you think it will’,” Famine says. “I think we’re going to save my daughter.”

“Does that mean we are not?” Conquest’s voice implies a frown.

“Maybe he’s betting on our doubts,” War ventures. “He thinks that we think, deep down, we can’t save her. And he’s telling us we will.”

“We don’t know,” Death says. “We just don’t. I think we should carry on.”

He sounds disturbed.

“I think we should go back,” War grunts. “Press him for information. If he knows what’s going to happen, we should try to learn as much as we can. He doesn’t look tough. One broken bone and he’ll talk—”

“No!” Conquest sounds horrified. “He helped us! My lady, please dissuade him—”

Famine shakes her head, slightly. “I agree with him.”
Conquest turns to Death, expression pleading.

“He knows more than he’s letting on,” Death says, dispassionately. “If hurting him will make him talk, we should.”

“No,” Conquest punches his fist into his open palm, violently shaking his head. “We are not torturers! That god helped us, and we should consider ourselves grateful he did! And I fear no one-you all know this best of all- but making unnecessary enemies is not the way the Horsemen should act. I say we continue onward- he said himself he can’t provide any more help.”

There’s a stilted silence.

“We’re wasting time,” Famine says, tersely. “Let’s decide. Do we go back for the god or not?”

“No!” Conquest objects.

Evidently Conquest’s speech had some impact on Death- he shakes his head. “No.”

“Yes,” War snaps. “I’m not walking into any more traps if I can help it.”

Conquest throws Famine an entreatying look- mismatched blue and white eyes rounded, pleading. He knows just how to apply the right pressure, just the way to look like a kicked puppy despite being the least pathetic creature Famine has ever met.

His beseeching isn’t lost on her. She can’t say no to that face.

“We shouldn’t bite the hand that feeds us,” Conquest tries. “If we get a reputation for harming those who help us, suddenly we will find ourselves without help.”

“You’re right,” Famine dips her head in acknowledgement. “Let’s count ourselves lucky for the information we did get, and not push it. We still have mountains and an entire ocean to cross.”

War grumbles, bitterly, but reluctantly accepts the decision.

Famine watches Death, out of the corner of her eye; his hand indecisively lifts up as if to touch the aggressive Horseman’s shoulder- but at the last second, returns to his reins.

The Horsemen turn to the eastern horizon, where the Appalachian mountains await them.

I’m coming for you, habibi, Famine thinks to herself. And I swear there is nothing that can stop me from keeping you safe.

Chapter End Notes

Wonder what that means.
The Horsemen encounter a problem outside of the Angel of Death's domain.

The sea is a welcome sight after the endless traipsing through the forests of the eastern United States. It means it won’t be much longer until their rescue mission can begin.

Conquest is concerned, despite how close they are. The encounter will be hard-fought—no one battles as furiously as a young lover, and Fareeha will most likely not be on Lady Famine’s side.

He shudders to think what will happen if four Horsemen are pitted against a half-Horseman and a god in her own Domain. The Horsemen are some of the most formidable foes on Earth, but the Angel of Death has undoubtedly prepared for their arrival, and Conquest has an unpleasant feeling in his gut that not every Horseman will survive this battle.

He hopes it isn’t Famine. The last time she died was horrible for him—he had to tend carefully to her, until her breath rekindled in her lungs, her heart stuttered to life. Seeing her still body had been hard—but not as hard as the waiting. It was agonizing not knowing when she would awaken again, and although he knew she would, he had feared that she would be cold and lifeless permanently.

Every Horseman is unusually quiet—War’s face is tensed, Death’s expression is unreadable, Famine’s brows are creased and her face is wrinkled in angry worry. Undoubtedly, all of them are thinking about the battle ahead—wondering if they will lose their lives and attempting to form strategy.

Conquest hardly remembers the appearance or location of the Angel of Death’s Domain, which makes it difficult to strategize. The last time he visited that particular area of Switzerland, Tiberius was still conquering Germania, and Conquest was only there for a brief moment to pull Death away from the slaughter. He unclearly recalls the Domain as a splendid palace, marble and stone, full of angelic beings with Nordic features. He also remembers the blood coating the marble and the contorted bodies of those who Death had slaughtered. Anything past that is jagged, fuzzy, lost to time and adrenaline.

It doesn’t matter what it had formerly looked like, either. Domains change. When the Spirit of the West first came into the world, his ranch was small, lacking any modern equipment or machinery. When Mother Russia was first born, her home was hardly more than an icy cave, but it’s now a resplendent recreation of the Kremlin, colorful architecture and all. It’s fair to assume that the Angel of Death’s Domain has evolved from its Greecan origins into something different, more modern—the layout and design are likely entirely different.

“Does anyone know how precisely to get there?” Conquest breaks the silence that’d made captives of his companions, only broken by the rushing surf or the splashes as their horses’ hooves galloped over the waves. “We know Switzerland, but that is not good enough to guide us there entirely.”

“I know where,” Death growls, hatefully. He does not elect to elaborate on how. Conquest does not
press the issue. Maybe Death’s memory of the incident two thousand years ago is clearer.

The sun eventually drags across the horizon, drowning itself in the sea. Night reigns, the moon glowing proud and bright, the stars twinkling. It doesn’t escape Conquest’s notice that War and Death have subtly moved their horses closer to one another, that they’re both gazing at the canvas of stars overhead. It’s a private moment, Conquest believes- something that should not be intruded on. They aren’t speaking with one another- nor touching one another, nor acknowledging the other’s existence- but it feels personal, nevertheless. Conquest glances away, back to Famine.

Her face is still tight, worried.

“Are you concerned about Fareeha’s fate?” Conquest asks, gently.

“You aren’t?” She bites back. Her anger and fear is understandable. Her daughter’s in peril.

“I am,” He says. “But I am worried about you, too. I must ask that you relax-”

“I won’t relax until she’s safe,” She insists.

Conquest can already tell that she won’t be swayed- if he cannot convince her otherwise, he should support her. He places a giant hand on her shoulder, giving her slight frame a comforting squeeze. She ducks her head, sighs.

They arrive on the European shore around dawn.

Death and War have refocused- sometime around the appearance of the sun, they turned their attention back to the land ahead and away from the sky. Their expressions- softened by the moonlight- have strengthened once again, morphing into stony, hostile masks.

It’s colder in Europe than it is in the United States. They pass through snowy hamlets and occasionally larger towns, full of friendly elderly people with corner-stores, bundled up against the chill. Conquest distinctly recalls the delighted squall of an infant from her stroller, wide eyes watching the Horsemen thunder past on the sidewalk.

After they draw closer to Switzerland, Death takes the lead from War. He follows the Angel of Death’s scent like a hateful bloodhound, and War pitches in with an occasional grumble once they get close. Conquest catches her smell, and soon enough, all four of them are perfect trackers.

Her Domain is in the mountains- a faint miasma of magic washes over them when they get close. Death, in particular, seems bothered by it. He growls- possibly unaware he’s even doing it- and War throws Death a concerned look, partially lifting his hand off the reins. Conquest can see his lips move unthinkingly, “are you alright”, but no sound comes from his mouth.

War blinks, clears his throat, and looks down at his hands.

“There,” Famine says. “That’s the entrance.”

It looks like a cave. A jagged hole bored in a grey, sloping rock face- but the tingling smell of magic gets thicker, more syrupy, here. Conquest remembers this place. Glancing back from the cave face, to the valley below- he remembers seeing the grass here bathed in moonlight, thousands of years ago. Remembers the stench of blood and the disturbed silence, Death’s conviction that what he had done was right.

When they try to enter, the hole closes. The walls snap shut, and War flinches back, nearly having lost a hand to powerful stone jaws.
“How do we get in?” War asks, tone guarded. “We can’t just knock a mountain down in order to get to her.”

“Tch! What do we have here?”

The voice is unfamiliar, and comes from above- two women are perched on a ledge, overlooking the cave’s entrance.

They both strongly resemble the Angel of Death, with some minor differences. The two women have horns, jet-black and curled upward- both have spiked tails, with a sharp spade at the end. They have cloven hooves, wicked and dangerous-looking. They have fanged mouths, wings made of light- the only difference between the two is their colors. One is wearing white, the other red- one has pink hair, the other black. Both bear long staffs.

“They look like a couple of pesky Horsemen!” The black-haired growls. “What do you say we put them out to pasture?”

War snarls, immediately on the offensive. “Try me, demon-”

“Let’s kill them, Imp!” The black-haired crows, delightedly. She tightens her grip on her staff and leaps off of the edge, landing, solidly, in front of Conquest and the other Horsemen.

The pink-haired- Imp- gently lowers herself to the ground, eyes narrowed. There’s a smile to her greyed lips- menacing, succeeding in unnerving Conquest completely.

“I have a better idea, Devil,” She says. “Let’s have some fun.”

“Fun?” Devil repeats, wrinkling her perfect nose. “What kind of fun?”

Imp’s grin sharpens. She leans in, brushing hair away from Devil’s ear- whispers something soft, too soft, for Conquest to hear. Devil’s skeptical expression slowly lightens, until it’s a fiendish, sadistic grin. Conquest does not like that expression, not at all. He reaches for his hammer, but stops when the two guardians of the Angel of Death’s realm break apart.

Devil slowly saunters up to an outcropping of stone- lays down, sprawling languidly, holding her head up on her palm. Her tail flicks, then comes to comfortably curl on the rock face.

Her red eyes glow in delight.

“Dance,” She says.

“Excuse me?” Death snaps.

“You want to pass into the Angel of Death’s Domain?” The white curve of Devil’s fangs is a stark contrast to her dark lips. “I want you to dance.”

War takes the offensive almost immediately, outrage shining in his blue eyes. “Excuse me? We are not toys for you to play with!”

Imp’s still smiling, nevertheless. “You can’t get through without us. If you want to get in, you’ll dance.”

“Why should we trust you? You work for the Angel of Death. You wouldn’t let us in so we could kill your ruler, even if we ‘danced’ for you.” Death counters. “Why don’t we just kill you, here and now, and bypass the greeting party?”
“Believe it or not, I don’t care what happens to the Angel, or her lover,” Imp says. “It’s boring out here. You’re the best entertainment I’ve had in centuries.”

“You have a lot of nerve-” War thrusts himself forward aggressively, jabbing his finger in Imp’s face. Famine grabs his wrist, tightly, and his gaze snaps to meet her’s.

“War. Stop. We aren’t getting in there without those guards. We can’t hurt them.”

He opens his mouth, anger burning in his eyes. She cuts him off. “Your PRIDE isn’t worth LOSING my DAUGHTER! Think of other people for once, War!”

There’s an immediate silence. Conquest thinks that War will strike her. There’s an unholy fury radiating off of him, and his expression is… Terrifying, to say the least.

He slowly lowers his arm, and his gaze.

“I don’t know how to dance.”

Conquest immediately squeals, “I do!”

In hindsight, Conquest’s actions may not be wholly dignified, nor suiting a Horseman’s serious, legendary status. He grabs War’s unoccupied arm, pulls him, and holds him nearly flush. War hisses, furiously, and attempts to escape, but Conquest doesn’t allow him to.

“I can teach you!” Conquest exults. The demonic guardians titter, amusedly, tails swishing and wings aflutter. “Here, War, it’s very simple-”

Conquest clasps their hands together, guides War’s other hand to rest on the meat of his shoulder, and sets his hand on War’s flank.

War immediately flinches, an angry scowl contorting his face. Death partially lunges forward, then freezes and slowly settles back, disguising the motion by crossing his arms.

The devils shriek in laughter, kicking their legs like bratty children. War’s face blooms red in mortification- he tries, ardently, to break from Conquest’s grasp. War is strong, though not as strong as Conquest- Conquest can keep ahold of him, just barely.

“Conquest,” War spits, through gritted teeth, “Let go.”

“Cool your head, my friend,” Conquest encourages. “Just relax. Listen to me closely. We will waltz, the waltz is very easy.”

War digs his nails into Conquest’s shoulder pauldron. He stares, rigidly, at Conquest’s chestplate while Conquest carefully guides him through a few boxes. Old dog War may be, but he is capable of learning- War’s movements become more knowledgeable, though he remains awkward. Conquest supposes his ungainliness is understandable- War has been thrust out of his element and been given nary a point in the right direction.

Once they’ve mastered the box, Conquest tries to explain the concept of being spun. War fluffs up angrily and refuses.

“I am not a ballerina! I am a warrior!”

Conquest decides not to push his luck.

He lets go of War, who stumbles away like he’s just been released from torture. Conquest turns to
the two demons while War limps off to attend to his battered ego.

“We have danced for you! Is that enough?” Conquest calls.

“Almost, almost!” Devil hoots, amused. “But those two haven’t danced!”

She stabs her finger at Death and Famine. If it weren’t for their dire straits, Conquest might’ve thought Death’s reaction to be comical. He pales, his head slightly tilting left and right, staring at the two guardians as if to ask if they’re being genuine.

“Me?” Death asks, sounding baffled.

“Yes!” She shrieks. “You and her. Get together.”

Conquest notices that there’s a lot less arguing and posturing from Death than from War. Possibly it’s because War is overly concerned about his masculinity, which he feels is threatened by dancing in the shorter role- Or it’s because Death was already anticipating dancing, and has had more time to come to terms with it.

Death and Famine are awkward initially- Famine is rusty, and Death, like War, had never waltzed. He’s a fast learner, especially without War’s bluster, and they complete a box and do a spin in no time.

Death throws a flat glare at the two guardians after it's over, brushing himself off.

“Are we done?” He asks, waspishly.

“No!” Devil and Imp chime together. “You and the angry Horseman. Dance together.”

War and Death glance at one another, hold the stare for a split second, and immediately look away.

“We did what you wanted!” War spits, accusing stare flying from the ground to the two devils. “We danced! Open the damned gateway!”

Imp stalks up to him, her spiny tail swinging with the motion. There is something unpleasant, cruel, glittering in her eyes, and her voice is saccharine to the point of viciousness. “The two of you dance- and I want to see a spin- and we will let you in.”

“No!” War bursts out, furiously.

“I’m not doing it,” Death glances between the other Horsemen, uncertain how they’ll take his decision but still determined.

“Death, War, I swear on all the gods, I’ll kill you both MYSELF!” Famine blusters, furiously. “Conquest, help me talk some sense into them!”

“This is the only way to get to Famine’s daughter,” Conquest hunches down a little bit. “Please just do it.”

They glance at one another, expressions uncertain and vaguely horrified.

“I know you hate one another,” Famine tries, “But we need to do this. Please. Fareeha could be getting hurt in there. She could die.”

Death is the first to approach- not looking War in the face.
“Who leads?” He says, under his breath.

“Me.” War says.

“You don’t know how to lead,” Death’s voice gets slightly louder. “You were following with Conquest. I’ll lead.”

“I can learn,” War snaps hotly in reply.

“I just want to get this over with, stop being stubborn and just let me l-”

“Shut up!” War clenches his fists. Conquest can tell his audience isn’t helping- the giggling of the devils is starting to agitate Conquest, he can only imagine how War feels. “I’m taller, I should lead.”

“You are not taller,” Death objects.

“Yes, I am! Conquest, Famine, who’s taller?” War glances back at them, eyes rounded with indignation.

“You’re the same height!” Famine shouts. “Just let Death lead! Blood of the gods, War, your stubbornness is going to kill my daughter!”

War’s face, tinged pink, flushes a deeper red. He places a hand on Death’s shoulder- twines their fingers. He looks so enormously uncomfortable that Conquest almost feels sorry for him.

When Death touches his waist, he cringes away, scowls.

War pulls his hand from Death’s and backs off- Surprise flickers across Death’s face, for a brief moment, then something more sullen.

“I can’t do this,” War says through gritted teeth. “I can’t. Famine, I’m sor-”

“No!” Famine snaps. “You do not get to leave my daughter to die and expect an apology to cover it!”

She shoves him back towards Death, and the two collide- Death catches him, instinctively, and War sputters like a half-drowned cat, trying to regain his footing. Death steadies him, and they exchange a glance.

They look away quickly.

“Fine,” War mutters, fiercely. He takes a step back, twines his fingers with Death’s. He flinches when Death puts his hand on his flank, but this time doesn’t jerk away.

Death leads them in a short box- War biting his tongue the whole time- and attempts to spin the aggressive Horseman. War’s spin is clumsy and slow, but he manages.

“There,” War spits, immediately after their dance is done. He and Death hastily break apart, both of them pretending that the other doesn’t exist. “We did what you wanted.”

“And it was excellent!” Imp crows, delightedly. “Oh, delicious, delicious, don’t you think so?”

“Oh, oh, I believe it’s perfect.” Devil agrees. “It meets our deal.”

Imp and Devil move to the side- and the gateway into the cave slowly grinds open, and they gesture with their staffs.
“In you go,” They say together. “But don’t blame us if you don’t like what you find in there.”

Famine grabs her gun. Conquest takes his hammer off of his back. War conjures his rifle. Death snatches his shotguns from thin air. The latter two seem much more at ease with weaponry in their hand- War’s got a bare-toothed snarl on his face, Death’s looking eager and anticipatory.

Famine leads them in.

Chapter End Notes

i appreciate comments- let me know what you think :) 

you can follow me at https://legendary-bard.tumblr.com if you want

i post storyboards/snippets/inside info for this fic and others sometimes, and at the moment im running a contest-y kind of thing for the next in my "ten words random generator" prompts

right here
Chapter Summary

The Horsemen fight the Angel of Death.
It goes poorly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They enter on foot.

War squints around in the dark, fingers fidgeting on the fore-end of his rifle. The four of them have fanned out- Death and War in the front, Famine behind and between them, Conquest bringing up the rear. It’s dark in here- the only light slants in from the cave entrance, partially blocked by Conquest’s body and weakening the deeper they go.

The cave gets darker the further they venture. It’s a human instinct to be scared of the dark- to not know what dangers lurk within and be frightened. While a Horseman would like to consider himself beyond such fears, War’s still wary.

After the bitter humiliation he’d just suffered, he’s jumpy. Sensitive to movement and action, body still blistering with mortification.

_He hates it._

He hates it so much. Hates the way his hands still tremble and his face is still hot, how he can still hear the shrieking laughter of the two _creatures_, tittering in just the wrong way.

To take his mind off it, he whispers into to his other Horsemen. The stifling quiet of the darkness, broken only by their slow footsteps, makes him unwilling to raise his voice louder. “Everyone stay on alert. I don’t trust this place.”

“It’s not how I remember it in the slightest,” Conquest murmurs in reply, ducking to avoid a stalactite.

“The Angel of Death doesn’t strike me as the dingy cave type,” Death mutters. He’s glancing around, leery, braced for an attack. He’s clutching his shotguns like a lifeline- and War realizes he, too, is clutching his rifle like letting go will kill him. Even knowing this, though, he doesn’t loosen his grip.

“It’s a trap,” War says, with ample conviction. “Obviously. That’s to be expected.”

“Shh,” Famine holds up two fingers- pushes past Death and War to take the lead. “I’m going to call to her. Fareeha! Fareeha!”

Her voice echoes back- _Fareeha, Fareeha_?

There’s no reply, and Famine whispers a pained “ _Damn._”
“Wait a second,” Death says, abruptly. War can’t see him anymore—just a vague shape outlined against other vague shapes—but his voice implies a furrowed brow. The last of the light has faded with their distance. “That echoed.”

“So?” War asks, impatiently.

“I think there’s a chamber up ahead,” Death says. “Stay behind me.”

“Stay behind you?” War snaps. “Why?”

“I can do the most damage at close range. Get back.”

War feels an indignant rage burn through him—he growls, threateningly, at Death, who growls back in reply. For a second, he debates a physical altercation—but if they start infighting, the Angel of Death will never get killed and Famine’s daughter will be lost.

He backs down, as painful as it is.

Death goes first, then Famine, then War, then Conquest. The stifling, tight passageway blossoms open into a distinct room, different from the tunnel they’ve been wandering through. War can feel cold air flowing all around them, coming from some unknown source. He takes a deep sniff—smells like minerals and wet dirt.

They’re blind in here, though. It’s even darker than it was before.

“Can anyone see?” War asks.

There’s a chorus of no’s, and before he has any more time to process, there’s a sudden stunning light right in front of him, brighter than the sun. War cries out in surprise, on instinct—shielding his eyes with his forearm even though he needs both hands on his rifle.

“How dare you!”

The Angel of Death stands before them, in a blaze of golden light whose brightness has dimmed just enough for her to be visible. Her bare feet dangle just above the ground, her golden wings haloing her figure with streaks of divine light. She hovers there, righteous and angelic, fury smoldering in her bright blue eyes. One hand is outstretched to them—the other holds a staff, the same as her demonic servants outside. War blinks the brightness away and swings his rifle up—Death growls, excitedly, and Famine thrusts her jaw forward, the anger in her stiffened posture matching the rage on the Angel of Death’s face. Conquest makes a deep, disturbed rumbling in the back of his throat.

“You break into my Domain, with the intention of stealing my lover—”

The Angel of Death’s wings shimmer with an inferno of color, edges fidgeting as if trying to contain her wrath. She seems to grow larger, more imposing—she drifts further off the ground, but the Horsemen appear undeterred.

“With hostility in your minds, with aggression unchecked—”

“You kidnapped my daughter!” Famine shouts.

“She came willingly.” The Angel of Death’s voice is cool.

“She is a child,” Famine hisses, furiously. “My child!”

“She’s hundreds of years old! She can make her own decisions!”
“She is *naive*. Sheltered. She doesn’t *know*-”

“And whose fault is that?” The Angel of Death asks. A vicious expression overtake her face. “Who coddled her and protected her and *sheltered* her from the world? Who kept her from me with the intention of keeping her *safe*, but only nurtured such deep-seated resentment that she’d rather be with me than you?”

Famine stands there, her single eye wide with shock. She has no reply.

“Turn around and leave.” The Angel of Death says. Her tone drops to something almost gentle.

“Not without my daughter,” Famine insists. Takes a step forward, towards the Angel, her expression hardening.

“I gave you a chance,” The Angel of Death says, softly. “History should remember that.”

And all hell breaks loose.

Famine shoots. The Angel of Death slams her staff down on the ground and the whole cavern shakes- War aims for the Angel of Death’s head, Death tries to lunge forward with his shotguns outstretched, and Conquest shouts “*get behind me*”- It all happens so quickly that War can’t process every event at the same time.

A jagged slat of cavern wall surges up from the ground- War rolls to avoid it and it slams into the ceiling, effectively sealing him away in another part of the cave. No light leaks in- it’s pitch black, and the shift from light to dark is disorienting, particularly considering how quickly it happened.

He can hear fighting on the other side. Cries of pain. He slams his fists against the wall, bellowing indiscriminate threats and curses.

Being trapped is terrible, but the worst thing is not knowing what the hell is happening.

It takes what feels like an eternity and no time at all, but eventually, the battle cries get snuffed, the bullets stop firing, and there’s nothing but a muffled silence.

War scrapes his fingers against the stony surface, hissing to himself- he punches and pounds and fights, but all it really does is hurt his knuckles without even so much as chipping the rock. After an indeterminate amount of time, exhaustion starts to set in- sore shoulders and biceps, throbbing hands that pulse with pain to the tempo of his heartbeat.

War slaps his palm against the stone one last time, pants, weakly, and sinks to the ground. He sits loosely, legs folded, and tries to just breathe for a moment.

He doesn’t know if the other Horsemen are dead and that *scares* him. He doesn’t know what the Angel of Death *did* to them, or what she *could* do to them.

He also doesn’t know if he’s ever going to get out of here. *That* hits him, abruptly- that he could be trapped in this dark pit for *forever*.

That’s… Vaguely terrifying.

He sits there. In the dark. He strains to hear sounds, scent something new, see *anything* in the blackness. At one point, he gets up, hand on the wall, and walks the length of the room. It’s not *small*, that’s certain- a crescent shape following a fifty foot curve, just about ten feet in width.
Once he’s mapped out the space he has, he tries to formulate a plan of escape.

His plans of escape don’t get very far along. The stone walls are thick, and while he is strong, he’s not strong enough to smash through solid rock. If he were Conquest, maybe this would be different, but he’s smaller than Conquest, weaker, without the tools necessary for the job.

Weaker.

He is not weaker.

He punches the wall again and the crunch makes him sharply suck in his breath through his teeth, biting his lip to try to keep quiet.

Broken, he assesses from the pain and the grinding snap of bone.

Blood of the gods, it hurts.

*Not the worst you’ve had. Get over yourself.*

He stands there, unsteady, slightly shocked by pain. Another eternity lapses in this cursed void, losing himself in the sensory deprivation and the rhythmic throbbing of his broken bones and bruised spirit.

And then…

Light.

A crack splits through the ground- golden light seeps, shafts that provide a gentle glow. They’re less than the width of his fingernail.

With trepidation, he approaches.

The cracks widen, brighter light piercing the room. Too bright to see what’s underneath him.

He scrambles backward as the crack wrenches open wider. He shouts in panic, tries to find a handhold on the wall, but the floor opens up and he can’t find a grip, and he falls.

He plummets into the golden light, trying to keep the dignity to not scream, and wonders if he’s going to die for the second time in less than a week.

He lands on his stomach, wreathed in golden light so bright that it might as well be the same as the dark hell he’d just been trapped in. His ribs snap when he collides with the ground, and he gasps, but no air comes in.

He tries to get up- despite his own ribs forking into his organs, he’s not willing to placidly lay on the ground and wait for more punishment to come. Blood comes up his throat and there’s a mixture between coughing and vomiting, a wetness that forces him to stop moving to heave. Every breath hurts, jostles his ribs. Deep breaths bring about such severe pain and nausea that he wants to curl up and die.

“Oh, he doesn’t look so good.”

He recognizes that hated voice.

Imp.
“I don’t know. I think the red is pretty.” Devil responds. The two of them loom into his view, dispelling the light like mist when they walk through it. He gets on his knees and elbows, trying to just steadily breathe.

“He won’t be down for long,” A third voice. The Angel of Death. She moves between the two of them, staring down at War with an unreadable expression.

“Then kill him,” Imp says, simply.

War snarls, weakly, in reply, and hacks up more blood.

“I don’t like killing if I can help it,” The Angel of Death says. “Grab him.”

He surges upward- gets to his feet, his chest screaming in protest. His vision goes black for a solid second, and comes back in a roar of color and sound.

He lunges for Imp. Throws his arms around her throat, squeezes.

If he’s dying, someone’s going with him.

= =

“I’m sorry about that.”

War’s head lolls, groggily. He shakes it, tries to get back to focus.

What just happened?

Everything went black sometime between strangling Imp and this exact moment.

“I didn’t want to have to do that. In fact, I think that we could be friends.”

He’s in a room. Blank and colorless. The floor is white tile. There’s a nice chandelier overhead, sparse decorations. A table in front of him, a white tablecloth. The smell of tea. The Angel of Death is sitting right across from him, teacup in her hand. There’s another teacup in front of War.

He tries to get up. He’s bound, ankles and wrists, with iron bands.

“What is this?” He demands.

“A proposition,” The Angel of Death says. “I don’t want to fight you. I know you don’t want to fight me.”

“I want to fight everyone.” War responds, furiously. “And I swear to all the gods, if you don’t release me right now, I’ll kill you before Death can even get the chance.”

His chains disappear, vanishing as thought they never were. He rubs his wrists, glaring at her, but makes no move to get up. She had immediately accommodated for his demands and hasn’t condescended to him, so far. That gives her some slack which she can use to speak.

For now.

If this conversation goes poorly, War is going to strangle her, then Imp, then Devil, then everyone else he finds in this gods forsaken place.

“Do you eat?” She asks.
War gives her a skeptical look.

“There’s tea.” She gestures to the teacup in front of him.

“I don’t eat,” He says. “What do you want?”

“I know your relationship with your fellow Horsemen isn’t the best,” She says. “Death, in particular.”

The hair on the back of his neck prickles. He must’ve not hidden his reflexive facial expression fast enough, because there’s an understanding nod from her.

“I have your best interests at heart,” She says. “I healed your broken bones and cured your bruises. Took away your pain.”

“*You* caused that pain,” He responds, tartly.

“Not intentionally,” She says. “I’m not interested in hurting you. Just the other Horsemen. Just those who oppose me.”

“I’m a Horseman. *I* oppose you.”

“You’re different,” She says. “You don’t hate me as much as the other Horsemen, do you? You don’t resent me just because Fareeha loves me. You don’t blindly devote yourself to a bitter Horseman and brainwash yourself into hating me. You don’t want to kill me just because I *exist.*”

War rolls his shoulders, uncomfortably. “What are you trying to propose, Angel? No more circling. Say what you mean.”

“I want an alliance,” She says. “Stop the other Horsemen from trying to take Fareeha from me. Repel them with us. With my mastery of my Domain, with Fareeha’s help, and your strength, we’ll be able to rebuff the other Horsemen and preserve our love.”

The gears spin and whir in War’s head.

“Think about it,” She urges, huskily. “I have allies. I *know* that Death killed you recently. What was it over? Something small and bitter? Over *nothing*? Death’s unstable. Famine is blinded by her own arrogance. Conquest is leashed so tight he won’t even *try* to understand anything Famine doesn’t spoon-feed him. *Join me.*”

He pauses a moment, digests this.

“I want to see Fareeha,” He says. “I want to get *her* side of the story.”

She smiles.

“Of course.”

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: i wrote all of this yesterday, all 2300 words, in one sitting, after scrapping the
OTHER 1500 word chapter i wrote on Monday.

That other chapter miiiiight make an appearance eventually. I think for now, though, I'll just leave you with this: it goes into detail about the birth of the Horsemen.

Comments appreciated!
The Horsemen attempt to rescue Fareeha. It's more difficult than it seems.

Death lunges for the Angel of Death, shotguns levied. Buckshot barks, but she beats her wings and soars far away, and he lands in empty space. An earth-shaking sound blasts Death’s ears- he spares a few seconds, amidst his bloodlust, to see what the noise was.

A column of earth slammed upward in the eastern wing. He sweeps his gaze over the Horsemen in a quick headcount.

One of them is missing. Where’s War-

What did she do to him-?

She’ll pay for that.

Fractured thoughts that fragment and flit through his mind, skittering and insignificant. He roars, furious, and surges after her again. Smoke whirls around him in a howling blizzard, and he flings himself into the air. His claws snag on her thighs, tearing through the skin, shedding bright blood, and she screams in blessed pain, her radiant wings frantically beating and legs kicking as she tries to get him off.

Death takes a heel to the face- he flails, momentarily, trying to get a hold on her, but his claws have come unhooked and he’s been thrown off. He lands as a smoky puddle, then reforms into something more solid. He conjures new shotguns.

His sphere of influence is spiralling out of control. The other Horsemen look weaker, shakier, and he could accidentally kill them, the same way he did War. He needs to keep it in check.

He gnashes his teeth, takes a few breaths. The swirling cyclone around him dims to wisps of mist.

“I’ve had enough of you,” The Angel seethes, furiously. Her wings flare out again, and she clutches her staff like a lifeline. Her legs are bleeding, profusely, ten bright red tracts that ooze down her bare thighs and calves. “You can’t st-”

There’s a sharp ringing of a gunshot- a bullet drives straight through the Angel of Death’s stomach and out the other side, blood immediately gushing from the wound. Her white robes are rapidly stained with crimson, and she gasps, in pain, clutching her stomach. Her wings fold in, and she doubles over. She breathes hard, agonized whimpers on the tail of some exhales.
“You talk too much,” Famine says.

“You,” The Angel groans. “This doesn’t change anything. She still loves me.”

There’s a thin stream of blood trailing from her mouth.

Famine takes aim again- the Angel bolts, wings beating. The rock wall opens up into a narrow passage, and she darts through, closing it behind her. Famine manages to get another shot on the Angel of Death, accompanied by a yell of pain and a spatter of blood, just before the stone wall grinds shut.

Famine lowers her rifle. “Think that killed her?”

There’s some grim satisfaction in her tone.

Death shakes his head. “Doubt it. Deities don’t usually die in their own Domains.”

“I know, but it was worth an attempt, at least.”

Death takes a few paces back to fully view the wall that the Angel of Death had gone through. It’s tall, solid. Thick stone. He glances around, trying to spot an entrance, a weak point, but he draws a blank. The only visible way in or out is the small cavern they’d come from.

“What do we do now?” Death asks, frustrated. The question isn't meant to have a serious answer. There’s nothing they can do.

“I will knock the walls down, if need be,” Conquest says. He teeters the hammer back and forth, slowly, on his shoulder, and takes heavy steps towards the wall. His weathered face assesses it. He taps on it with his knuckles- snorts- and starts stretching out, preparing himself for the challenge.

“Conquest, you’re strong, but I highly doubt you can just… Smash this wall down,” Death shakes his head. “Especially since we have no idea how thick it is.”

“You have seen me perform wonders before, Death,” Conquest says. “Never underestimate me!”

He picks up his hammer, takes a deep breath, swings his shoulders back and keeps his lower body sturdy. The hammer comes down with tremendous force against the rock, enough to shake the whole cavern. Dust rains down from the ceiling, little chunks of stone- Death instinctively shields his head and eyes.

“Conquest, that’s not going to get us through the wall. If anything, you’re going to create a cave-in!”

Death hisses.

“Have a little faith,” Conquest says, softly. He rears back and swings his hammer with all of his strength. Death and Famine can do nothing but stand there, uneasy, and wait for the ceiling to potentially collapse.

It strikes again, and again, and again. The wall starts splintering inward under the force, deep cracks beginning to scar the stone with every collision.

After ten solid hits, Conquest shouts a rallying war cry and slams his hammer into the wall a final time. Rock explodes inward with an immensely loud noise, stones showering the ground.

Conquest pants, straightening up in the glow of his triumph. He stares through the newly-minted entrance with a smile on his face, then turns urgently to the two other Horsemen.
“What the hell,” Death says. Famine makes a shocked noise of agreement.

“There is no time to waste,” Conquest says, hurriedly. He gestures for the hole. “Go and rescue Fareeha.”

“The way you say that makes it sound like you’re not coming with us,” Death frowns.

“I am not,” Conquest says. Famine starts to say something, worriedly, but Conquest cuts her off. “Surely it did not escape your notice that War is missing? I am going to go rescue him.”

“By yourself? You’ll get killed. You don’t have a ranged weapon, the Angel’ll pick you off from a distance-” Death points out.

“No. No, I will not get killed.” Conquest shakes his head. There’s a glitter of certainty in his eyes. “Luck to you, Death.”

He hurries off, back towards the room War had been trapped in. Death feels a twinge of guilt, of fear, but tries to bury it. He can’t do anything for War now. It’s in Conquest’s hands.

“Let’s do this, then,” Death says.

They move past the jagged rocks and scattered shards of stone- delve deeper into the cavern, staying close for safety purposes. There’s light, far ahead, enough to provide an objective for them to reach. He can’t help but feel like a fish in the deepest trenches of the ocean- lured into a trap by a glow in the darkness.

“We’ll get your daughter back. Kill the Angel.” Death says, in the slight lull of silence. The sigh that he gets in reply is unwelcome, to say the least.

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Famine says.

“About what?”

“The Angel of Death. When she dies, she’ll come back. And then Fareeha- She’ll go after Fareeha again.”

“I know. But you heard her. She’s not going to stop trying to chase Fareeha, whether we kill her or not. She’s dangerous, and the best chance we have for saving her now is killing the Angel.”

Famine shakes her head, slightly. There’s a lot going on that Famine is thinking but not saying. Doubts, Death thinks. Doubts that she would never say aloud and is probably having difficulty saying just in her head.

“I’m at a loss, Death,” She confesses. “I don’t know what to do. There’s no right answer here. I can’t leave her with the Angel, but you heard what she said- I don’t want my own daughter to hate me just for trying to protect her.”

Death shifts his shoulders. He is not the best at advice, or counseling, or consoling. The extent of his emotional capacity was silently pining for decades and accidentally killing the one he loved.

Hnh. Not loved. That word does not fit a Horseman’s mouth. Maybe… Admired. Felt a connection for.

“Whatsoever the end result, we should kill the Angel and save Fareeha,” Death says, trying to stop thinking about War. “We can explain how and why she’s dangerous to Fareeha afterwards. No
secrets. She’s an adult now, she deserves to know what the Angel does.”

“That’s not a good solution,” Famine murmurs, uneasily.

“But it’s the best we have,” Death persuades.

She sighs.

They take several steps before she quietly says, “We’ll get War out too. I promise.”

She makes a slight movement in the dark and lays her hand on top of his. Surprise bolts up his spine, like lightning, and once her words register, there’s an almost immediate chill of fear. That fear sours from its adrenaline-based origins, churns his stomach, and after just a few seconds, he feels almost sick.

He realizes he’s stopped walking, and opens his mouth to ask her what she knows, but she’s already moved up ahead.

He prowls after her, feeling uneasy.

They’ve reached the end of the tunnel. It opens up on a ledge, overlooking a dazzlingly white plaza a few hundred feet long and wide. There’s marble and quartz floors, stairs, columns, roofs. Grecian architecture. Looks like a small marketplace, a few homes. Smells like fresh bread and earthy vegetables.

Almost inconsistently, the sky is bright blue overhead, cloudless, and the sun glows. Death gets the distinct impression that they haven’t left the cavern system, and that the sky isn’t real. Real or not, the sunshine is warm and the marketplace feels open.

“That’s more like the Angel. A paradise in the middle of a cave.” He snorts, derisively.

It looks like a warm, welcoming little plaza. But at a closer glance- the place is crawling with demons. Young, pretty women with horns, hooves, fangs, and spined tails. Shopping, talking to one another- nothing overtly hostile, but still dangerous in the same way a wild animal is. It may not try to attack you if you’re nearby, but if you draw too close or make the wrong move...

It’s just like the Angel to have terrible danger simmering just beneath the visage of a perfect, picturesque town.

At the far end of the square is a giant, multi-storied palace. Yellow banners hang from the walls, emblazoned with the Angel’s mark- two blazing white wings contained within a circle. A long carpet, luxurious and red, trails over the front steps. Two angelic statues glare, threateningly, from their position guarding the stairs, and a balcony sits on the top story. Looks like a place where the Angel of Death would address the town, or stare out at the marketplace. There’s a small glass table, two wiry chairs-

“Famine,” Death whispers, low and hoarse. “There’s someone up there. Is that Fareeha?”

The figure is starkly visible against all the white marble and quartz, wearing a black tee and jeans. It’s too hard to make out their exact features from this kind of distance, but the figure looks nothing like the Angel of Death or her demonic servants- skin too dark, hair not tied back like all the creatures here.

“That’s her,” Famine responds, a flicker of hope in her tone. “What’s she doing?”
“It looks like she’s drinking something,” Death squints. “No guards.”

“Why would the Angel leave her alone? It has to be a trap,” Famine says.

“Or she’s preoccupied somewhere else. Nursing her wounds.” Death murmurs. “I’m more concerned about all the others down there. It’s going to be a massacre getting through that.”

“So be it,” Famine hisses. “I’ll kill as many as I have to to save my daughter.”

Death grins. “I was hoping you would say that.”

Famine drops to her belly on the overlook- setting up her rifle for a good sniping position. Death, meanwhile, drops down off the ledge and heads into the marketplace.

A disguise won’t do him any good- no matter what clothes he’s wearing, he’s not going to be able to blend in with a wave of demonic women. He just has to hope that Famine has his back.

Death gets spotted almost immediately. A gossiping pair of demons look at one another and start whispering in alarm. They bare their fangs, curl their claws, and attack. Other demons, spotting their fellows surge forward, decide to join them.

Death’s shotgun makes quick work of eight of them. The difficulty comes when he runs out of shots-then he has to backpedal and rely on his back-up. Famine gets quick headshots on the lot of them, precise rounds that send demons crumbling to the ground with every ring of her rifle.

Unfortunately, there’s at least a hundred of the damn things, and Famine isn’t that fast. Death gets overwhelmed by a surge of demons- claws ripping and tearing, teeth shredding against his armor, vicious grins and glowing eyes all around him. He cries out in desperation, pain- he bursts into mist and reforms three dozen feet away, shaken from the dogpiling. He’s bleeding in a few spots, although the brunt of his armor held- He was lucky to get away with that with his eyes in tact. Some of those claws had come terrifyingly close to gouging them out.

“INCOMING!”

Conquest charges into view and throws himself off the ledge, elegantly soaring through the air to land, solidly, in the loose pile of thrashing demons. Death can hear bones pop under his weight, frantic wails and screams of agony. Conquest doesn’t waste a second before he starts throwing his hammer in every which direction, laughing like a maniac as he clubs lines of demons.

“Conquest! Where’s War?” Death yells, trying to gingerly blot up some of his trickling blood.

“I could not find him! I knocked the wall down, but he was gone! I believe the Angel is up to some devilry!”

Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no. 

“Death, go get Fareeha!” Famine shouts. “Stop standing there!”

He starts- Wait, we can’t leave without War, we need him, we need him, Conquest shouldn’t be here he should be getting War back-

He turns and sprints towards the Angel of Death’s palace, his hammering heart having nothing to do with the danger that lays before him.

The statues guarding the staircase grind to life- stretching their stone wings and arms, locking in on
Death. They’re tall—eight feet, with soft features that don’t match their ferocity. Both are in the likeness of the Angel of Death—so they’re slight, feminine—but he gets the feeling that they’re sturdier than the Angel of Death, and that a few bullets won’t be enough to put them down.

His shotguns bark. They put up their shields, and the pellets barely make a dent. They slowly advance, undeterred by the flying bullets.

Their impassive expressions are unnerving—They wield spears and shields, attacking with no flicker of life in their stony faces.

Once they get close enough to Death, they thrust their spears and bash with shields, forcing him back. He gets a lucky shot on one of their sides while their shield is away, the statue’s chest exploding into chips of debris, but the wound does nothing to halt the stone Goliath. One of them thrusts their spear right through his side, tearing the spot just beneath his ribcage. Death yells in pain and they swoop down on him, their blank expressions somehow more malevolent than an expressive face could ever be.

Conquest yells as he’s overwhelmed by a mass of demons. Famine is forced to seek new ground as another crop of demonic Angel-lookalikes peel away from Conquest and try to attack her.

“Stop!”

The statues grip Death, fingers grasping him tight enough to bruise. They turn their dull faces to the sound of the voice. The demons on top of Conquest stop ripping at his armor, and Famine, whose neck is a hair’s breadth away from a demon’s fangs, doesn’t get her throat torn out.

In the midst of all this fighting, the Angel of Death stands on the balcony, her arms flat on the elegant rails. Evidently she’s gotten over her bullet wounds, and the scars to her legs—she appears perfect and unharmed.

Standing next to her is Fareeha, who looks horrified, and…

War.

What the hell is War doing up there?

The Horseman’s face is cool, impassive.

“This has gone on too long,” The Angel of Death’s voice bristles with indignation. “This is my home that you have raided. These are my people that you’ve killed!”

“And that’s my daughter you kidnapped!” Famine shouts. “Give her back! Give my goddamn daughter back or I’ll mount your head on a pike, you snake!”

“She agreed to come with me!” The Angel of Death snaps.

“That’s a load of—” Famine snarls.

“Mom- I did. I did want to be here. It’s not fair that you keep me locked up! It’s not fair that you keep me from the Angel!” Fareeha bursts out. “I love her! I love her, why can’t you just let us be!?”

“Fareeha- habibi!-” Famine’s voice drops to a gentler, more entreating tone.

“Mom!” Fareeha objects, sharply. “You need to realize you don’t always know what’s best for me! You left me in a tower for hundreds of years and my only friend was the Spirit of the West! You
barely checked up on me, you barely talked to me, you were so busy with- with being a Horseman-”

Her voice starts cracking. The Angel of Death lays her hand on Fareeha’s palm, and Fareeha thumbs her eyes before tears can spill.

Famine looks to be at a loss. Conquest rumbles something, soft and low, in the back of his throat.

“War,” Famine’s voice shakes. “War, what are you doing up there??”

“It’s obvious to me that you’re blinded by your own bias,” War says, dispassionately. That tone is wrong for him. He’s supposed to be heated, angry. Death feels his heart cry out, pained, into an uncaring void- he swallows, and his mouth feels like sawdust. “Pettiness won’t get us anywhere, Famine.”

“You- you- you turncoat-” Famine choke. “What the hell got into you!?”

War’s eyes narrow. The air in the marketplace drops by what feels like forty degrees, glacially cold.

“Famine. Turn around and leave.”

Famine’s expression twists- betrayal, then understanding, then rage.

“You bastard! You bastard!” She howls. The demons surrounding her snicker. Bare their fangs at one another, lash their tails.

War, Death’s heart feels like it’s about to splinter into hundreds of pieces. War, how could you do this? Why?

The statues holding Death suddenly shift and churn- one grabs his ankles, the other his wrists. Death spits furiously, struggles against it- tries to disappear and reappear in a new place, but his body’s not obeying him. It must be War, it has to be War's betrayal. It cuts so deep- he’s in so much disgusting emotional turmoil- that his flesh won’t dissolve and remake itself.

They stretch him out underneath the balcony, limbs splayed, like a prized pig, held out for inspection. The Angel of Death prowls behind War, sets a hand on his shoulder.


Conquest bellows in rage- starts swinging his hammer, roaring like a lion. Famine kicks the demon on top of her, flinging her away and using the butt of her rifle like a club to whack nearby creatures.

“War, no-” Conquest shrieks.

“War, don’t-” Famine howls.

War conjures his rifle.

He stares directly into Death’s eyes and Death thinks of the kiss, of all the animosity that’d come before, of the coldness in War’s body when he lay dead in the grass.

Without breaking eye contact, War grabs the Angel of Death by the hair- abruptly slams her face into the railing, cracking her forehead against the solid marble. He does it once, twice, blood spraying from her nose- she shrieks in sudden, unexpected pain. War throws her to the ground, plants his foot solidly on her back, and takes aim.
With just a handful of shots, it’s all over. War stands beside the Angel of Death’s body- blood leaking through the gaps in the railing, dripping steadily to the white stairs several stories below, pooling in a crimson puddle.

Fareeha screams at him- shoves his shoulder and wails why, why would you do that to her, but War doesn’t even turn to address the half-Horseman. He’s still looking into Death’s eyes- as he does so, a slow, self-assured smile breaks across War’s face.

There’s something warm, there, something that makes Death’s chest burn.

Oh, gods, it’s love.

Chapter End Notes

editing? not in my me

you can follow me at https://legendary-bard.tumblr.com if you want

comments keep me going!!
Birth

Chapter Summary

And so was the Horsemen’s birth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first of them breathes his first breath.

A second pair of lungs begins to work. Then a third, then a forth.

The First of them stands there—blinking, swaying, unused to the light and heat of existence. He hasn’t had time to get his bearings before the Second emerges, shaking her head and closing her eyes tightly to block out the brightness. The Third follows not long after—squinting and disoriented, but not willing to shut his eyes to stop the shine. The Fourth is the biggest—he shields his eyes with his hand, rumbling in discontent.

They stew together for an indeterminate amount of time. They’re fragile and naked, bared to the heat of the sun and the stiffness of brittle grass underfoot. They adjust, slowly, to having bodies, grow into their own muscle and fat. Their milky eyes, unseeing, learn to adapt to the harshness of the sun and perceive colors and shapes.

The Third wets his lips, clears his throat. The others, numb and in their own world, twitch their heads at his noise. Attention turns to him.

He growls, weakly. The others attempt their own growls—the First is the one who masters volume and noise first.

“I,” He says. “Me. We.”

The Second copies him. “I. Me. We.” She points to the First. “You.”

They practice speech for a long time. They chirp and bubble, gesture with their awkward limbs, wiggle their tongues and pucker their lips. They refine noise into words, convey meaning and purpose.

After they learn speech, they learn to move. They take shallow steps, with another there to stand in the way to stabilize them should they fall. The Third is the most sturdy of foot—with the Fourth the most wobbly, and the most dangerous to fall over with his giant stature.

After they know how to walk, they rest. And while they’re resting, they think.

“Who are we?” The Third asks, without expecting an answer.

“What are we?” The Second attempts.

They look at one another. Soft-skinned, new to the world, birthed from a wombless womb. They look at their hands, at their limbs, wiggle their fingers and toes.
“It will come to us,” Says the First, faintly confident.

“How do you know?” The Third bats back, aggressively.

“Just a feeling,” the First murmurs, raising his shoulders at his rough tone.

“The hostility isn’t necessary,” The Second turns to look at the Third, frowning.

The corner of the Third’s mouth slowly droops. His brows knit together, and he stares down at his knees.

Then he suddenly perks. He blinks, eyes wide, mouth slightly open.

“I’m War,” The Third says. “That’s… My name.” He hesitates, a moment, then shakes his head.

“No. Not just my name. Me. I am war.”

Fire and ash. The discordant clash of armor, the proud jut of a spear from a nation yet to exist. The smug grin of an infantryman, his gun glinting as he lays in a muddied trench. Clash of saber and the crack-boom of a blunderbuss. The elaborate knots of a beard, a veiny hand clasping an axe. A spray of blood. A circling hawk above its master, the warrior draped in fur and as natural on horseback as she was on her feet, her armored opponent bloodied and village seized. A stone flung at a skull, the first warfare, before bows and swords and tools. A red and white striped flag, thirteen stars, the bellow of cannons and the rolling melody of drums. A bitter war between red-coated soldiers and valiant warriors with their cowhide shields, their bodies sturdy and arms strong, victory that ended in defeat.


A long silence reigns- the other three, who don’t know themselves yet, ruminate upon War’s declaration.

“I believe I may be victory,” The Fourth ventures. “But… No, not victory. Conquest.”

Cold steel. A blade at the throat and an armored foot planted at the square of a lesser being’s back. A majestic plume from a helmet. Subjugation- steel and iron, chains. The clutching claw of a newly born king, greedy eyes surveying his nation. Cold brutality- decapitation of menfolk and weeping women. The shine of firelight in a lion’s eyes, the cold, steady hand of a warrior on her spear, the bright colors of her clothes and her dark skin. Breaking free of former chains- theft of weapons, the slaughter of the devil-struck pale men, freedom and domination, the establishment of a new and independent nation in its tender infancy. The sweeping brutality of red and white and black, a blessed symbol made cursed, the ringing knell of gunfire and the slow reclamation of occupied territory.

“… Are you sure?” War asks. “I think Pestilence would make more sense.”

Conquest gives him an odd look. “No, no. Conquest feels right.”

The First and the Second exchange looks with one another- they look back to War, to Conquest, who are familiarizing themselves with their own beings.

“Do you recognize either of us?” The Second asks.

War squints at her. “No. I don’t think we’ve met.”

Conquest shakes his head, his blond curls swaying with the motion. “My apologies, my lady, I do
not. Maybe if we look around we will find some clues?”

The four of them look at their surroundings. It’s an endless flat land, lush with bristling golden grass. Every so often there’s a tree- a tall, thin trunk with winding branches, a verdant canopy of leaves over top. The sky is deep, blue, the sun glaring down on the grassland. When wind disturbs the grass, it makes a pleasant rustling.

Still, though, it is unfamiliar to them.

“I don’t remember this place,” The Second shakes her head, looks helplessly to her fellows. “Do any of you?”

“No,” War says.

“No,” The First replies.

“Sorry,” Conquest says, “But no.”

She sighs in disappointment, shoulders slumping. “I’m starting to remember… I think. I’m Shrike.”

She glances down at herself- then away, in distress. “Or…” She presses the heel of her palm to her forehead, face wrinkling like she’s in pain. Conquest draws close, his blue eyes tender with sympathy. “I don’t remember.”

“Maybe you’re Pestilence.” War suggests. He draws exasperated stares from Conquest and the Second.

“Wait!” The First bursts out, suddenly. His expression is soft, even though it’s urgent. “Wait, wait. I know, I remember. She’s Famine.”

All of them take a moment to digest the name- what it means, the facets of its identity and the Second’s.

“Yes,” She says, voice slow and unsure but gradually gaining conviction. “Yes! That’s it. I am Famine.”

The pitiful wail of a baby. Flames sweeping through a dry field of wheat in summer- stealing lives and livelihood. The rationing of war. Gaunt faces and gangly limbs, eyes too big for their skulls. The sharp slice of hunger through a stomach- vomiting up bacteria-laden water. Mealy rice riddled with bugs. Bodies huddled in a space far too small for any of them, clinging to one another and crying, tears streaking through the dirt on their hollowed cheeks. Distended bellies on hungry children, not matching the count of their ribs and the bones that stand starkly against their skin.

“You remember her but not yourself?” War asks, dubiously.

“Apparently I don’t,” The First scowls down at himself. “I… I think it was something… About horses. I don’t know.”

“Horses! Horses. That’s right, Shrike is a horse.” Famine bursts out. She glances around in distress. “Shrike? Shrike?”

War startles, recognition dawning in his eyes. “I have a horse, too. Immortal. His name is Immortal.”

He takes a few hesitant steps out from the shade of the tree they’re underneath- unsteady,
vulnerable. Conquest hurries after him, still wobbly, and grabs his shoulder, trying to pull him back.

“Hold a moment,” Conquest says, expression serious. “I don’t believe we should go anywhere until we all know who we are.”

War glances back at the First. He snorts to himself and slowly saunters back towards him.

“I think I have it,” The First murmurs, softly, as War gets close. “Death.”

The word is soft, even modest, but carries weight.

The flash of fangs. The fear of lungs struggling to breathe, a body wrapped in water and chains digging into their ankles. The last step over a cliff, the terrifying weightlessness, the lurch, the crunch. The gush of lifeblood from a torn wrist. The heel of a boot slamming down on an insect. The quick, clean slide of a guillotine. A hail of bullets, shredding a body to unrecognizability. Burning heat and thirst- every last droplet of water drowned in dust, blood coughed from sand- shredded lungs. The glazed brightness of fever, the sickly sleep never awoken from. The stillness of a furry body in a nest of wriggling, crying puppies.

Death, newly christened, raises his chin. He looks down at his hands as a feeling of wholeness ripples through him, through all of them.

“We’re Horsemen,” Death says, confidently. “Death, Famine, War, Conquest. The Four Horsemen.”

“If we’re Horsemen, where are our horses?” War asks. He is anxious, rather than skeptical.

“I don’t know,” Death admits. “Maybe closeby. Maybe discovering their bodies the same way we did.”

“I believe we should look for them,” Conquest declares. “I do not know about the rest of you, but… I feel slightly distressed that my horse is missing.”

There’s rumbles of assent from everyone. Four shapes toddle off into the savannah- naked, new, naive- and begin their search.

Chapter End Notes

A shorter one than I usually go for, but there it is.

you can follow me at https://legendary-bard.tumblr.com if you want

comments are VERY much appreciated!! i was actually kind of astounded by all the talk after last chapter, you guys are so awesome ❤️
Chapter Summary

The Angel of Death is dead, and Fareeha is left behind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Angel of Death doesn’t make so much as a sound.

Blood spatters across the white marble, War’s face, Fareeha’s feet. The rifle vanishes, and War cocks his head in a self-satisfied kind of way. A tide of blood is divided by the sturdy posts of the balcony railing- separating into multiple streams as it pours from her wounds. It flows over the edge, spattering on the white steps far below.

The demons wail in grief. The stone statues break apart into chunks of marble. Death breaks free of the stony grip, shaken but alive, and Conquest struggles his way out of the mass of demons, who are weeping openly at the death of their master. Famine kicks one of them away from her, then sprints to the edge of the ledge she was perched on and throws herself at Conquest, who opens his arms wide to receive her.

The hug is deep, warm. Conquest staggers under her weight initially, but crushes her to his breast, an affectionate “my lady” rumbling from him- he kisses her forehead and gently puts her down, a smile wrinkling his face.

“It is done,” Conquest breathes, taking her hand in his and squeezing. “We’re victorious!”

Their tender moment is interrupted by a crash and a yelp. Fareeha has War pinned on his belly against the balcony’s small table, bending his arm upward towards his back at an awkward, almost painful slant, trapping his other arm with her free hand. He thrashes and kicks, furiously, but Fareeha’s hold is good and she’s strong, too strong for War to buck himself free. In any other circumstance, Famine might praise her for her swift, efficient subduing, but that’s a Horseman she has pinned underneath her.

“Get off me!” War bellows in frustration.

“You killed her!” Fareeha cries. “Why!? Why did you do that!?”

She jerks his arm further upward, and he groans in pain.

Death is on his feet in an instant.

“Let go of him!” Death demands. Fareeha shoots a murderous glare down at Death, and does not loosen her hold.

“Fareeha, sweetheart, let him go-” Famine attempts, peacefully. She draws apart from Conquest, taking a few steps towards the palace.

“I want to know why!” Fareeha yells. “I want to know why you killed her!”

“I want to know why!” Fareeha yells. “I want to know why you killed her!”
Death lunges onto one of the statue’s bases—digs his claws into the marble and hoists himself up, transitioning upward from ledge to pillar to windowsill. He scales the palace with little difficulty, giving the occasional grunt of effort. His strength, flexibility, and nimbleness are all surprising; Famine’s never seen him climb like that. She didn’t even think they had that kind of youthful vigor left in them.

Within less than a minute, Death has vaulted over the railing and joined Fareeha and War up on the balcony.

“Death, if you hurt her—” Famine shouts up at him.

“You let go of him right now—” Death is evidently ignoring her, preferring to threaten Fareeha.

“I don’t need your help, Death—” War thrashes fruitlessly against Fareeha’s excellent pin.

“Both of you shut up! I’ll kill him if you don’t tell me why you did that!” Fareeha vows, thrusting her chin forward. She hoists up the angle of his arm again, and War hisses in pain, trying to kick her. She evades.

Famine glances back at Conquest— he’s staring at the scene with a little guilt clouding his expression. She manages to catch his attention with her glance, and he turns to her, eyes clouded with worry. Famine approaches him—she whispers “go get her”, giving a light slap to his back to encourage him to move. He nods in understanding, hurrying for the front doors of the palace.

“The Angel of Death is an evil being,” Death cautions Fareeha. “She enslaves those who’ve died into her service. It’s a sin against nature.”

War groans again, shifting up on his toes to try to avoid some of the pressure on his arm. Death’s expression gets darker.

“Let him go, and we can talk about this,” Death says.

“And lose my leverage!? Do you think I’m dumb?” Fareeha demands. Death scowls, takes a step closer.

Fareeha jerks War’s arm up again and the Horseman sharply inhales, squeezing his eyes shut, brows crinkling in pain.

Death rocks backward on his heels. Fareeha, in reply, slackens the force on War’s arm. War lets out a soft, relieved sound through his nose.

“Habibti, think about what you are doing. You’re holding a Horseman hostage!” Famine calls to her from down below. “Let him go, and we’ll talk about this reasonabl—”

There’s a crack and War howls- Famine winces at both sounds. Something broke, no doubt about it-War clenches his teeth, trying to tamp down another screech of pain. His shoulder bulges unnaturally underneath his jacket.

“Don’t talk to me about being reasonable! You killed her without talking to her about it! Without listening to me!” Fareeha shouts. Her voice carries over War’s soft, stifled groans.

Death sees it as an invitation to attack. He lunges forward, claws outstretched- Fareeha is forced to let go of War to dodge the attack. Death throws a punch that Fareeha blocks- Death swipe
And she bumps right into Conquest, who picks her up in a bear hug, keeping her arms securely pinned at her sides. She kicks, flails, incoherently.

“Let me go! Conquest, let me go right now-”

“I don’t care whose daughter you are,” Death hisses amidst her yelling. “You’re going to pay for that-”

He advances on Fareeha, fists balled, and a sharp stab of concern- and, yes, fear- runs up Famine’s spine.

“Death, what the hell do you think you’re doing!? Get away from her!” Famine shouts.

“Your attentions are better suited to helping War!” Conquest attempts to talk Death down, who was unswayed by Famine’s protests. “Hurting poor Fareeha will not do anything for our situation!”

Death pauses his advance- takes a second to mull it over. He nods, curtly, and swings back around, stalking over to War, who’s moved to sit on the table he’d previously been pinned to. War- eyes narrowed in pain- attempts to set his shoulder back into its socket.

He jerks it up, with a groan filtered through his teeth, and it snaps grotesquely back into place. Death winces and has to actively try not to look away.

“She’s strong,” War growls, pain bleeding into every word. “Stronger than I thought a demigod could be.”

There’s a mute silence between the two- Fareeha continues struggling against Conquest’s hold, which is plenty of noise to keep it from being incredibly strange and stilted.

“Thanks for… Having my back.” War murmurs, finally.

Death’s expression softens, somewhat.

Famine turns her attention away from the nesting lovebirds to her daughter. Conquest is trying to be careful with his hold, as to not hurt her, and he trudges off the balcony and back into the palace. Soon enough, he carries her out the front doors.

Famine is pleasantly surprised to see that within the minute it took to get from the balcony to the ground level, Fareeha has calmed and her struggles have stopped. She glares, mutely, ahead- not looking at Famine or Conquest.

Conquest carefully sets her down and she attempts to push him away. He rocks with the force of the motion, but doesn’t waver from where he’s standing.

“Why won’t you just tell me why, Mom?” Fareeha asks, one hand wiping over her eyes. Her voice is tremulous, and it hurts Famine just to hear it. “You didn’t have to kill her.”

“It isn’t forever,” Conquest tries. “It isn’t like humans, she will return. The Angel of Death’s resurrection will take less than a decade. Practically a blink for a deity!”

Famine shakes her head, slightly, and shoots a targeted glance at him.

Conquest, please leave this to me, she hopes the look conveys.

“Fareeha,” Famine slowly moves closer, her palms outstretched. “The Angel of Death is dangerous.”
“You keep saying that! Give me proof!” Fareeha stomps her foot, and there’s a flicker of determined fire in her eyes.

“Alright then- Pain! The deity. She was a relatively harmless god, accepted in the pantheon. The Angel of Death taunted her, tortured her, until her sphere of influence grew out of control and Pain went rampaging through the world-” Famine blurts.

“How do you know it was the Angel’s fault?” Fareeha asks, lips pressed tight and thin.

“Pain bore signs of being tortured,” Conquest cuts in. Famine bites back the urge she has to tell him to stay out of it. “And she’d have no reason to lie about it after the fact.”

“But do you know for sure? What if Pain was just- trying to make her look bad!?”

Famine and Conquest exchange a furtive, but incredulous look. How many excuses is Fareeha willing to make for the Angel of Death’s murderous, conniving plots?

“Fareeha-” Famine actively attempts to make her tone sound not condescending. “I’m sorry, sweetheart-”

Fareeha throws Famine a look of such outrage that the Horseman can practically feel her skin be scorched.

“You’re sorry-”

Famine holds up a hand for silence. Fareeha ignores it.

“You murdered her in cold blood! Don’t say you’re sorry!”

“She was trying to kill us!” Famine startles when she hears Death, and glances past Fareeha to see that he and War had stalked out of the palace while Fareeha and Famine were speaking. “She wanted War to murder me, and you didn’t say a word of protest.”

“You invaded her Domain!” Fareeha argues.

“And that gives her grounds to kill us?” Death scoffs.

“Yes! You’ve killed her before, a lot more than she’s killed you!” Fareeha snaps. She stalks up to him, nearly nose-to-nose with Death. She lifts her finger into the air, pointing it into his face, and War almost instantly smacks it down. He shoulders past Death, to stand in front of him, facing her.

Famine gets the feeling things are about to go very badly.

“War-” She begins, warningly.

“What were you expecting me to do? Murder another Horseman?” War growls.

“Talk with her!” Fareeha nearly explodes. “You didn’t need to kill anyone! You could’ve just- just-talked it out with her-”

“I did talk with her,” War says. “We had a long, bountiful discussion about how she wants to guard you like a treasure from your mother. She wants you. Needs you.”

Fareeha squares her shoulders. “She loves me. And you killed her!”

“She wants you for her own schemes,” War says. “I’m not saying she doesn’t love you, but love
isn’t always pure or incorruptible.”

She opens her mouth.

“Before you say anything, I still owe you for breaking my shoulder.” His tone drops into a snarl. “I’d suggest you be quiet and we leave before the locals get angry.”

Fareeha balls her hands into fists.

“She’s not a good person. She just isn’t. She’s a murderer who takes advantage of the dead.” Famine breaks in. “Even if she does love you, that’s not the kind of love you want, habibti. She’s cruel to those she’s resurrected. Gives them unfair deals when they’re at their weakest point.”

“She resurrected the dragon of the North Wind,” Conquest says, voice low and somber. “She bid him to murder his family. To slaughter all of the Shimadas- potentially dozens- in trade for his life.”

Fareeha jerks back, as if slapped.

“N-No. No. She wouldn’t, you’re- you’re lying. She wouldn’t do that, she’s- She built all of this! She’s not cruel to the imps and devils and all these others- she’s kind-”

“We were there,” Conquest rasps, regretfully. “We listened to the deal. We agreed to courier her feather to you, Fareeha.”

“I got it from the Spirit of the West!” She objects.

“Who got it from us,” War corrects.

She hesitates, trying to think about all of this. “… He did say he got it from you… But that doesn’t prove this- this conspiracy with the Dragon of the North Wind!”

“Fareeha, think about what you are saying,” Conquest says. “You are ignoring all evidence to the contrary just because you don’t want to believe it. Think about it, please. The Horsemens aren’t the type to rip lovers apart without a reason.”

She clenches and unclenches her fists, rocking uncertainly on her heels. The Horsemens remain silent, impassive, while she thinks. War slowly steps away from Death, rejoining him at his side rather than at his front. Neither of their faces give anything away.


Famine steps forward, offering her hands. Fareeha takes them, using Famine to steady herself.

“Let’s head back to the ranch,” Famine suggests, quietly.

“No. No. I’m not going back to the desert, I’m not going back to the ranch- I want to explore.”

“Well-” Famine begins. “We could-”

“No.” Fareeha interrupts. “By myself.”

She pulls her hands away, determination smoothing her expression. She turns and stalks for the cave exit. Famine makes a noise of objection- tries to follow after her. Conquest grabs her by the shoulder.

“No,” He says. “Don’t, my lady. After what we’ve done here-”
He turns his head to the droplets of blood still trickling.

“- I think she needs some time alone.”

“She could get hurt,” Famine hisses.

“And she will learn from that pain,” Conquest grips her shoulder tighter. “Have some faith in your daughter.”

“If she gets killed-”

“It will be on my head. I know. But consider her feelings. Her wants. Foolish, maybe, but let her be a fool while she’s still young.” His expression melts, a little. “I was an arrogant braggart, a fool of fools, when I was young, and look how I turned out!”

Famine quirks a smile. “Was an arrogant braggart?”

“Very funny, Famine.” Conquest huffs. “My point still stands. You should let her go.”

Fareeha’s retreating back disappears, swallowed by the darkness of the tunnel between the Angel of Death’s marketplace and the outside world. Famine so very badly wants to call out to her- to cage her again, keep her safe, but she has to let her go, no matter how much it hurts. Her daughter is her own woman, who can make her own decisions. Fareeha is strong, tenacious, and even if she’s inexperienced in the world, she will carve her own path, no matter how many mistakes it’s laden with.

“That faun predicted this.” Death and War have moved up, flanking the other two Horsemen. Death’s voice is low, guarded. ‘Events that are about to unfold won’t go the way you think they will’.”


“Not lost,” Conquest shakes his head. “Freed. And I have no doubts she will come back to you, on her own time.”

The sniveling demons creep towards the palace- dab their fingers in the Angel of Death’s spilled blood, collect her body and wail in mourning. The four Horsemen, after a long moment of pause to reflect on all that’s occured, depart the shattered Domain.

There are only three horses waiting for them when they leave.

Like Fareeha, Conquest suspects that it, too, will return.

Chapter End Notes

Andddd that’s the end of Part 1, folks! The first arc is done and over with!

I go on Spring Break next week, so there won't be a new chapter next Friday. In addition, I’m trying to figure out where the story goes from here- because it will go /somewhere/- and finals are kicking off soon, so the Friday /after/ that may not have a chapter either. Just keep a look out.
Second up- thank you all for 8000 views!! i know its slightly belated, but it's a joyous occasion nevertheless!

And finally- whoa, that comment variation. Ch 19 had the most comments- with twenty-freakin-three- while chapter twenty had just. three

that being said, comments appreciated! did this chapter round out the arc properly? do you have any speculation as to what fareeha's going to get up to? questions? concerns? go ahead & say 'em
Hunt

Chapter Summary

The Spirit of the West catches his little problem, and then accidentally gets another one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“That’s it, boys! Keep on his tail!”

The Spirit of the West stabs his finger forward, dramatically posing in the saddle as a legion of ghoulish cowboys gallop past. There’s five of them- Jane, Sarah, Li, Benedict, Estefan- and they ride in close pursuit of the creature.

It’s been four months since the Horsemen visited his ranch. Never came back to deal with his monster problem, so the Spirit of the West’s been forced to turn his own hand to it.

The Spirit of the West spurs Flashbang and brings up the rear of his little harras, whooping madly. They stream down a grassy field, spreading into a line, almost like a net. The creature they’re chasing tears up the turf with its claws, leaving a highly noticeable trail with every frantic bound.

It’s within sight. It’s a stony beast, four-legged, with a large chest, shoulders, legs- The little varmint that’s been terrorizing the Spirit of the West’s ranch is a gargoyl, no doubt about it. There’s earth clinging to it, flowers and weeds that’ve grown in chips or cracks in its rocky surface. Blood, on its claws, from one of the Spirit of the West’s coveted Bessies, who’s now drying out in the sun and missing a couple meaty bits.

“Fan out!” West bellows. “We can get ‘im!”

He reaches for the spool of rope at his waist, gradually gaining more and more ground on the gargoyl. It turns its head back around, a flurry of panicked chittering rattling around its stony chest, and tries to push itself harder.

It’s no match for the cowboys. The Spirit of the West twirls a lasso, and throws with devastating accuracy. It hooks the gargoyl at the junction of thigh and hip, sturdy and solid; the Spirit of the West throws himself back in the saddle and jerks, roughly. The beast trips and falls, leg outstretched-it flails and squeals, and the ghoul cowboys circle around, throwing their own ropes to keep it secure. It ends up with every limb lassoed as well as the Spirit of the West’s original snare. The ghoul cowboys pull the ropes, making sure there’s no give for it to thrash and wiggle around.

“Gotcha, you slippery little thief.” The Spirit of the West drawls.

“Trussed up like a Christmas turkey,” Sarah’s milky eyes glow with excitement. “We’ve already got the ropes on him. Let’s Washington this pest.”

“We should try mercy,” Jane disagrees. “Killing it won’t not give us what we’re looking for.”

The Spirit of the West dismounts, keeping his rope tightly in hand.
“Ten cuidado,” Estefan warns, quietly. “Es peligroso.”

“I know what I’m doing,” The Spirit of the West assures, cocking his hip as he approaches the gargoyle. “Sides, what’s he gonna do to me like that? Poor fella can’t even move, much less gut me.”

It looks up at him in alarm, claws scoring the earth. It chitters a slurry of nonsense words, attempts to struggle. The ghoulish cowboys pull the ropes tighter and it’s forced to be still under their strength.

The Spirit of the West kneels beside the gargoyle, quietly loosening the rope encircling its thigh. He tugs it loose and moves, circling around to its front. He carefully slips the loop around the gargoyle’s neck, then pulls tight.

“I ain’t got any earthly idea if you can understand me,” He says, slow and clear. “But you ain’t allowed to run ‘round my ranch no more, killin’ all my cows. You orphaned a calf today. Didn’t even have the sense to kill a cow that ain’t nursin’. Idiot.”

He kicks it. The flowers nestling in the gargoyle’s stony carapice shudder with the motion. It croons in something like pain.

“Yeah, no. You ain’t gettin’ me with that sympathy bit. I don’t care how much y’squeal and whine, you’re a cold-blooded killer who’s been leechin’ off my livestock. You stole Peacekeeper.”

He nudges its head with the toe of his boot.

“Didja understand that? You stole Peacekeeper. Where’d’ja put her? Where’d you put my gun, you goddamn thing -”

The lack of a response angers him- he kicks it, hard, and immediately regrets his decision as eye-watering pain shoots up from his toenails.

“Damnit.”

Estefan chortles. “Ya te lo dije.”

“Are you okay, boss?” Sarah drawls.

“The lot of you shut the damn hell up!” The Spirit of the West removes his hat, flustered, and fans himself with it a few times. Looks down at the gargoyle with a glare, too embarrassed with his own actions to be truly enraged. “Christ. I don’t think he understands us.”

“Need to grab another construct,” Benedict says, thoughtfully. “They know one another’s language.”

“As soon as you can find a djinni, let me know,” The Spirit of the West sighs, exasperated. “I ain’t exactly buddy-buddy with isolationist Nepalese monks.”

“The Reaper was here not even six months ago. Contact him, he has a personal relationship with the Prophet,” Li recommends. “It can’t hurt.”

“He’s hard to get ahold of,” The Spirit of the West complains. “With the war on, he’s probably not gonna be available for a while, an’ that’s probably got all the djinn caught up, too. Ugh.”

“Centaurs?” Estefan tries.

“Do centaurs even speak-” The Spirit of the West gestures nebulously towards the gargoyle in the
“Y’know… Construct-ese?”

“Where would we find a centaur, even if it did?” Jane asks. Estefan nods in acknowledgement, ruefully.

“We could create our own construct,” Benedict suggests.

“The hell we could,” The Spirit of the West says, waspishly. “I ain’t gonna be held accountable for breathing new life into this earth, ‘specially now. Christ knows the Reaper’d probably come after my hide for conspiring with all them construct folk in Russia.”

“You ain’t scared of a mortal, are ya, boss?” Sarah challenges.

“Course not. I could swat him like a bug. But still, looks bad for me. Don’t wanna put the wrong impression in everyone’s heads.” The Spirit of the West taps his chin. “’Sides, what if the next Reaper wants to be a genocidal maniac? Best we keep the devil we know.”

“Devil? He seemed nice enough,” Jane says. “He and his partner were very polite.”

“It’s an expression,” The Spirit of the West huffs. “Look, all I’m sayin’ is we probably shouldn’t go around spawning a new construct when he’s trying to sort out a civil war, or we could get in trouble.”

“Chicken,” Sarah says, smirking slightly.

“Gimme your rope, Sar,” The Spirit of the West straightens up, holding his hand out.

“I didn’t mean it,” She squeaks.

“Not what I meant. I’m gonna truss our thief up proper, and we’re gonna drag him back to the manor. We’ll let him loose eventually, and he’ll make a break for his den or his church or wherever he hangs out, an’ he’ll lead us straight to Peacekeeper. No need for a translator then.”

“Why not let him go now?” Benedict says.

“He may not understand us, but I think he’s smart,” The Spirit of the West straightens his shoulders. “If we let him go now, he’ll run us on a wild goose chase. ‘Sides, he’ll look good as a mantlepiece for a couple days, won’t he?”

“Absolutely devilish, boss,” Sarah tosses over her lasso, and the Spirit of the West uses the loose rope to bind the gargoyle’s arms behind its back. Benedict lets go of his, too, and the gargoyle’s arms are firmly bound. Estefan and Li let their ropes go, and soon enough, he’s tied up like a hog, from shoulder to ankle.

They lash a final rope to the gargoyle, then tie it off to Jane and Sarah’s saddles. They urge their horses to move and slowly drag the creature back to the manor.

“That was excellent work, everybody,” The Spirit of the West mounts Flashbang and sets a slow pace. “Little bastard thinks he can hunt on my ranch an’ not get caught. Well, not with all of y’all on the case, that’s for damn sure.”

He flashes a grin around at the ghouls- their mouths perk upward, as soft smiles. They deserve a little encouragement- they’ve been sniffing around for this pest for over half a year with no progress. And finally, finally, they’ve lassoed the bastard and he’s gonna be mounted in the hall.
A horse appears on the horizon. A dark stallion with a white spot- Jack, or Diamond, or whatever- and a dark-skinned rider charge right for them.

The Spirit of the West squints, making sure he’s seeing things right. “Issat James?”

There’s a few conformational noises from the rest of his hunting party.

“The hell’s he want?” The Spirit of the West frowns. “He said he wanted to collect the cockatrice eggs today.”

“You’re too late! We already got him, Jamie!” Sarah yells, cupping her hands around her mouth. “We got ‘im!”

James waves his arms, frantically yelling something that’s caught and tangled in the wind.

“Oh, shit,” The Spirit of the West leans forward, concern tightening through his guts. “Please, dear sweet Lord, let him say that it was jus’ an egg broke or somethin’, please don’t let this be something serious-”

James’s horse finally slows, a roughly a hundred feet from them, and skids to a stop a dozen or so feet away.

He takes a sharp gulp of air. “Dragons! Dragons, boss! I tried to stop them, but they couldn’t hear me!”

“Dragons?”

“Big blue and green dragons!” James says, frantically. “Like the ones Li flies for the New Year!”

“You’re scared of a paper dragon?” Benedict scoffs. “James, come on now-”

“No! They weren’t made of paper! They were real, and they were tearing up everything around them-” James cries.

“Shit,” The Spirit of the West glances back down at the prone gargoyle, then at the others. “Li, Benedict, you’re with me. Estefan, make sure that crafty bastard doesn’t go nowhere. Sarah, Jane, haul him back to the manor. James, take me to these dragons. I’m gonna make ‘em play nice on my ranch, or else I’mma get new dragon-scale boots.”

He rolls up his sleeves, digs his heels into Flashbang’s sides, and races after James, who’s already spun his horse around and spurred it. Li and Benedict hurry after him.

The Spirit of the West can feel these ‘dragons’ before he can see them. They leave a tangible impact in the air, distinct from the net of western warmth that permeates the very soul of this ranch. It’s Old World magic, like that of feudal China or medieval Europe or pyramidic Egypt- it leaves a bad taste in the Spirit of the West’s mouth. Makes him nervous. He’s capable, but if it’s two old god-dragons that’re duking it out on his land, there’s going to be problems.

What he finds is… Not what he expected. On the border of his Domain is two men. One, young and with green hair, littered with scars, in a white gi, holding a sword aloft. Another, slightly older, with raven-black hair and in darker garb. Raven-haired is armed with a bow. The land around has been pulverized- marked up with small scuffs as well as bigger changes. A few trees have been knocked over, and part of the earth has been plowed in a skinny line, like a flying saucer had crashed on its side.
The Spirit of the West’s only thought is an indignant there’s no dragons here.

He’s about to say James what the hell are you on and, from the black-haired man’s fingertips, a giant translucent blue beast erupts— all jaws, whiskers, scales, and horns. It snaps at the green-haired, who dodges and conjures a creature of his own. A nigh-identical green dragon leaps from the blade of the sword with a burst of light, going for its twin’s throat, and the two roll in the sky, maws parted in silent cries.

A third dragon— this one also blue— lunges forth from the first man’s fingertips, careening into the fight with its mouth wide, teeth at the ready. They clash with a mythic slam, carrying weight despite their ghostly, ethereal appearance. They roll and snap in mid-air, like logs in an aggressive river, or feisty alligators.

The Spirit of the West resolves to stop… Whatever the hell this is.

“Hey! Hey! You two! Cut that shit out right now!” The Spirit of the West yells, with as much authoritative dignity as he can muster.

Neither of them so much as turn their heads in his direction. The bowman shoots an arrow, which the sword-carrier deflects, and the Spirit of the West reckons that ought to be impossible, but he’s more irritated at how he was completely ignored.

“The fuck do these guys think they are?” The Spirit of the West mutters, angrily. He throws himself off Flashbang and holds out a hand for the other ghouls to stay put. James looks scared, Li looks angry, Benedict is leaning forward with interest— the whole lot of them have good reasons to follow him up, but West intends on handling this himself.

He marches straight up to where the two are fighting. Claps his hands and immediately, the earth churns. The two fighters rock back and forth, managing to stay on their feet despite the shift in the ground. A moment later, twelve pecan trees shoot up, their trunks shifting and waving to form something akin to prison bars, a net of leafy canopy blocking overhead escape. The end result is the formation of separate hexagonal cages around the fighters.

The two fruitlessly attempt to escape— either by climbing or slashing the trunk with their sword. Doesn’t pan out— the tree stands, hard and uncompromising.

Once their inability to escape sinks in, they look around. The Spirit of the West feels a little glow of warmth in his stomach when two pairs of eyes slowly settle on him.

“Hi,” The Spirit of the West says, with a smile. “You two gentlemen need to stop scrappin’ on my turf, else I’m gonna need to get violent.”

“What are you?” The bowman asks. “Some kind of… Poorly dressed sprite?”

The Spirit of the West presses his lips into a thin line. “Neither. I’m the Spirit of the West, an’ the both of y’all ’re on my territory.”

They look at one another. The sword-carrier slowly sheathes his sword, and the bowman lowers his bow.

“I’ve never heard of you,” The bowman says, tone guarded.

“Ju- Wh—” The Spirit of the West manages to smooth his expression before he can get wholly indignant. “I’m a god, okay? Spirit of the American West? Cowboys, grain fields, pioneers, pecan trees?” He reaches forward, grabs a hanging pecan from the branches of the tree jail, crushes it until
it splinters open, and holds it up demonstratively.

The two still look blank.

“You’re in my Domain, an’ I’d appreciate you not messin’ it up with your dragon things.” The Spirit of the West clarifies.

“ You’re a god?” The bowman’s brow wrinkles.

“Are you even listenin’ to me!?” The Spirit of the West bristles. “Yes, I’m a god!”

“And this is your Domain?” The bowman’s eyes glint.

“Yeah, this is my Domain, and y’ain’t gonna go messin’ it up with your squabble!” The Spirit of the West folds his arms.

“I want to claim sanctuary,” The bowman says, immediately.

“No!” The sword-bearer yells. “You can not give him sanctuary! You c-”

“Hold on there, shortstack,” The Spirit of the West holds up a hand for silence. “Lemme talk to the guy. You sure as shit don’t look dead, bowman, and I dunno if you know the rules for my particular Domain, but I only accept dead people for sanctuary.”

The bowman glances at the sword-carrier. “With no exceptions?”

“I mean- What’s yer case? What’cha two fightin’ about?” He thoughtfully picks out the pecan fragments from the crushed shell, nibbling on them.

“The Angel of Death has bidden me to destroy the Shimada line,” utters the sword-carrier. “He is the last remaining Shimada, and once he is dead, my mission will be complete.”

“Well, I dunno if you knew this, but the Angel of Death is dead,” The Spirit of the West says. “She died, like, four months back. I know y’all are mortals, but’cha couldn’t feel that?”

“It is more personal than that,” The sword-carrier growls. “He killed me. The elders of our clan bid him to, and he slaughtered his own brother like an animal.”

The Spirit of the West is beginning to feel out of his depth.

“Yeah, but,” West says. “This ain’t got nothin’ to do with me or my Domain. How ‘bout I saddle both of you up, give ya a nice horse, and you can kill each other somewhere else?”

“I won’t wait for vengeance,” The sword-carrier promises, fiercely. “I’ll kill him here, and I won’t let him get away.”

“Okay, I know we’ve all engaged in a little friendly attempted fratricide every so often…” The Spirit of the West shifts back and forth. “But I think maaaaybe you should talk about it rather’n try to murder one another? I mean, what’s it matter that he killed ya? You’re alive now. The Angel of Death brought’cha back, you’re not bound to her service no more. Plus, yer whole family’s dead, so those elders that pressured yer brother in’ta killin’ you can’t do that again.”

The sword-barrier growls. The bowman remains silent.

“I want him dead for what he did to me.”
The Spirit of the West snaps his fingers. The pecan trees encircling the bowman slowly retreat back into the earth. The bowman shifts into a tougher stance, expression cold and stony.

“Run,” The Spirit of the West advises, plucking another pecan from the tree.

“I will not run,” The bowman says. “I’ve asked for sanctuary.”

The Spirit of the West huffs. “Sounds like t’me I should jus’ turn you over to him. We don’t ‘preciate murderers here.”

“I am not a murderer,” He says. “I did it for the honor of the clan. I had to.”

“Liar,” The sword-bearer hisses through his teeth. “You had the chance to let me go. Exile me.”

“And you would’ve brought shame on us from a distance. I did what was asked of me and I would do it again.” The bowman’s face and voice smooth into something impassive. “It no longer matters now. The Shimada clan is gone.”

“Yeah… That’s real great and all, but I’m thinkin’ about my problems, here,” The Spirit of the West clears his throat, interruptive. “Get off my land if you’re gonna fight. If you ain’t, I can offer some basic necessities, but unless you’re dead, you ain’t a ranch hand and you ain’t stayin’ here too long.”

“Spirit of the West,” The bowman drops to a knee, head bowed. “I will humbly request sanctuary on your Domain again. I may not be a departed soul, but I ask for an exception. It is not just Genji I’ve found turned against me. I’ve been sought by the Lady of the Hunt, Doomfist, and the Lady of the Shadows... As well as others seeking to claim the remnants of the Shimada empire.”

“Sounds like t’me you’re hidin’ from the consequences of your actions.” The Spirit of the West states. There’s no real malice in his tone, just the statement of a simple fact.

The bowman’s expression tightens. “That is not what this is.”

“Then what is it?”

The bowman doesn’t answer.

“Yeah, alright. I’ll give you asylum, archer. Git up.”

The bowman stands up.

The Spirit of the West squints at the skyline. He crooks his fingers, gesturing the ghouls forward. Li and the rest spur their horses forward- Flashbang trots obediently beside them, despite his riderlessness.

“Did you get it sorted?” Li asks.

“Yeah,” He says. “He wants asylum.”

“And you gave it?” Benedict asks, incredulously. “He’s another mouth to feed, another filled bed.”

“Ain’t exactly like we’re getting more numbers these days,” The Spirit of the West says, ruefully. “An’ I’ve got faith that he can help us out with some problems we been havin’ ‘round the ranch.”

“Do you think he can help with the gargoyle?” Li asks.

“I dunno. Wouldn’t hurt to have an experienced huntin’ hand. Y’all ain’t exactly trained warriors, no
“Offense.”

“You’d better hope Sarah doesn’t hear you say that.” Benedict says, crisply.

“Who are you talking to?” The bowman interrupts him nearly mid-sentence. The white, milky eyes of the ghouls turn to the archer, irritated at his inability to hear them. He admirably stands his ground, though his hand tightens on the grip of his bow.

“The downside of non-ranch hands,” Li sighs.

“At least we can insult him and he can’t hear,” James says, a little nervously.

“I’m talkin’ to the ghouls,” The Spirit of the West demonstratively gestures to the three of them. “They can talk with me, but nobody else. ‘S part of the territory. They can still hear ya, though, so play nice.”

The archer nods.

“Li, saddle him up and take him back to the manor.” He moves around the bowman, heading for the remaining pecan tree cage. The sword-bearer housed within shifts, antsily. “As fer you… You know the rules of sanctuary. Get the hell off my territory ‘fore I do somethin’ we’re gonna regret.”

He doesn’t have Peacekeeper anymore- his Weapon- but he’s still formidable on his Domain. And even if he wasn’t, and his ranch hand ghouls are immortal. The sword-bearer isn’t. Given enough time, the sword-wielder will lose, no matter how good he is.

The sword-wielder gives a slow, stiff nod.

“Awesome.” The Spirit of the West snaps again. The trees sink back into the earth.

He points towards the horizon. “Exit’s that way. Come back here an’ cause trouble like that again an’ I’ll slap you so hard you’ll wish you had the Angel o’ Death to bring ya back. You wanna kill him, you do it off my territory.” The Spirit of the West then lowers his tone, almost conspiratory. “’F it makes you feel any better, though, he’ll get sick ‘o country life eventually, jus’ like all the city folk. Then you’ll get your chance.”

He’s hoping to leave them both with the impression that he’s a firm but reasonable fella. The sword-bearer nods, lip curled in a grimace, and turns away, starting a slow pace to leave West’s Domain.

The Spirit of the West turns back to the four awaiting him. Li, who’s already re-mounted her horse. Benedict, who’s staring at the bowman with unabashed scrutiny. James, who’s fidgeting nervously with his reins. The so-far unnamed bowman, who stands defiant but slouchy, like a tomcat who’s attempting to assert its uncaring dominance.

The Spirit of the West claps his hands, summoning a horse that crawls through a swirling whirlpool of dirt on the ground. The mare shakes out her elegant mane and tail, and moves her head to regard all of them.

“Y’ever ridden a horse?” The Spirit of the West asks, throwing his leg over Flashbang’s back.

“Yes,” the bowman offers out his hand to stroke his mare’s muzzle.

“Alright. ‘Fore we head back to the ranch house, a few things. One, we got a gargoyle in the main hallway. Let it go an’ I’ll personally throw you out on your ass and let your brother kill ya. Shoot, I’ll prol’ly make popcorn, too.”
He nods.

“Two, don’t go anywhere without a guide. You’re mortal, and some of the stuff on the ranch should only be managed by immortals. Reaper and our cockatrices can be awful murderous sometimes.”

The bowman nods again.

“Three, I’m gonna need your name, and an explanation for the bigass fuckin’ dragons you can shoot out of your hands, ‘cos that’s fuckin’ sweet.”

“I am the Dragon of the South Wind,” he says, voice clipped.

“And I thought Spirit of the West was inappropriately long,” Benedict murmurs. “Is he expecting to be referred to with that whole title every time we address him?”


“Well then,” The Spirit of the West tips his hat up- glances back at his ghouls, who all seem a little wary about this whole arrangement- “Welcome aboard, Hanzo.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaand we're back, folks!
Chapter Summary

The Dragon of the South Wind wakes up in the Spirit of the West's Domain, and finds that he has a proposition for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Up an’ at ‘em, archer.”

The Dragon of the South Wind blinks awake.

His surroundings read as immediately unfamiliar. The bed he’s laying on is too soft- doesn’t have the firmness he’s accustomed to. His blanket is a thick, plush quilt, rather than the thin fleece he’d fled with on his travels. The entire room is strange- the walls are a dusty tan-yellow, with faded wallpaper patterns that’d undoubtedly once been some manner of flower. A wooden ceiling fan turns indolently overhead- a curtained window has been opened wide, and leaks watery morning sunlight into the room.

There’s a rug on the floor, woven, patterned with a rustic red and gold. Nearby the door, a wooden cabinet, slightly ajar. A nightstand beside the bed with a shaded lamp.

The Dragon of the South Wind sits up, propping himself up on his elbows, until he finds the source of the voice that’d woken him.

In front of him, on a wicker chair, is a man. He’s got an American-style hat, brown, with a wide brim and indented crown. He has medium-length brown hair, shaggy as to suggest it’s been quite a while since it’s been cut. His beard is thick, but not unmaintained. He has kindly eyes, brownish-grey. In his thirties, possibly, but with a weathered face that makes him look more seasoned. He wears some kind of robe, a warm red with a gold-orange border and a hexagonal, chain-like pattern. Underneath it, a brown button-up shirt, with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. Two leather gloves. Dark pants, a belt with a golden buckle, a bandolier slung across his hip, sheets of leather that buckle around his pants as some kind of… Leg armor, perhaps? Brown, cowhide boots, complete with spurs.

He had introduced himself earlier as the Spirit of the West. He has an aura radiating off of him, and it gives the Dragon of the South Wind comfortable feelings about something he’s never known. He has no instinctive knowledge of wheat fields, nor the American west; he is not familiar with rawhide and sweltering heat, but the man radiates a reassuring warmth. The Southern Dragon is not instinctively drawn to it, or drawn away- it just is.

“Mornin’, sleepyhead. Jus’ thought I’d pop on by an’ have a li’l chat with you,” The Spirit of the West offers up a smile. “You’n I are gonna have a li’l pow-wow.”

The Southern Dragon is keenly aware of himself. His hair has been let loose- not tangled, but in need of brushing to counteract whatever mussing he had done in his sleep last night. He’s shirtless, though he sees no wrong with that and the Spirit of the West seems unconcerned with it.
“What, exactly, does ‘pow-wow’ entail?” The Dragon of the South Wind asks.

“You’re here ‘cos of extra-special circumstances. Jus’ wanted to get things straight between us, since you’re going t’ be living here for a while.”

The memories of the past months swirl into his memory. He has been on the run since he killed Genji- it became clear to him that, after Genji’s death, there was no place for him in the Shimadagumi any longer. He fled Hanamura and later, Japan- attempted to hide, for a short while, in southeastern Russia. He had managed only two weeks, being forced to flee alongside other refugees from the brewing construct war; from there, he moved to Tibet. It was there he learned of a slew of Shimada deaths. The elders, his uncles, his cousins- His father, Sojiro, had been slain naught but three weeks after his flight from Hanamura. He had heard that they were committed by Genji, the brother he’d slain and grieved for. Despite the seeming impossibility of this, the Angel of Death had resurrected less important people, and in the face of the slaughter, the Dragon of the South Wind had to concede that Genji was alive and he was an active threat. His little brother was never the type to forgive and forget, always centered on revenge.

After the news of the deaths had come, swift and unexpected, the Dragon of the South Wind was forced to move on from Tibet to forestall his own vengeance-fueled demise.

He went from Tibet to India, then India to France, then France to Britain, in miserable conditions and attempting to be as inconspicuous as possible. Finally, he managed a flight to the United States, a cultural melting pot of creeds, colors, and backgrounds. He would be safer there, hidden amongst its crime and diversity- and after spending a few years in America, he promised himself he would return back to Japan. He stayed in small cities for no longer than a week, working a variety of jobs that he had no experience in. He flitted across the country- from the East Coast to the West Coast and back again.

He hated it. Hated the instability of travel, the roughness of the living compared to his princely origin. But he preferred having his life to his comfort. He did not turn his nose up at anything or anyone- he seized opportunity and thrived as best as he could in his terrible surroundings.

There was no slip-up in his careful plan. He did not expose himself, he did not settle in one place too long; Genji finding him was sheer chance. He had been identified on a train ride that Genji had coincidentally also taken; there had been an attempt to flee, and then, when that was unsuccessful, conflict.

Ultimately, their battle took them to the Domain of this... uniquely American god.

The Spirit of the West reaches to the nightstand, where he’s left a grainy wooden tray, two teacups, a pot of tea, and a bowl of sugar. He pours some tea.

“It’s ephedra,” The Spirit of the West says, delicately. “Cowboy tea. S’posed to be good for you, or somethin’. It’ll be awful sharp-tasting at first, but you’ll get used to it.”

He carefully hands the cup over. The Dragon of the South Wind tentatively sips. Sharp and distinctly bitter. He swallows a mouthful, and indicates his desire for sugar with a hand gesture. The Spirit of the West nods, stirs some in, hands it back. It’s better.

“Y’don’t talk an awful lot, do ya?” The Spirit of the West says. There’s a hint of curiosity in his expression for a second, but it goes when he starts fixing his own tea. “What’s on your mind?”

“This is an… Unexpected awakening.” The Dragon of the South Wind proceeds carefully. “I do not… Understand your behavior.”
“Why’m I so doggone homely, y’mean? Why am I makin’ tea for you like I’m your personal servant?”

A nod.

“Well, shuuu, ain’t you thought that’s jus’ how I am? Southern hospitality, an’ all. Can’t tell me there ain’t nice Japanese gods.”

“There are.”

“Well, now that we’re got tea outta the way, let’s talk.” He says, voice warm and pleasant. “Don’t think that you’re sittin’ in the lap of luxury jus’ ‘cos you’ve got into a nice god’s Domain. Ain’t nobody ‘round here that doesn’t work for their keep.”

The Dragon of the South Wind nods, curtly.

“Good.” The Spirit of the West gets up, chair creaking. “There’s clothes in the dresser, breakfast downstairs. There’s a shower down the hall. At breakfast, we’ll talk more ‘bout what you’re gonna be doin’ here.”

He takes the tea tray with him on his way out. The Dragon of the South Wind gets out of bed and neatly arranges the covers. He finds his hair ribbon on the nightstand, which he keeps in hand as he heads to the indicated dresser.

The clothes within are charmingly rustic. Jeans, a blue shirt with two snap-buttoned pockets over the breast, a leather vest, a pair of socks, two leather boots, another one of those western cowboy hats, and a white handkerchief. The Dragon of the South Wind gets the impression that the clothes have not been hand-picked for him, but merely serve as the standard for the Spirit of the West’s hired help. There had been no identifiable uniform or insignia that distinguished them as his ‘ranch hands’, as he had called them, other than their complexion.

Every ranch hand has an unhealthy greenish-grey tinge to them, alongside milky white eyes, bereft of pupils, and unmoving mouths. Every so often they would flicker, their bodies going slightly translucent, before re-solidifying. The Spirit of the West seemed able to communicate with them, often musing on something they’d said with no audible words spoken on their behalf. Either they really can only speak to the Spirit of the West, or the god is insane and invents conversations with his ghouls. The Dragon of the South Wind is inclined to believe the former- the god had seemed lucid during their conversation.

He takes the clothes from the dresser, opting away from the handkerchief, hat, and leather vest. The Dragon of the South Wind doesn’t quail from unfamiliar clothes, but he feels slightly uncomfortable wearing such… Unapologetically American garments, so he does what he can to tone it down.

Shirtless and barefoot, he slinks forward, unable to stop himself from glancing left and right to see if anyone is around. The spacious hallway is empty, and the Southern Dragon continues on to the promised shower.

The bathroom is small, and he wonders if it’s shared amongst all the ghouls and the god- or if they even need a bathroom, and this is just a courtesy for any mortal residents. There’s a mirror, a porcelain sink, a toilet, and a bathtub-shower. A bath mat by the tub, and a proudly red, white, and blue shower curtain. Some of this alleviates his anxiety- he had been fearing that the technology in the ranch house would be as archaic as its decorating, and he would have to hand-pump his shower.

The Dragon of the South Wind rifles around in the drawers attached to the sink and finds a
hairbrush- briefly contemplates using it before putting it away. He doesn’t know where it’s been, and although it appeared clean, he doesn’t trust it.

He steps into the shower.

While he’s in it, he attempts to tame his hair- combs tangles out of it with his fingers. He gets it as smooth as he can manage without a real brush. He scrubs dirt out from his hands, his fingernails- he sits down on the rim of the tub, beside the shampoo bottles and liquid soap- and very carefully tends to his dirtied feet, aching from months of travel.

Once he’s suitably cleaned, the Dragon of the South Wind leaves the shower. Dries himself with a towel that’s been left on a wooden towel rack.

He dresses in the allotted clothes- He buttons up the shirt, which is a little too loose, though it seems that way by design; then the jeans, which have the opposite issue. The boots fit acceptably well, with a little too much extra space in the toe.

He looks at himself in the mirror. It is… Definitely not his style, and the wet hair doesn’t help. But it’s not the ugliest thing he could be wearing.

The Dragon of the South Wind carefully puts his hair up, wraps his gold-patterned ribbon around it, then pokes and prods at himself until he’s presentable.

And with that, he heads downstairs.

It’s a short trip through the foyer to some kind of public dining room- there’s about two dozen ghouls, possibly a little less, who are eating breakfast. The scene makes the Southern Dragon feel slightly unnerved- the complete silence hanging over a communal room that should be full of boisterous chatter is almost chilling. The only noise is the scrape of forks and spoons, the sound of chewing. There’s no speaking, or any hint of life within the room other than the mechanical motions of the feasting ghouls. The silence is almost oppressive.

However, he does not back down in the face of all of the ghouls and their unsettling atmosphere. The Dragon of the South Wind was invited to breakfast. He is hungry. And so, he will eat.

There’s food already laid out. Plates of sausages, eggs, biscuits, sliced fruits, sweet pastries, honey, butter, jam, generous slices of ham and bacon, thick brown-grey gravy, coffee, fruit juice, some kind of thick mash that appears similar to oatmeal. There’s a stack of plates, a few mugs, silverware; everything has been laid out in a banquet-esque fashion.

The Southern Dragon takes a plate and cutlery and carefully picks out his food. He’s very conscious of every clink of his fork on his plate and chime of knocking dishes.

It’s so quiet.

The Dragon of the South Wind is no stranger to silence- meetings amongst the Shimada were often somber, quiet affairs- but the ghouls don’t so much as audibly breathe. Their chests rise and fall, but they’re silent, even when one yawns or huffs air from their nostrils.

The Dragon of the South Wins maneuvers around the lines of tables, finding a seat. None of the ghouls around him look up as he sits down, visibly ignoring him.

He wonders, for a moment, if they can even see or hear him.

He doesn’t have too much time to wonder, though- a sharp bang from the front hallway startles the
Dragon of the South Wind until he’s nearly halfway out of his seat. There’s a shrieking wail right after, distorted, like a pair of wind chimes are crying out in pain. The ghouls’ heads snap up, though not in synchronization. A few of them reach for their holsters—some of them nervously ball their fists. Another handful slowly return to eating.

“Go on an’ cry, y’gods-dammed thing! Killin’ my cows!”

The Spirit of the West. There’s another resounding noise, a softer sound of pain.

“An’ if that weren’t enough, y’stole m-”

He cuts off abruptly.

“Hmph. You ain’t worth it.”

The Spirit of the West abruptly appears in the doorway, hands jauntily stuck in his pockets, hat tilted up.

“Nice t’see you, Hanzo. Didn’t think you’d be down for breakfast so soon.”

The Spirit of the West slowly saunters towards the Southern Dragon. He steals a piece of bacon off a nearby cowhand’s plate, nibbling on it. “How are you findin’ the accommodations?”

“The clothes are… Not to my typical taste.”

The Spirit of the West grins, crookedly. “Yeah. Thought so. Any other complaints?”

He thinks about how he had seen no other option than untangling his hair with his fingers. Declines to bring it up. “No.”

“Y’eaten enough?”

The Dragon of the South Wind glances down at his half-empty plate. “Not quite.”

“S’okay. Once you’re done, we’ll talk shop.”

“Why don’t we discuss it now?” The Southern Dragon presses. “I want to know what you want me to do.”

“Tch. Ain’t no big thing.” The Spirit of the West pulls a chair back out with a loud squeal of wood on wood, and drops into it. He plants a booted foot solidly on the table, folding his other leg over his ankle. He leans back, the chair rocking precariously. “I had a bit of an issue rather recent-like, s’all.”

“What kind of issue?”

The Spirit of the West bides his time. He draws a cigar from within the folds of his clothes, rolling it between his fingertips indecisively. “It’s embarrassin’.”

“You have caught me in a compromising position, as well,” The Dragon of the South Wind says, neutrally.

“Too right,” The Spirit of the West muses. He sticks the cigar between his teeth, and with a snap of his fingers, it lights. He takes a thoughtful drag and blows a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. “Y’know what a Weapon is? Weapon with a capital W? As in, a god’s Weapon?”

The Dragon of the South Wind inclines his head slightly; not indicating whether or not he knows,
but gesturing for the Spirit of the West to continue.

“Right. Li’l piece of punch, li’l piece of power, held inside a god’s Weapon. Like, for instance, his ability t’Deadeye.”

“Dead eye?”

“Some gods got powers.” The Spirit of the West sniffs. “Stuff that sets us above mortals. Mine’s Deadeye. I need one second to face down an’ opponent- or multiple opponents, don’t matter- and once I decide the time is right, they drop like flies. Perfect shots.”

“And you claimed this ability is held within your Weapon?” The Dragon of the South Wind asks, setting down his fork.

“Eh… Yeah.” He puffs on his cigar.

“What relevancy does this have to your... issue?”

“My Peacekeeper- my Weapon- was stolen from me.” His expression sharpens. The shadow cast on his face by the hat darkens, the glow of his lit cigar reflected by his eyes. His right eye, in particular, has a disconcerting reddish sheen.

The acidity of the fruit the Southern Dragon had just eaten burns his throat- the heat of the room grows sweltering. The ghouls all tense, turning their heads to regard their lord.

“Stolen right from under my damned nose. An’ I can’t get it back.”

The Dragon of the South Wind has to swallow for his throat to unstick. “You do not know the identity of the thief?”

“Naw.” The darkness clinging to his face recedes- the intensity of tastes and temperature cools. Tension dissipates with a soft exhale of smoke. “I know who stole it.”

“And you want me to find them for you?” The Dragon of the South Wind interprets.

That earns him a hearty laugh from the god- a grin takes the place of an unreadable line. The chair firmly comes to rest on all four legs, and the Spirit of the West takes his feet off the table, placing them back on the floor.

“Naw. The no-good thief is the gargoyles I got chained up in the living room.”

Chapter End Notes

anxious to know what you all think : )
Chapter Summary

The Dragon of the South Wind hunts down the gargoyle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I fail to understand what you want me to do, then,” The Dragon of the South Wind says, politely.

“Ain’t it obvious?”

“If it was obvious, I would not have asked,” he responds.

The ghouls all glance at one another. The Spirit of the West’s weather-beaten face reddens.

“Look, I got plans. We’re gonna beat that gargoyle up a bit an’ release him. We’ll chase him back to his den an’ get my Peacekeeper back. I want you to ride back-up an’ help me track him to the den.” He explains it in such a way that it seems to imply that it was obvious.

“What makes you think I have any experience with tracking?” The Dragon of the South Wind asks, faux-innocently.

The Spirit of the West falters. “I don’t. Just assumed, with yer mastery of the bow an’ horseridin’ skill, that you’d have learned how to track, too.”

“Your assumption was correct,” The Dragon of the South Wind nods. “I am… Acceptable at tracking. And in exchange for this, you will allow me to stay in your Domain?”

“Yeah,” He says. “But after I’m gonna ask you to do the same kinda shit my ranch hands do. Driving cattle. Shearing sheep. Chasing chickens. Harvesting some of the crops I got out back. I’ll let’cha stay here an’ give you three square meals, plus place to sleep an’ shower. It’s a fair deal.”

“It is,” The Southern Dragon ventures, tentatively.

“Good. I’m glad ya agree. Done with breakfast?”

“Yes,” The Southern Dragon says.

“Perfect.” The Spirit of the West promptly gets up, gestures for the Dragon of the South Wind to follow. He does so, and reaches to take his dirty plate with him.

The ghoul sitting next to him harshly swats his hand- he jerks back, tightening into defensive stance on instinct. The ghouls’ milky eyes bore into his. Her curls bounce as she slowly, pronouncedly, shakes her head.

It’s the first time any of the ghouls have even acknowledged the Southern Dragon, as far as he’s aware, and it sends a chill up his spine that he tries to stifle.

“What?” The Southern Dragon asks.
She points at the Spirit of the West. Makes a shoo-ing gesture with her hand. The Southern Dragon steps away from the table, cautiously relaxing his posture. The ghoul turns back towards her food.

Someone else will take his plate, then, he presumes.

Walking alongside the Spirit of the West, the Dragon of the South Wind can make a few more observations. The god has strong, self-assured footsteps, and with every step, he jingles. The source of this curious sound is rotating pieces of metal attached at his boot heel. Spurs, in the shape of stars. The points are dulled.

He is taller than the Dragon of the South Wind- though not so much taller that The Southern Dragon feels dwarfed by the other’s stature. So far, the god has ( whether purposely or not ) appeared to have done everything in his power to appear approachable and humble. It’s an unusual quality in a deity, especially a young one, which are typically more belligerent and blustery than older, wiser gods.

They head out into the main hallway. The Dragon of the South Wind had seen it on his way in, but he hadn’t stopped to linger. He doesn’t like the feeling of voyeurism- watching the intimate inner workings of someone else’s home, while good to get a basic impression of them for tactical purposes, feels strange when he isn’t searching for weaknesses.

The room is large. A wooden, carefully carved ceiling fan precariously perches overhead, presently motionless. It has a multitude of lights attached to it, though they’re off, with the windows and their sunlight being preferred over electricity. There’s a few tables off to the side- with well-loved games of checkers and battered packs of cards still left out. Most of the tables are snug against the wall.

The walls are lined with old, grey-brown photographs. Some of them are of people- smiling as they hug their horses or hold a chicken in their arms. They are vintage, not recreations- they have dates ascribed to them, most a range of years from the nineteenth century.

Some of them are old newspaper clippings, framed. Headlines, political cartoons, police descriptions, column excerpts. The majority are from the stereotypically southern states, he notices, and between the seventeen hundreds and the new millenium. One of the clippings is from only a year ago, about a western movie that did well in American markets- *The Six Gun Killer*, with a June 2027 release date- and the oldest is from an American author persuading others to ignore the 1763 Proclamation Line, dated 1763, October 15th.

A large dart board has been attached to one of the walls, with plumed darts still stuck on. Parallel to this, on the opposite side of the manor, is a positively massive painting of the Spirit of the West, poised atop a rearing palomino horse.

There’s a few various other decorations. Flags that the Dragon of the South Wind doesn’t recognize- mostly full of blues, reds, and whites- high up on the walls, even higher than the ornate ceiling fan. Almost as though they’ve been hidden.

“What are those?” The Dragon of the South Wind asks without thinking, pointing up.

“They’re the west,” The Spirit of the West says, a little proudly. “State flags. You get your classics like Texas and Oklahoma and California, but'cha also get Ohio, Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Oregon. If ya think about it, near half the states are the ‘west’. Depends how your own personal feelin’s.”

“And the rest?” There are a few cow skulls, pelts, firearms, even a spool of rope, hung up on the walls.
“Jus’ decor.”

The last item of interest in the room— which the Dragon of the South Wind had been purposely not looking at— is the fireplace. It’s old, brick, with black ash scorching the interior, with a hearth and mantle cleared of anything.

In its place, a gargoyle has been lashed to it. Shackles pin it to the brick above, steel bands looped around its bulky wrists and ankles, lifted just high enough so that its feet do not touch the ground. The mantle shelf cuts into its back, forcing it to bend its stomach forward to avoid having it jab against its spine.

It turns its oblong head towards the Dragon of the South Wind. It tweets, softly.

“Do you know anythin’ about gargoyles?” The Spirit of the West asks.

“...Only the simplest things,” The Southern Dragon responds. “I know that they are constructs. They are second to creatures like atronachs and centaurs. Stronger than golems.”

“Do they need to eat? Can’t have him starvin’ to death, but I don’t wanna make him think that I’ll reward him with food for bein’ a little bastard.” The Spirit of the West studies the creature.

“I do not know,” The Dragon of the South Wind responds. “I have not studied modern, European gargoyles.”

“Hell. We should prol’ly just let him go now,” The Spirit of the West taps his foot impatiently. “Jus’ in case.”

The Southern Dragon nods, ever so slightly. “And afterward? What will you do?”

He frowns. “Ain’t thought ‘bout that yet. Don’t wanna kill it. Maybe relocate it. Away from my ranch.”

The Southern Dragon nods again.

The Spirit of the West whistles. A few ghouls troop out from the dining room, their white eyes narrowed dutifully.

“Clara, Jane, you two go grab some horses. Benedict, David, Esadowa- as soon as they get back, saddle up. You, Hanzo- want you to take a horse and lead the party after the gargoyle.”

“And what will you be doing?” He asks.

“I’m gonna let the gargoyle go,” He says. “I can travel distances much quicker’n anyone could ever run, ride, or fly, so I’m gonna stay behind to cut it loose. Once the gargoyle’s out’ve the manor, I’m gonna head to the stables, grab a horse, catch up, and take over leadership. Don’t worry.”

The Dragon of the South Wind glances back at the troop of ghouls. Three women, two men. Benedict, he recognizes- a wiry, gangly man wearing suspenders and a white, breezy shirt. The others, he does not.

He’s to command these ghouls. He has the feeling they do not appreciate it— they have seniority over him, and he is a newcomer.

None of them seem overtly mutinous, though. The Spirit of the West hadn’t scolded them for saying anything.
Maybe the promise of the god taking over again soothed their worries. Or maybe they have faith in the Dragon of the South Wind’s ability to lead. Their blank expressions and voiceless motion make it very, very difficult to discern what they’re thinking.

Two of the ghouls, presumably Jane and Clara, step forward and leave the manor. The Dragon of the South Wind follows behind- Benedict, David, and Esadowa follow up until a point, stopping in the shade of the porch.

He goes with Jane and Clara, on a long walk over a flat dirt path, the sun beating down on their backs. There’s a fenced-in patch of wheat to their left, and a second fenced-in portion of grass to their right. A cow hangs its head over the edge, braying softly to the lot of them. One of the ghoul women turns to it and waves.

The walk is brisk. Seven minutes, and they come upon a large barn and pasture. A handful of horses play, happily, in their corral- rearing and whinnying at one another, mock-fighting and bucking for no reason. Some of the horses are unusual, such as a coal-black stallion with glowing red eyes and fangs, or a pure-white mare with massive white wings that occasionally launches into flight and soars for a moment before coming back down.

When Jane and Clara come to the fence, a few horses canter up to them. One of them takes a running start and leaps over the fence- the Dragon of the South Wind scrambles out of the way to avoid being crushed, and the horse is unabashed, trying to steal an apple that Jane produces from her pocket.

The process of getting them ready is lengthy, particularly since they have to tack up six squirming horses. It has been a long time since he’s had to tack his own horse, and he does so very slowly. His brushing and cleaning of the hooves is inexpert, so much so that one of the ghouls needs to aid him. He can’t tell if it’s with exasperation or good-natured understanding. It makes him, once again, feel very uneasy.

The saddle is easier. Despite the fact that a western-style saddle is different than what he’s used to, the fundamental principle of putting it on is mostly the same. He knows of the differences between the two common varieties of horse riding and tack, and he tells himself the transition will not be difficult.

“Should we get one for your master?” The Southern Dragon asks, tightening the girth around one of the horses’ middles. It snorts through its nostrils, but doesn’t kick or attempt to bite. “There are seven of us.”

There’s no discernible response. He presumes the Spirit of the West will saddle his own horse.

“We should hurry. It has been quite some time.”

The ghouls seem to agree. One of them lifts up her wrist, showing her watch. They’ve wasted forty minutes out here, getting the horses ready.

Bringing them back is another process- one of them is ill-behaved and keeps trying to bite the Southern Dragon, with little success after the first attempt. Clara and Jane do not attempt to help him, and the tactic quickly becomes learning to adapt to its mood and keep his distance. It calms before they reach the porch.

Muffled yelling comes from inside the manor house. The Spirit of the West, it appears, verbally berating the gargoyle.

The other riders step off the porch.
Jane fans herself with her hat. David nods. There’s a combination of head tossing and slight changes in body language from all of the ghouls as they move towards the horses.

Their nonverbal conversations make the Dragon of the South Wind feel a strange combination of paranoia and intruderism, like he simultaneously has no right to “eavesdrop” on their pseudo-conversations and that they are brazenly talking bad about him to his face.

He has long since learned to ignore such feelings. Even if they are talking about him, what good does it do to know that? They are immortal, eternal beings under the Spirit of the West. He could hardly fight one in an honorable duel.

He mounts one of the horses. The saddle feels odd, but is something he will adjust to. The other ghouls climb atop their horses with practiced ease.

The manor’s door is opened by another ghoul. Jim, or James, or John. The Dragon of the South Wind vaguely recalls him from yesterday.

“Get outta here!” The Spirit of the West hollers from inside. “You stupe! You varmint! Git, git!”

There’s a tremendous skittering, crashing sound. A moment later, the gargoyle sprints through the front door, claws tearing through the turf as it blindly sprints forward.

None of the ghouls move a muscle. The Spirit of the West dashes through the front door, to the porch, huffing.


He sprints off in the direction of the stables, and the Dragon of the South Wind thinks to himself, despairingly- Why doesn’t that fool get one of us to ride him to the barn? It would be far faster- but he doesn’t want to cast doubt on the god in front of his loyal ranch hands.

“Onward,” He says, instead. He spurs his horse and it moves, galloping after the gargoyle at a steady pace.

There are initial difficulties. For one, he and his horse do not have an intimate connection yet. He has to learn the horse’s peculiarities while riding it at an uncomfortable speed over unusual terrain. Horses are individuals- some don’t like a rider leaning in certain ways, or don’t like certain slackenings or tightening of the reins. Some find a bit intolerable, others don’t mind. Some have preferred styles of riding- Western or English- and it appears his horse has a Western preference when the Southern Dragon is an English-style rider.

All of this he has to balance while giving directions to the other ranch hands, keeping the gargoyle at a reasonable distance while not losing sight of it, and trying to stay in the saddle. It’s a task that demands intelligence, leadership, quick thinking, riding skill, and a cool head.

As they ride forward and the Dragon of the South Wind coasts over the initial terror and confusion, he realizes that the reason the Spirit of the West gave him this task was a test. One with important consequences of failure.

Did the god really have so much faith in-?

One of the ghouls leans across and smacks him in the arm, then points towards the horizon.

The tell-tale glint of water shines up ahead, a few dark green shapes clustered around it. A river, banks bristling with trees. From this distance, he can’t tell if it’s too wide to jump, nor how shallow it
is. The gargoyle does not appear to be slowing down.

It takes a running start and leaps, landing in the water with a tremendous splash, sucked under the glittering surface nigh instantly. It pops back up, ten feet downstream, getting swept by the current. It flails in the water, clearly not built for swimming. However, it gets lucky and manages to sink its claws into the opposite bank. It hauls itself out, soaking wet, and continues its sprint.

The Dragon of the South Wind slows his stallion before he gets to the riverbank. Too deep to traverse, too much current. They can’t swim or walk through it.

He judges the distance.

“We can jump it,” He says, the words to convince both the others and himself. He steers his stallion back. The ghouls follow him without visible complaint.

The Dragon of the South Wind runs his horse. Gradually, faster, faster, until he trusts the speed and they approach the river. Too late for doubt now. If the horse spooked, or if he’s misjudged the distance, that’s his cross.

They fly, for a short time. His stomach turns in the split second where they are off the ground-

Then they land with a teeth-rattling thump on the other side.

No time to relax.

“No time to lose,” The Southern Dragon barks.

The next ranch hands vault over with their horses. First David, then Esadowa, then Jane, then Clara. Benedict shifts back and forth, indecisively toying with his reins.

“We do not have time for this,” The Dragon of the South Wind warns.

Benedict shakes his head, gesturing with his hands for the rest of them to go on. The ghouls exchange exasperated glances, and Jane gestures violently with one hand, but Benedict turns and canters off to the west.

“We will go on without him,” The Southern Dragon mandates. The ghouls do not argue.

The gargoyle left a trail of water over the grass, but not for too far; either the trail baked in the sun or the gargoyle dripped off all the excess after less than twenty feet.

To make things even more difficult, the grass has been disturbed recently, by cattle or some other hoofed beast- the trail is too muddled to track.

He’s yet again left with the indecisive task of leadership. The ghouls all look to him.

He won’t crack under pressure.

*I won’t fail.*

His father trained him better than that.

“Give me your gun,” He speaks to the nearest ranch hand, who defensively shifts backward. “Trust me.”

The ranch hand- Esodawa- contemplates it for a moment. She turns over her pistol. The model is old,
but it still appears functional.

“Dragon, hunt my enemies!”

He shoots straight up. The familiar stinging surge of his dragons prickles the line of his tattoo underneath his shirt, and a blaze of blue light launches out of the barrel alongside the bullet. The Dragons split in the sky, swirling elegantly, scenting the air for his chosen prey. They tug at their master’s heart, at his chest, at his very being- they are hungry, eager to obey his demand.

After a moment, they turn east, barreling through the sky. A sudden feeling of weakness makes the Dragon of the South Wind’s grip on the reins momentarily falter, but he recovers.

He hands Esodawa her pistol back.

“They will lead us to the gargoyle,” The Southern Dragon says, exhaling hard. “All we need to do is follow them.”

The ghouls look around at one another in surprise, but obey his order. Soon, there are five horses galloping after the flickering shapes in the sky.

And not much longer after, a sixth joins them. Not Benedict, but the Spirit of the West, mounted atop his palomino. He appears from the dirt- lunging out of it like a sand spider, with an impressive showering of earth that inexplicably leaves the god and his horse completely clean.

“Howdy, y’all,” He calls. “What’d I miss?”

“We are in close pursuit of the creature,” The Dragon of the South Wind provides. “My Dragons are chasing him.”

The Spirit of the West tips his hat up and squints at the sky. “Huh. So they are. An’ where’s Benedict?”

“We were separated at the river,” The Southern Dragon says, eyes fixed on the Dragons. “I presumed he’s finding another way around.”

“He’ll catch up eventually,” The Spirit of the West says. “Good work, keepin’ this thing tailed.”

“Thank you.” He dips his head slightly.

No obstacles rise before them. No new rivers, forests, hoards of oxen, rabbit warrens- either the Spirit of the West is quietly reshaping the terrain as they run after the gargoyle, or it picked a very clear path to run across.

Eventually it gets within sight again, and they’re able to slow the horses and give them a break.

“It cannot possibly be much further,” The Southern Dragon says, eventually, though his voice is soft and dubious. “The creature is nesting in your territory, isn’t it? We must be close.”

“Never underestimate li’l bastards like these things,” The Spirit of the West grumbles, disgustedly. “Could run for days to get back-n-forth ’tween its den and here.”

“We will not be on horseback for days,” The Dragon of the South Wind says, but it’s more request than demand.

“Naw,” He says. “Ghouls gotta eat an’ sleep, just like you. Plus, saddle rash. Wouldn’t wish it on anybody, much less my ranch hands. If it turns out to be days of pursuit, hell, might need to hire a
Horseman an’ try this dumb bullshit again.”

Unpleasantness touches the back of his mind. The Dragon of the South Wind had met some of the Horsemen before—two of them, right after he killed Genji. The gargantuan Conquest, and the smaller but none less intimidating War. The *sensations* that’d been radiating off of them—

He does not want to meet the Horsemen *ever* again. They’re not built to interact with mortals on a close scale.

“We will catch it ourselves and retrieve your Weapon,” The Dragon of the South Wind says instead. “We will not need a Horseman.”

The Spirit of the West inclines his head towards the Southern Dragon, a smile cracking his concerned visage. “Hmph. You think so?”

“It cannot possibly be much further,” He echoes, stubbornly.

“Well, shoot. I dunno why, but for some reason, I believe you.” The Spirit of the West tips his hat up. “Let’s go get my gun.”

The ride isn’t that much longer. The grass starts thinning, from a lush green to a straw gold. It starts getting blessedly cooler, transitioning from hot summer sun to a more wintry chill.

“We’re leaving my Domain,” The Spirit of the West rumbles, softly. “Shit. Ain’t gonna be as strong there, an’ the ghouls can’t come.”

“They can’t?”

“Nope,” He says. “Ranch hands can’t leave the ranch. It’s gotta be us. Esa, David, Jane, Clara—go back, find Benedict. Hanzo an’ I are gonna deal with this ourselves.”

The ghouls nod, heads bobbing out of time. Their horses peel away from the formation, turning and trotting back, deeper into the ranch.

A fence looms nearby.

The Spirit of the West speeds his horse, and it soars over the fence. The Dragon of the South Wind pushes aside any misgivings and his, too, vaults elegantly over the wood. The last of the magical warmth of the Domain fades, like mist in sunshine.

“There,” The Spirit of the West seems… Different. A little more tired. “Hell. It just ran under that tree stump, see? A den, I’ll bet my ass.”

He slows his horse. The Dragon of the South Wind does the same, and when the Spirit of the West climbs off his and ties his reins to a wispy tree, he copies the motion.

A bird flies out from the naked branches, tweeting a sing-song warning. It’s curiously yellow, unlike any bird that the Southern Dragon’s ever seen.

They continue on foot from there. Walk, slowly, with grass crunching and wind blowing.

“Did I pass your test?” The Dragon of the South Wind says, tacitly.

“My test?”

“Placing me in charge. It was a test.” He says, bluntly.

There’s a comfortable silence. They settle on either side of the mouth of the burrow, staring down into the blackness.

It’s just small enough to accommodate the Southern Dragon- possibly even the Spirit of the West, if he tightened his stomach.

“I do not think I’m going to put my hand down there,” he deadpans, and the Spirit of the West laughs.

“Could use water to flush him out,” The Spirit says. “Or collapse the ceiling down on him.”

The Dragon of the South Wind glances up, at the pair of Dragons circling overhead like hawks.

“Let me try something,” he says. One of the dragons slowly peels away, drifting down to them until it rests at the Dragon of the South Wind’s side.

“In there,” The Southern Dragon says, indicating the burrow with his hand. “Don’t kill it. Chase it out.”

The Dragon slowly lumbers forward in the air, snout protruding into the den.

The gargoyle unexpectedly bursts out, wailing in a high, reedy tone. The Spirit of the West lets it run, and impatiently crawls into the earth as soon as the dragon rejoins its twin.

After a moment, the Spirit of the West lets out a triumphant cry.

He wriggles his way out of the burrow, face smudged with dirt, a glinting gun held proudly aloft.

=*

The rain cascades harshly down from above.

The figure in the woods wraps her shawl tighter around her shoulders. The wind screams like an indignant banshee, tearing her hood back. Her face is pelted with sheets of icy rain.

Shrike knickers, softly. Fareeha keeps her hand firmly on the horse’s reins.

“Not much further,” She promises, though her voice shakes. It’s been a long, long journey. Her feet are tired and her limbs ache. Her thighs are chafed and her back is sore.

But she persists.

Shrike’s brown eyes shine dubiously. She does not protest to Fareeha’s remark, though, and continues to carefully picks her way through the sodden undergrowth alongside the demigod.

“This Inventor,” Fareeha says, teeth chattering, “Has the answers.”

Shrike does not visibly react.

“It’s not a wild goose chase,” She assures, though it’s more to herself and not the horse. “I’ve come
too far for this to be fake.”

Chapter End Notes

One thing i struggled with, so much, was wanting to call the ceiling fan / chandelier a chandeleir-ing fan. i eventually decided that it wouldn't fit the tone of hanzo's narration, but i agonized over the decision for days

EDIT: not much longer after this chapter goes up we'll hit 10,000 views !! thank you guys for reading !!
Tea

Chapter Summary

Fareeha gets some answers from the Inventor and her companion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Inventor is small, for a god.

She’s stick-thin, sinewy, with arms that aren’t old enough to burgeon with muscle yet- twiggy in a way particular to the young. Her face is round, cheeks plump, with skin that glows with a youthful enthusiasm. Her nose is broad, her eyes dark with intelligence and determination. Her brows and cheeks are spotted with white paint, her hair tied behind her head to keep it out of her face while she works. She can be no more than eleven, or twelve, but Fareeha knows better. This god is older than her- older than a myriad of other gods- and while her childlike face may suggest naivety, she is still wise beyond her features.

The Inventor has a companion with her, who stands as a stark opposite. The centaur- a forest spirit, and Fareeha is hesitant to name it as a construct, a child of the Iris and Nature, but she thinks it is one- settles around the Inventor, like a queen with a kit nestled against its belly. The Inventor’s back rests comfortably against the centaur’s flank, adding to this warm, familial impression.

The centaur is a being made of wood and stone. It has a face comprised of rock, with wooden horns- its body is mostly wood, with a stone skeleton beneath, like some strange twist on skin and bone. Vines lace up and down its body, and at some points on the centaur there are graceful drapes of red and gold autumn leaves, almost like clothes. It has wooden ears, pointed like a horse, and large horns that sprout lemon-yellow mushrooms at the tips. Its hooves are cloven, made of rock.

It was the centaur that lead Fareeha here. The half-Horseman had been caught, out in a storm, with Shrike- her mother’s horse that she had stolen several months ago, following the death of Fareeha’s lover- and had been wandering a forest with no iota of idea where she could find the Inventor.

The centaur had spotted her, hailed her, and told her there was a place she could seek shelter. Fareeha had stubbornly replied that she would not find refuge until she found the Inventor.

The centaur’s eyes had lit up and it told her to come along- she knew precisely where the Inventor was, as she was a personal friend of the god. Five minutes later, Fareeha had entered a crack between two gigantic stones, and once she’d squeezed through the gap with Shrike they’d made their way into a...

Workshop, of sorts. It wasn’t large, as Fareeha had been expecting. Nor was it small- Perhaps twenty feet by twenty feet, with rows and rows of shelves full of scraps of wire, sheets of metal, circuitry, screwdrivers, hammers, and some glimmering bits of metal that she couldn’t even place. There was a center workshop table, with a mechanical husk of some beast Fareeha couldn’t even attempt to name- wires forked in and out of the thing, like some kind of mechanical cat’s cradle. The thing was quiet, dormant, and Fareeha privately wished it would stay that way.
The Inventor was working on it, hands steadfast as she prodded in its mechanical innards. The centaur cleared her throat, gently, and she looked up.

*Visitors,* the Inventor gasped, hands flying to her mouth. *Oh, please, sit.*

Fareeha had sat. Shrike waited by the exit, nostrils twitching nervously. The horse’s instincts were keener than Fareeha’s, but the fact that the horse had agreed to embark on this venture was good enough for Fareeha to keep at it.

The Inventor had brought out a hot plate, laid out some richly colored rugs for them to sit on, and had put a kettle on. The centaur had settled down, and then the Inventor had laid against her, and they were at the present.

“So,” The Inventor gingerly adjusts the electronic hot plate’s temperature. “I heard you were looking for me?”

“Yes,” Fareeha says. “You have no idea what I’ve been through to find you.”

“I hope I do not disappoint.”

“You will not,” The centaur assures. It has a strange quality about its voice- it reverberates, harmoniously, in its throat. “No one has ever been disappointed by you.”

“There’s a first for everything, Orisa,” The Inventor chides, softly.

The centaur is named. Orisa. Fareeha didn’t think that people named constructs.

“Besides, I’ve never had this particular person come to me before,” The Inventor continues. “This is the first time we’ve met…?”

Her tone trails off, implying a question.

“Fareeha,” Fareeha hurries to say.

“Fareeha,” The Inventor confirms. The way she says it is with a childish triumph, like she’s just solved a puzzle she’s been working at for ages. “Do you have a last name?”

Fareeha suddenly feels quite foolish. “No.”

“You’re not a mortal?” The Inventor’s brows rise.

“No,” She shakes her head. “Not… Exactly. Mortal father and a nonmortal mother.”

“A demigod,” The Inventor says. “Hmm. Those don’t happen too often anymore. The last great demigod I remember-”

Her brow tightens, and her lips shift back and forth, unhappy.

“Doomfist,” Orisa finishes. “Maybe it would be best if we did not dredge up old history. If this Fareeha is bad, I will take necessary action to stop her from causing harm. Do not worry.”

Fareeha senses there is a story between the three of them- the legendary hero-turned-villain, the Inventor, and the centaur- but she doesn’t press. That doesn’t concern what she's here for.

“I was wondering-”
Orisa cuts Fareeha off. Her glowing yellow eyes flash, spinning in their sockets and constricting unnaturally.

“She is the daughter of a Horseman!” The declaration is bold, said without the expected trappings of fright and disgust. “Famine.”

“Hum,” The Inventor taps her finger with her chin. “I recognized Famine’s horse. I was going to ask how you got it.”

Fareeha suddenly feels very foolish again. “I- It’s a long story.”

“Is it why you need help? I can’t help you if your mom wants her horse back.” The Inventor’s tone is apologetic. “I’m better at fixing machines than relationships.”

“No- I want… A question answered.” Fareeha obliges.

“Wouldn’t it be better to go to a knowledge god?” Orisa asks, gently. “Athena-”

“I don’t want Athena, or the Yeti, or Vulcan,” Fareeha balls her hands into fists. “I sought you out because I thought you would be- impartial.”

“Current outlook,” Orisa’s eyes spin again. “Concerning.”

“Shh,” The Inventor waves one gloved hand, her dark eyes sparkling with interest. “Ask your question.”

“Is the Angel of Death evil?” Fareeha has to force herself to speak loud enough to be heard.

The centaur’s pupils shrink, then glance across the room. The Inventor looks slightly uncomfortable.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I love- loved- her, and I need… I’m not really sure. Closure?”

The electric kettle beeps, sharp and clear, then falls silent. Orisa’s body shifts as she rises, moving to another part of the workshop to get cups.

The Inventor seems to be thinking over her answer.

Fareeha tries to return from the edge of anxiety. The longer she’s denied an answer the more worried she gets.

“That’s never a yes or no question,” the Inventor tries, gently. “And I didn’t interact with her very much. It- Isn’t my place to say.”

Fareeha’s heart trembles as she fights to keep her face impassive.

Four months, wasted-!

She must not have done a good a job as she thought, because the Inventor takes a look at her and squirms.

“From what I know,” The Inventor begins, hesitantly, “Which isn’t too much, I swear- she did a lot of bad stuff. From there, it’s up to you to decide if what she did was evil.”

Fareeha leans forward. “I heard some things. That she- forced Pain to hurt people, in order to get her
out of the pantheon.”

“Oh,” The Inventor glances away. “I’ve heard that before, but I know her for something else. She was the one who told Doomfist to find me, and I- I think she knew, beforehand, what would happen to him.”

“What would happen to him? What do you mean? What happened?”

At that particular moment, Orisa chooses to come back with the cups. The Inventor is silent, lips pursed in thought, while the centaur pours tea.

Fareeha tries it. It’s warm. Soothing. Sweet, although she hadn’t seen any sugar or honey poured in.

“It was a long time ago,” The Inventor says, finally. “Doomfist was well known at the time. They called him the Savior. He was a loved son of a god of strength and a mortal man- legendary in his day for his helpful deeds and goodness. It… Didn’t last.”

“I will take the story from here,” The centaur says, insistent but not unreasonably firm. “Please, drink your tea.”

The centaur settles at the Inventor’s back, and the god fits snugly against her side. The Inventor sips her tea at Orisa’s indication, clearly in thought.

It’s hard not to see her as an unhappy child, and Fareeha has to actively fight instincts to awkwardly tell her it’ll be okay. Orisa cuts in before Fareeha can muster up the sympathy to pat the god on the shoulder.

“The Angel of Death sought him out,” the room seems to darken, or perhaps, the centaur’s eyes get brighter as she recalls the tale. “Though why is shrouded in secrecy. No one knows what they said-what bargain they struck, or why. But we know he spoke with her; Doomfist came to the Inventor many years ago and said the Angel told him that a weapon of unbelievable power could be made. There was no reason to deny him. He was well-known, loved by many. The Inventor crafted him his Gauntlet, and he took it. The change was nearly immediate. As soon as it touched his fingers, the Inventor stood in a ruined workshop, and Doomfist had fled with his prize. She tried to pursue him, to stop him; however-”

“My physical form limited me. I am too-” She gestures to herself, her body, frustrated. “Young. I couldn’t keep up with him or beat him in a fight. He got away.”

“He attacked a band of constructs,” Orisa continues. She raises one hand, strokes the Inventor’s hair soothingly. “Centaurs. My herd.”

Her voice trails, sad. “They were destroyed in an instant. Myself included.”

“But-” Fareeha begins to protest.

“In a moment,” Orisa promises. “I will explain. The Inventor found us while she was chasing Doomfist. The Iris whispered in her ear- while the others of my herd had their souls collected by my lady for reincarnation, I remained. I had been left behind to help the Inventor combat this new threat. The Inventor very carefully caged me, and brought me to a new workshop. She built a new body for me- not one of flesh and fur, like I was accustomed, but one of stone and wood. My soul took root in what she had crafted, and I have been her companion ever since.”

“What about Doomfist?” Fareeha can’t help but feel invested in the tale.
“One of the Reapers trapped him, not long after his crime spree,” The Inventor says. “As far as we’re all aware, he’s still trapped. Though it’s possible he’s broken free and kept a very low profile.”

“For our sakes, I hope he has not,” Orisa’s eyes constrict. “But Doomfist’s ultimate fate is not relevant to the question you came with, Fareeha. We have given you one of the Angel of Death’s evil deeds. She corrupted Doomfist- or made him seek corruption- and has inflicted great damage on myself and my brothers and sisters. Whether this action overrides her love for you, and your love for her- it is for you to decide.”

Fareeha weighs on this. More and more it seems as though the Angel of Death had put on a pretty facade to ensnare her- and for what purpose she was to be ensnared scares her. Attacked, like Pain, to raise the Angel up? Corrupted, like Doomfist, to be an agent of strength and chaos?

The love- the Angel’s love- wasn’t real. Fareeha’s known that ever since the Angel of Death died. It’s been gradually seeping into her, like ice-cold water dripping down her spine, but she always knew, and she’s come to an uneasy acceptance.

Fareeha downs the last of her tea and suddenly finds it hard to meet their eyes. “Would you mind if I… Stayed for a little while? I have the answer to my question.”

The Inventor smiles. The centaur’s eyes crinkle slightly, a smile without a mouth.

“Of course.”

“Good,” Fareeha says. “Just- one thing first.”

She gets up- setting her cup down- and heads over to Shrike. The horse snorts, quietly, and Fareeha gets the keen impression that it already knows what she intends.

*Can’t convince me that bit an’ bridle ain’t just for show.*

“I don’t know how linked she is with you,” Fareeha says, falteringly. “I don’t know if you can- really tell her anything. But tell her that I needed to do this. I am sorry.”

Shrike tosses its head up, acknowledging. It turns and trots out of the workshop, tail swishing behind it.

Fareeha turns back to the centaur and god, retakes her place on the rug, and pours herself more tea.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for the incredible delay- this chapter took nearly a month to put out.

I've been very busy as of late, which is why I haven't kept a more consistent update schedule. I had finals, one of my cats was diagnosed with some kind of lung infection/cancer and my mother was forced to put him to sleep, I got a job for community service hours so I can graduate, etc etc.

I promise the next chapter won't take a month, but I doubt it'll be next Friday.

All that said, enjoy your weekend, guys.
Peacekeeper

Chapter Summary

The Spirit of the West gets his Weapon back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Spirit of the West shakes clumps of dirt off of his clothes, dusts off his pants and serape, and pulls on his beard to get rid of any earthy residue.

“Finally. Finally. D’you know what it’s like t’be a god without his gun?” The Spirit of the West regards the revolver with sharp, intelligent eyes. They burn with an unfamiliar red flame, hotter than the warmth that the Southern Dragon had seen earlier. Almost as if the Southern Dragon stares into them too long, it’ll set him ablaze.

The Spirit of the West twirls his revolver in a practiced, but loose, grip.

There’s a faint but noticeable change to the aura radiating off of him, now that he has his Weapon back. The former sensation of summery sunshine, wind that blew a touch too hot, now rages like the scalding winds of a distant prairie fire. The rustle of overripe wheat in a fall breeze has changed to the strident scream of a train whistle, the thunderous sound of wheels tearing over the tracks. The smell of hay and horse is more like sulfur and ashes, and for a second, he thinks he catches a whiff of rotting flesh.

He’s hit with an intense scene that captures his mind; endless land, made of dry and cracked mud, without a promise of water or civilization for hundreds of miles. In the center of this barren wasteland, there’s a broken wagon with a destroyed back axle and a snapped wheel. There are the bodies of two oxen, still chained to their yoke, left to bake in the unforgiving sun. Vultures circle overhead, the bravest of them diving down to tear strips of flesh off the dried carcasses. An old man, dark hair streaked with grey, stares up at them and presses his hand to his heart, his pulse faint and weak.

God will carry him to Heaven, and his body will be left for the vultures.

The Southern Dragon is taken into the body of a wild mustang- his nose is wet with blood, his lungs stab with a furious pain, and his hooves sting. But he knows that he must get away from the men on horseback, from their loosely coiled weapons that bind and pin. His heart threatens to beat its way out of his chest, and his muscles burn from sustained effort of his gallop.

When a rope is thrown over his neck, he screams a defiant bellow, and charges straight for a nearby gorge to throw himself off.

The Dragon of the South Wind snaps out of it, startled, when the Spirit of the West stuffs his Weapon back into the ornate leather holster at his hip. The fire in the god’s eyes remains unsnuffed, but the furious heat dims and the… Visions… go away.

The smells, sensations, sounds, have all gone, leaving just the two of them.
The Southern Dragon wonders if he should’ve helped the Spirit of the West get his Weapon back after all. That was… A kind of intensity that he had never felt before.

“You did good, Shimada. I’ll credit ya that.” The Spirit of the West tugs on his beard. “Now, I want an explanation for somethin’.”

The Dragon of the South Wind inclines his head, indicating that the god should continue, but it’s hesitant. He still feels a touch… rattled. The vivid sensation of defiance- of the decision to kill himself rather than be captive- is still fresh in his mind.

He doesn’t disguise the wariness on his face well enough, because the Spirit of the West frowns.

“Don’t look like I’m about to bite your head off,” The Spirit of the West says. “I’ve got a bit of my punch back, but that don’t mean I’m gonna hit you with it.”

The Southern Dragon nods, taciturn. This does not assuage the Spirit of the West any, whose expression stretches in incredulity and indignance.

“I ain’t a double-crosser,” The Spirit of the West insists. “You did good work an’ I ain’t in the business of killin’ or hurtin’ people who do the jobs I ask ’em to. That’s just bad practice.”

The Dragon of the South Wind, again, nods. Passivity is serving him well so far.

The Spirit of the West seems to realize he’s not getting through to the Southern Dragon. A deep frown etches itself into his face.

“We should get back t’ the ranch an’ celebrate. Maybe box Benedict ‘round the ears for bein’ yellow.” He suggests.

That’s supposed to be a joke, or to make the Dragon of the South Wind feel better. It doesn’t, really.

“I’ll get the horses.”

When he turns, the Spirit of the West catches him by the shoulder.

“Hey... You ain’t thinkin’ about leavin’ on your first day, are you?” The god asks.

“I would not abandon safety so easily,” The Dragon of the South Wind responds, voice flat. “Genji is nearly certain death. I will take what I have been given without complaint.”

He finishes turning around, and the Spirit of the West lets go of his shoulder. The two of them trudge towards the horses. The Southern Dragon’s mare lifts her head up from where she’s been snuffling at the grass, snorting air into his face as a sort of greeting. He strokes her nose.

They mount their horses and set off an easy pace towards the ranch.

As they near the fence encircling his Domain, the Spirit of the West snaps his fingers. The wood splinters into sawdust, granting them passage, and once they walk through, it reforms itself sturdily behind them.

The sunshine is warmer, stronger, inside the ranch; but it’s a gradual change from the wintry air outside to the summery heat, giving the Southern Dragon time to adjust.

“What are you going to do with the gargoyle?” The Dragon of the South Wind asks. “It escaped.”

“Leave it be,” The Spirit of the West says. “We spooked it, an’ it ain’t comin’ back… An’ if it does
an’ tries to take my stuff, I’m gonna kill it.”

His tone is matter-of-fact.

“Anyway. As I was sayin’, earlier,” The Spirit of the West clears his throat. “You did good work. I jus’ got a question for you, that I was gonna ask ‘fore we got all off-topic. Those, ah... dragon things you got.”

The Dragon of the South Wind glances at him, trying to read his expression. The god looks genuinely curious, lips slightly pursed, eyebrows slightly raised. It doesn’t fool the Southern Dragon—there’s an ulterior motive to the innocent query. Trying to figure out what kind of power the Southern Dragon holds, and trying to seem non-threatening by making idle, innocent conversation. It’s kind of astonishing he thought that the Southern Dragon wouldn’t see right through him.

“Ask,” He says, simply.

The Spirit of the West takes a hand off of his reins to scratch his beard, consideringly. “They got a range?”

“They are limited,” The Southern Dragon says. “By roughly a kilometer and a half.”

“That’s… How many in miles?”

“Nearly one.”

The Spirit of the West nods.

“How didja get ‘em? They’ve got a vintage kind of vibe to ‘em, like Old World god magic, but you’re a mortal. As human as they come.”

“They are specialized beings,” The Southern Dragon responds, loosely. “My clan, the Shimadas, was solely capable of creating constructs from light. The dragons are housed in the tattoo on a Shimada’s body; mine on my arm, Genji’s on his back, and my father—” He breaks off. “… Irrelevant. An ancient magic is woven into our flesh, and for a small price, we summon beasts of supreme power and wisdom to seek and destroy our enemies.”

“Small price?” The Spirit of the West tilts his head.

“Exhaustion. The dragon steals strength from you in exchange for its service.” He pauses, for just a beat. “It is well worth the cost.”

“... You said they were constructs?”

“Not in the traditional sense. They were not sculpted with clay or rock or jewels, nor are they powered by typical arcana. The Iris and nature do not birth them, like centaur or djinn. They are a creation of flesh, ink, and willpower.”

The Spirit of the West takes a moment to mull on that.

“Where’d you say you were from?”

“I didn’t,” He responds, flatly.

“Hah,” The Spirit of the West looks unamused. “Where’re you from, then?”

“Japan.” He tries to keep the touch of wistfulness out of his voice. “A place called Hanamura. Very
beautiful in its prime, but destroyed now. Genji saw to that.”

“My condolences fer your loss.” The Southern Dragon glances at him, sharply, but he sounds genuine. The Spirit of the West’s facial expression- one of sympathy- leads the Southern Dragon to believe he’s actually sorry.

Quiet stretches between them; the Southern Dragon offering no response other than an acknowledging nod. It isn’t long into the conversation’s lull that the Spirit of the West seems to get bored, or else uncomfortable with the spanning silence.

“So, s’a long ride back…” The Spirit of the West produces a cigar from nowhere, sticks it between his teeth, and lights it with a snap. “I’ve asked ya an awful lot. Got anythin’ you wanna ask me?”

A few questions come to mind, but they are polite inquiries that aren’t necessary. He already has all he needs to know. This god is powerful, laidback, and American; he’s willing to provide food, water, and shelter, both from the elements and Genji. What else is there he desperately needs to know?

The Spirit of the West misinterprets his silence. “Are you feelin’ okay? King used to be a doctor, back when he was alive. He could get’cha looked at.”

“I’m alright,” The Southern Dragon assures. “When you retrieved your weapon I was afflicted with… visions. They are still fresh in my mind, and they… Bother me.”

“Yeah,” The god says. “It happens. A god’s influence gits unchecked when he’s upset, or when he gets his Weapon back after he lost it for a while. What didja see?”

“A suicidal horse.” The Southern Dragon deadpans.

The Spirit of the West stifles a snort and consequently inhales his cigar smoke. He hacks a rough cough, pounds his chest, and manages a raspy “Oh”.

“I felt its conviction,” The Southern Dragon glances away, keeping his voice even. “Its determination to destroy itself rather than be captured. The feeling is starting to go away, but… It’s still disturbing.”

“Sorry,” The Spirit of the West apologizes. “Didn’t mean t’show you that. It won’t happen again.”

The Dragon of the South Wind guardedly nods. They’ll see if that promise turns out to be true or not.

They go the rest of the way in peace and quiet. The Spirit of the West makes sparse conversation, which the Southern Dragon makes a small effort to contribute to. His thighs begin hurting- chafed- from the time in the saddle, the small of his back keenly pinpointing with pain as he rides straight-spined, with tiny micro-adjustments to keep balanced. He suffers in silence, promising himself that they are almost there. He resigns himself to tomorrow’s promised soreness.

When the manor comes into view, he breathes an internal sigh of relief.

“Whoo, that was longer’n I thought. How’re you feeling?” The Spirit of the West glances at him, teeth squeezing the stump of his second cigar.

The Southern Dragon debates telling a falsehood.

“Sore,” he rasps, truthfully. The Spirit’s mouth twitches downward.
“I pushed ya too hard,” he says, guiltily.

“No,” The Southern Dragon insists. “I fulfilled my task.”

“I don’t rightly agree,” The god leans back in his saddle. “I don’t think it counts if you’re sufferin’.”

The Spirit of the West glances up at the sun, squinting, then looks back at the Southern Dragon. “Get some R&R, Hanzo. Ranch ran smooth without you, you can take a rest.”

He nods. The Dragon of the South Wind knows the line between accepting pain and self-flagellation, and he’s not interested in hurting himself or pushing himself too hard if there’s no greater purpose behind it.

The Spirit of the West’s dismount, once they reach the manor, is smooth and practiced. When the Southern Dragon’s boots hit the dirt, his knees buckle and he has a second where his stomach lurches dangerously; then his legs remember to take his weight. The god’s halfway into asking “you alright?” by the time he recovers, and he nods, unthinkingly.

The ghoul ranch hands pour out of the manor, spilling off of the porch and onto the dirt driveway, their dull white eyes wide and curious. Some of them cup their hands around their mouths, stomping their feet and throwing their fists in the air. The silence, despite what must be a twenty-person cacophony, is still unsettling. The only thing he can hear is their stamping feet, but even that is strange—it seems oddly muted, as though the sound is reluctant to reach the Southern Dragon’s ears and is only doing so because it must.

The Spirit of the West pulls his revolver out of its holster and proudly holds it aloft. The ghouls must erupt into an enormous cheer, because the Spirit of the West simultaneously grins as wide as he can and yells “Settle down! Settle!”

The Southern Dragon watches all of the noiseless, gaping mouths, and has to look away.

The majority of the crowd starts to surround the Spirit of the West, and the Southern Dragon spots his chance to mutely shoulder through the crowd, go up the porch, and back to his temporary room.

He is stopped before he even gets to the stairs. The ghouls who chased the gargoyle with him—Clara, Jane, Esodawa, and David, though Benedict is conspicuously missing—block the way.

Clara smacks him on the shoulder in a way that feels too hard to actually be friendly, but she’s still beaming. They jostle him, and although it’s not intended to be aggressive, it’s rough. Their mouths move, saying words he can’t hear, and when he just wants to rest, it strains his nerves.

“Move!” He says, sharply.

The Spirit of the West whistles, loudly, trying to get the crowd under control. The ghouls turn from the Southern Dragon or lapse in their celebration to stand at attention. It gives the Southern Dragon a chance to surreptitiously sidle up the porch stairs and push his way into the manor house.

He lingers in the doorway a moment, enough to catch an airy snippet from the Spirit of the West:

“Now, I’m thinkin’ a celebration is in order. Jane, d’you still remember how to fiddle…?”

The Southern Dragon closes the door behind himself, exhales deeply, and heads upstairs. His thighs hurt with every scrape of his pant leg against his skin, and the muscles pull with every step.

When he gets upstairs, he heads for his room—he quietly closes the door, then drops to the mattress.
He removes his boots, then his pants, and slides under the covers.

He lays there for a long while, not tired enough to properly sleep, but whenever he thinks about getting up he remembers the tenderness of his skin and decides moving is not worth it. He ends up staring at the ceiling and thinking.

Most of the shock from the visions has died off. He can’t quite remember the exact sensation of a weakly pulsing heartbeat, the scorching sun, and the ominous promise of the feasting vultures.

That is a mercy, he thinks.

He has no idea how long has passed- a while, he believes, maybe a couple hours, maybe a little longer- when his door opens. He lifts his head up, wary, as a ghoul walks in.

Benedict. His green skin is a lighter shade than the others, and his gangly frame and mop of curls is distinctive.

He’s bearing a plate of food, retaining some dignity in his posture while still not quite meeting the Southern Dragon’s eyes. He leaves the meal on the nightstand and hastily skitters out.

Breaded chicken, fried. Some thick white substance that takes a minute to identify as potato, with a divot holding a pool of gravy. There are some frilly greens soaked in dressing, two fluffy biscuits, chickpeas, and a glass of tea with… Ice cubes.

He can’t eat all of it, though he tries. It’s… Greasy, but food is food, and he won’t complain. Benedict slinks back in maybe thirty minutes later, gesturing to his plate, then the door.

“I’m finished,” The Dragon of the South Wind assures. Benedict takes his dishes and leaves.

The Southern Dragon feels almost bad for him. Benedict’s probably waiting on him at the Spirit of the West’s request, as a punishment for being- as the god had said- “yellow”.

He climbs out of bed- inhaling sharply through his teeth at the sting of the initial movement- and nudges the curtains open. The sun is starting to set.

He shuts the window and closes the curtains, slides back into bed, and closes his eyes.

The Southern Dragon wakes in darkness.

Sleep cloaks him like a heavy, inviting blanket, but his body demands he get up. Barely conscious, he climbs out of bed, puts on his discarded pants, and shuffles out into the hallway. His thighs hurt with every step, and it begrudgingly pulls him from the milkiness of sleep until he is awake enough to feel cranky.

It’s dark even outside his room- he presses his hand to the wall and moves in stifled steps, to avoid blindly knocking over any furniture in the hallway and to minimize chafing. Somewhere downstairs, there’s an easy buzz of two voices, and the crackle of a fireplace. It only serves to remind him that he could be warm, stationary, in bed, instead of wandering around a cold hallway. Still, biology demands.

On his way back from the bathroom, something occurs to him.

He had heard two people downstairs.
He tip-toes towards the staircase, and light from below shines brightly, breaking up the darkness. He drops into a crouch, pain forgotten, and peers through the gap in the banister.

A blaze burns in the fireplace, shadows twitching sporadically with each rise and ebb of the flames. Two large chairs, facing one another, have been set before it.

In one of them is the Spirit of the West, expression impossibly grave in the firelight.

In the other is a man that the Dragon of the South Wind does not immediately recognize. He is larger than the god- and handsome. He has a strong jaw, a broad nose, and a well-bred face and posture. The slant of his shoulders, tilt of his head, speaks to careless strength and charisma. His bulk is ill-judged as brutish muscle- he is powerful, but the Southern Dragon is convinced that it belies intelligence, and this stranger’s strength serves as a tool wielded like any other.

He is in a suit. The jacket is white, the pants dark. An ornate… gauntlet, perhaps a prosthetic, is attached at his shoulder, metal glinting a dull gold. His head is shaven, and his dark eyes reflect red in the flames’ glow.

“I am not condescending to you. I am trying to put you on the right side of history.”

The voice stirs the Southern Dragon’s memory, and he recalls an encounter he’d rather forget.

Doomfist.

He had sent correspondence not long after Genji’s rampage. As simple as a voicemail.

“There are unfriendly things stirring out there, Shimada Hanzo. You have talents that could be utilized, and I want to see them used in the right places. By the right people. It’s time to choose where the Shimada legacy will go- alongside gods, or into the grave. Join me in the Pashupatinath, and you will be the guiding arrow of our enemies’ destruction.”

He had abandoned the phone and left Nepal as soon as he was physically capable.

“You can’t jus’ come into a man’s home and all but legislate what he’s supposed to do. What if I don’t feel like killin’ this Yeti of yers?” The Spirit of the West folds his arms. “I got a responsibility to these people.”

“They will adapt,” Doomfist says, “Or die.”

“They can’t die,” The Spirit of the West says, exasperated. “They’re immortal. Even more immortal n’ me or a Horseman. An’ that ain’t relevant, anyhow. I don’t subscribe to the conflict is evolution handbook. I like things the way they are.”

“And it’s made you weak,” Doomfist responds, impatiently. “I am trying to save you from your own inherent softness, Spirit.”

He stands, abrupt.

“If you will not fight now, then you should prepare to die on your knees later. And while you are screaming for peace- for mercy- I will champion strength and change for human and godkind alike.”

And with that, he stalks out.

The Southern Dragon breathes out, shakily. He had been holding onto the small sliver of fear that Doomfist had discovered his whereabouts and was hunting him, and the Spirit of the West was
merely another check on the demigod’s list.

“What a real piece of shit,” The Spirit of the West says to himself.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for taking two whole months on this. I'm not very productive on summer vacation. :(

But I'm back now, and today is the end of my first week of school, so you can expect more and more regular updates. Fingers crossed, hoping I can get the next one out by next week.
A breeze swirls, cutting and cold, through the forested landscape. The spruces bend to the will of the wind, creaking and shuddering before slowly swaying back into their sturdy formation. There’s no snow yet, but the temperature and the clouds on the horizon are an assured promise that it’ll be there soon. Distant mountains, purplish-grey peaks, are already capped with white.

In the center of a clearing in the woods, two Horsemen battle; the air there is quiet and still, torpid and timid in comparison to the rest of the forest. All the animals have long since fled with hungry bellies or rage burning bright through them.

Famine’s elbow collides with War’s neck, and the aggressive Horsemen is promptly sent careening into the ground.

He’s motionless for a moment; then he groans, limbs shifting. He pushes himself up from the dirt, expression unamused. A growl rumbles through him once he meets Famine’s eye.

She offers her hand out to him and he takes it, swaying unsteadily once he’s on his own two feet.

“You hit harder than I remember,” War rubs his neck, and pain twinges from it. He can’t see it, but he can feel a bruise forming. It doesn’t concern him; it’ll be healed before it ever gets the chance to discolor.

“You’re slowing down, War,” Famine says, tone critical. “Or are you not taking this seriously?”

“A little bit of both,” He responds, flat. “I’m a sore loser. It’s best for both of us if I don’t try.”

Famine folds her arms, head canted forward. “I want you to try again. This time, I want your full attention and full effort.”

“You’re going to regret this.” He gives the nape of his neck a brief massage before he slides into a steep stance.

“We’ll see,” Famine says.

The trees shift, almost nervously, in the wind. The wood cracks and groans, branches rocking back and forth.

Famine adjusts her stance. Her frame is slighter, smaller than War’s, and she knows how to use it to her advantage. She’s been doing it all morning- dodging and jabbing, using her legs for strong blows after she’s gotten him flustered or set him off-balance. He’s had to distance himself from the combat in order to not explode with rage at how many times he’s been beaten. Having to contain himself- to not try in order to not feel bad about losing- is maddening.
He whuffs air through his nose, letting her know the match is about to begin, and takes the initiative and strikes first. She blocks. He throws his leg at her, hoping to catch her off guard, but she jumps back to avoid. She throws a jab at his neck, and while he’s busy deflecting, her leg swings up to catch him in the chest. He staggers, but the blow didn’t carry enough weight to knock him off his feet.

“You’re stronger than that, Famine,” War growls. “Quit playing. I’ve had mortals hit me harder.”

She flashes him a smile, and throws another kick. He catches her ankle, but before he can throw her into the nearest tree, her other foot cracks into his jaw and he instinctively lets go. He cups his smarting chin, hissing in pain.

Meanwhile, she gracefully catches herself on her hands and vaults herself to her feet, dropping into a smooth crouch. The excessive moves are working against her. He may have come away as the more battered combatant in that bout, but she’s expending her energy with those throws and kicks.

War grabs for her, feinting to one side, and she dodges, taking the bait. He surges forward, one hand locking around her arm. She has a split second to pull, but he doesn’t give her a chance to squirm away. He jerks her forward, spins her, and locks her into a pin from behind. She slams her heel into his toes, and when he is unflinching at the pain, her calf targets the softness between his legs.

“Ngh-” He does not loosen his hold, but his knees momentarily buckle. “Famine, give up. I won. You can’t break free.”

He increases the pressure on her shoulder blades. She squirms for a second, probing for weakness, and when there is none-

“I yield,” She sighs. Satisfaction courses through War’s blood, a euphoric itch of smug victory.

He lets her go.

A split second later, Famine’s elbow jabs into his solar plexus, then his stomach, then his crotch, and in a blink of an eye, he’s been thrown on his back in the dirt, hurting all over. When he tries to get up, Famine is on top of him, her braid draping loosely off of her shoulder.

“The fight was over,” War growls. “That’s not fair.”

“Oh, so you’re the champion of fairness now? Earlier today you threw dirt into my eye to try to blind me.”

He has no response.

Famine climbs off of him, brushing off her sleeves. War stands up not long after, a little unsteady.

“Why do you always hit below the belt?” War gripes. “It hurts, you know.”

“Because there’s such a convenient target there. You’re nearly double my weight and half a foot taller than me. The playing field needs to be leveled somehow.”

He growls, wordlessly, and elects to not argue that. “Are you satisfied with my effort?”

“I can’t be satisfied, War. You know that.” Famine is smiling a tiny smile.

War cracks his knuckles, rolls his shoulders and shakes himself loose. “I’m done.”

“You haven’t even won a round yet,” She tsks.

“But I knocked you down, and you didn’t knock me down. I won.” Famine says, airily.

He’s already swinging before his brain even registers he’s being goaded- he swipes for her, and she grabs his arm and twists. He howls, lashing out with his foot, and catches her in the stomach. She gasps, soundlessly, and lets go. He throws his other leg up and kicks her solidly in the side, sending her careening to the ground- she catches herself on an elbow and one of her palms, just before her face would hit the dirt.

The expression of outrage on her face makes War’s stomach feel warm. He grins down at her.

“What was that about getting knocked down?” War says, gruffly.

Her foot unexpectedly streaks forward, and she sweeps his legs from under him with one solid strike. He lets out an indignant grunt as he crashes to the earth, and Famine pounces on him. One arm wraps around his throat and grabs his wrist, the other pinning War’s other arm at an awkward angle. It’s a practiced hold, one he’s been in many times in their infrequent training sessions. The hold combines weight, ineffective muscle movement on the victim’s part, and proper positioning to immobilize a target, making it hurt if they struggle.

War struggles anyway.

“Give,” Famine says into his ear.

He smashes the back of his head into her face, enjoying hearing her yelp. The result is a lance of hot pain as she hoists his arm up in punishment.

War receives unpleasant memories at the aching sting; Famine’s daughter had forced his shoulder out of its socket only a few months ago, and it’s not something he’d like to relive. He decides to tactically surrender.

“Rghhh- I yield! I yield-”

Famine lets go.

She stands, and War remains on the ground, flipping onto his back and folding his arms. The sky overhead offers nothing to make him feel better, but he stares upward anyway.

“Come on, War. Get up.” Famine coaxes, her voice light with amusement. To War’s ears, it crosses into mockery, and smoldering embers of outrage begin kindling to a furious pyre in his chest. He opens his mouth to say something rude, but a sound catches his attention before he gets a word out.

Footsteps. One set is heavy, the other less so. Two two-legged beings, not a single lopsided four-legged beast. The footsteps come to a stop by the edge of the clearing.

“War, quit playing in the dirt.”

It’s Death’s voice. Irritation flickers through War, fast and bolting. They’ve been on bad terms recently; Death has been unyielding in his determination to shy away from touch, from a connection. Not to say War hasn’t been acting similar to him- but acknowledging these thoughts and acting on them is a lot harder than thinking them. He blames Death whole-heartedly for not leaving his comfort zone and forcing War to confront his feelings.

( He imagines Death probably thinks the same, with the roles reversed. Blood of the gods, what a
“Make me,” War says, snippily.

“Don’t,” Famine warns, before Death can say anything. “What’re you two here for? You’re supposed to be practicing down the hill.”

“We were,” Death says, and War looks up. Death rocks back, arms tightly folded. “Someone came for Conquest and I. They said they had a message, but would only relay it with every Horseman present.”

“Who?” Famine asks.

“Ah! It isn’t who, my lady, but what!” Conquest corrects.

A creature climbs up the path to the clearing where the Horsemen have now gathered. The beast is a stag, large and regal. Its antlers bristle impressively, its legs muscled and sturdy. Its breath plumes in the air when it exhales, hotter than the Horsemen’s. The way it moves is careless, graceful— but its most defining feature is its snow-white fur and dark eyes, glittering with an unnatural intelligence.

“I don’t have long,” The stag says. It looks entreatingly at them all.

“Who are you?” War demands.

“A messenger,” The stag says. “The specifics are irrelevant.”

It stoops low, in a respectful bow.

“I am to inform you that there is something precious waiting for you in Nepal,” The deer looks up, its wet black eyes unnervingly serious. “The next step in an infinitely complicated series of events is about to unfold, and sooner than you may think.”

“Nepal?” War’s nose wrinkles. “No. It’s too close to the Shambali.”

“What’s this about—” Famine begins, but the deer shakes its great, antlered head.

“Questions at the end. I need to be brief.” The stag says. “A valuable treasure you have lost awaits you, Famine. Your wayward daughter has found refuge in the warmth of the Iris.”

“My daughter? You’ve seen my daughter?” Famine’s eye widens, and her voice grows husky with urgency. “Is she safe? Did she look healthy? Was she okay?”

“Your daughter was in good company and good health,” The deer says, a touch impatient. “Please, leave unimportant questions until after I finish.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not going,” War asserts. Death nods, jerkily, in agreement.

“This isn’t our responsibility. We’ve done enough for your daughter, Famine.” Death agrees. “We were all nearly killed the last time we tried to rescue her.”

Famine’s glare scorches the two of them, but both War and Death are unfazed.

Conquest opens his mouth to attempt to persuade them otherwise, but the stag interrupts first.

“That’s just as well,” The deer says. “The Shambali monastery is presently under siege.”
War twitches in surprise. Conquest and Famine exchange incredulous looks, Famine’s more worried than his.

“Younder siege?” War demands. “By who? Those peace-loving bastards don’t have a single enemy in the world.”

“Surely you are not so out of touch to not feel the brewing war,” The deer says, a touch slyly. “The angry masses stand at the gates. The master of the Shambali has delayed far too long… And, unfortunately, with all of those who seek justice assembled, you would not be able to enter the monastery without a fight.”

War senses the manipulation- it’s hard not to, what with the honey on the deer’s tongue.

He falls for it. The promise of a good fight is too much for him to not agree.

“If we go there… I get to crack skulls?”

The deer blinks, slowly. “If you must.”

“I’m in,” War says, decisively, and he leans back against the nearest tree. Death looks irritated, glancing between War and the stag, but he ultimately sinks into a conceding slump with his arms folded. War senses he’s reluctant, but he will go along. It’s a nice change of pace.

“Do you have anything more to tell us?” Famine pushes. “A message from Fareeha? Or the Shambali?”

“No,” The stag relays. “I have not spoken to either. I have observed, as I was told to.”

“I have a query, if I may,” Conquest says, lifting his hand. “The way you have been speaking is odd. You were told to, so you say, so I must ask: Who sent you? What master do you serve?”

“Someone with a vested interest in not letting a madman tear the world open,” The deer responds, ducking its head slightly. “There are things stirring, who have grand plans that are bigger than a mounting mortal war. The furious army storming the Shambali monastery is inconsequential against the weight of what’s to come.”

“What’s to come?” Death asks, eyes flicking to War.

The deer deliberates for a moment.

“Change,” It says, decisively. “The action of several- not just yourselves, but several other moving, shifting parts- will determine whether that change is positive or not.”

The deer suddenly stands up straight, ears twitching.

“A friend is returning to you,” It says. “And with its return, I must go. Good luck to you, Horsemen.”

The deer turns and leaps into the forest- it bounds away with a couple swift steps, and is quickly out of sight. War’s eyes can’t discern whether it was a magical disappearance, or merely the result of fast legwork.

And as it promised, a lost friend returns.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for 12,000 views- it's much appreciated.
The honeysuckle is ripening today. The scent is heady, reassuring, blanketing the meadow. The cheery sunshine glows in tandem the blossoming miasma, lending a certain tranquility to the surroundings. The grass is soft and tender; there are no long, razor-sharp blades, only the plush carpeting of trimmed greenery.

It’s not a uniform cut, though. It’s been grazed by animals and been allowed to grow back, currently in the gentlest stage of its transition. Under a hand it resiliently bends, but springs back, undaunted. The sky is a lovely, robin’s egg blue. There’s a few clouds, indecisively skirting the edge of the horizon, as if hesitant to ruin such a picturesque valley. When they do get close, they rush by with a hasty embarrassment.

There’s wildflowers resting in the grass. The tiny clusters of color, smaller than a man’s thumbnail, grow in artful patches of white, yellow, and purple, all around the meadow. Bumblebees, fat and furred, lazily criss-cross through the air, scattering pollen.

Cresting the edge of the meadow, a ring of pines exudes the loamy, evergreen scent of the woods. The trees are a barrier between the peaceful lea and the tumultuous chaos of the world; guarding this cherished kiss of Nature’s serenity from those who might cause it harm.

Comfortably lying in the lush green is a man. His arms pillow his head underneath him, and his legs cross carelessly at the ankle. His chest faintly rises, eyes half-lidded, basking in the sun and the wind and the fragrance of the meadow. He lays on the precipice of a restful sleep, no woe or fear to touch him in this hallowed place.

There is an Other with him. The Other stirs, not far away, pushing itself up from the grass and onto its elbows. It touches its face, sliding its hand over gritty white stubble. It caresses its own jawline, fingertips sliding up its cheek to its thin, short crop of hair. Its blocky hand stalls in its locks.

The Other turns to regard him, expression questioning. Its eyes are blue; a deeper, greyer color than the sky. Wounds fork through its face, faint gashes from a war long ago.

He is starting to remember things.

He doesn’t want to.

He waves his hand to instruct the Other to lay back down, and it rubs its thumb over its lips, as if in
thought. Slowly it lays back down, though he gets the impression that it would not have obeyed if it didn’t want to.

What? He asks it, after a moment of silence.

Do you feel that? It asks.

Feel what? The sunshine? The breeze? The grass?

No, it responds. There’s something terribly wrong.

He feels a sudden queasy spike of fear rush through him. An icy wind cuts through the warm sunshine, making him shiver, but the meadow seems to reverberate, resist, and it dies.

Are you sure? He asks, breathlessly. Everything looks so perfect. Everything feels so perfect.

No, the Other says, troubled. I’m not sure. But this doesn’t feel right.

Who are you? He asks.

The Other pauses. It touches its mouth again, and its fingers migrate down the skin of its throat, to its chest.

I don’t know, the Other responds. I don’t think I’m real.

Am I real? He asks.

Yes, the Other says. I think so. Something is wrong.

You said that already.

The Other sits up.

Do you know me? It asks.

You’re familiar.

What’s my name?

He thinks about that.

War, he says.

War, the Other- it is not War, he thinks, but a visage of him, a memory, maybe, or a copy- muses. What about your name?

Death, he says.

Do you know this meadow? The Other asks.

Why are you asking so many things? I liked it better when the meadow was warm and we were resting. Death says.

The meadow has changed since they spoke. The inviting sunshine had been choked with clouds, and a freezing wind blows, his body barren in the cold. Flakes begin condensating in the air, and he wraps his arms around himself.
I want the meadow back, Death says plaintively.

The Other tries to take his hand. Death lets it twine its fingers with his, body shuddering beyond his control.

The meadow never existed, the Other says. I think this is a dream.

Horsemen don’t dream, Death responds, certainly. Horsemen don’t sleep.

That word floods him. Horsemen. He is death, the rider of the pale horse, one of four…

Horsemen can die, the Other says, matter-of-factly. Are you dead?

I don’t know, he says.

What do you remember? the Other asks.

He tries to think back.

Nothing. I don’t underst

†

A sharp, stinging pain to his cheek wakes him up.

War’s hand is fisted in the front of Death’s clothes, his other hand falling to land another blow. Death catches his wrist before it can land and smashes the meat of his palm into War’s nose; his strike is received with a loud crack and a sudden spurt of golden ichor from War’s nostrils.

“Son of a-” War drops him, his hand coming up to cup his face. “You piece of-!”

He stomps on Death’s ankle and agony shoots up his leg. It isn’t broken, but it hurts, and Death clenches his teeth to stifle a noise of pain.

War removes his hand from his face, assessing the damage to his nose. He carefully adjusts the cartilage back into place with a series of grotesque crunches, irately lapping at the spurts of blood that come with every movement.

When the trickle stops, he turns to glare at Death.

“This is what I get for trying to help you?” He gestures to his face.

“Someone attacked me while I was vulnerable,” Death defends. “I reacted.”

War snorts, derisively, and turns away. Evidently he doesn’t feel like arguing.

“Where are we?” Death asks. He rises, and with the motion, his ankle twinges in protest. It’ll heal soon.

From what Death can see, they’re in some kind of pebbly, misshapen prison- small, with enough just enough height for one of them to stand up, and barely enough width for one of them to lay down. There’s a regular but sharp jostling of whatever they’re inside, and the material of it appears to be loose and scaly, yellowed. A draft comes from somewhere, cold, and the air is thin. It’s dark, with the only light coming from small slats that pucker the walls. They’re the origin of the draft as well, Death presumes.
“You don’t remember?” War raises a brow.

“No,” Death says.

“Not too surprising, I suppose. You died.”

“Did you?”

“No,” He says, a little sour. “I’ve been healing from my wounds while you were dead.”

“Wounds?” Death’s eyes rake over War’s form. “How were you injured?”

“A roc,” War says. “We were heading through Asir Mountains on our way to find Fareeha. Must’ve passed by its nest, or bothered it somehow. It attacked you first. Killed you before you had the chance to fight back.”

He hesitates, and there’s a softness, vulnerability, in his expression.

“It swooped down on top of you and you were just…”

An exhale.

“Don’t,” Death raises his hand, impatient and disturbed. “Where are we now?”

War raps his knuckles against the fleshy wall of their prison. “In the roc’s clutches.”

Death takes a second to weigh on that. The idea of being eaten or crushed does not frighten him; the Horsemen are immortal. Completely unkillable. It may take longer to regenerate from particular wounds, but the Horsemen will always be reborn.

It’s the way they’ll die, if they’re devoured, that disconcerts him. There was no way they could be eaten and retain a godly dignity upon resurrection.

“We’re going to get out of here,” Death informs the other Horseman.

“Bullets are nothing to a roc,” War shakes his head. “I put fifty rounds into one of its eyes and it barely even blinked. We can’t-

He clenches his jaw, resentful.

“... Fight our way out.”

“Then we wait until it releases us, and flee. It can’t keep us in its talons forever.” Death says, folding his arms.

“And what do we do if it throws us directly into the mouth of its chicks?” War asks, temper rising. The vague urge to tear out War’s skeleton surfaces in the corner of Death’s mind, but it’s a manufactured desire. He ignores it.

“We’ll figure it out,” Death says.

“The same way that we’ve ‘figured out’ this?” He gestures between himself and Death. A sudden and palpable tension thickens the air.

Death throws a sharp glare at War, makes a miniscule shake of his head. War does not heed his warning.
“You haven’t been trying,” War accuses.

“Can we not do this now?”

“You’re the one who kissed me,” War hisses, ‘kissed’ invoked with the same acidity as a curse.

“This isn’t the right place for this, War. Think.” Death snaps.

War’s eyes smolder, resentful.

But he concedes. Turns his head away and crosses his arms.

“Famine and Conquest are in its other talon,” War says, voice brittle and cold. “We’ll need to reconvene with them if we want a chance of getting out alive.”

Death feels a slight twinge of guilt that he ruthlessly oppresses. They can’t afford to think about this right now, and even if they could, this emotional trouble is War’s fault, too.

Death sits back down, leaning against the roc’s toe, refusing to look in War’s direction.

The harsh juddering and rocking- the motion of the roc’s flight- begins to worsen.

There’s a sudden sharp jerk- Death halfway jolts forward, and War, who was standing up, is thrown onto his hands and knees.

“Uff-” War grunts, glaring around at the gloom. “The hell was that?”

“Nothing good.” Death sounds disturbed, even to his own ears.

He stands, moves over to War, and offers his hand.

War takes it.

There’s another sharp jostling, and the both of them are nearly thrown off their feet. Death’s stomach swoops, alarmingly.

They’re descending, Death realizes. He looks towards War, mouth open to warn him. War meets his eyes in the darkness, and there’s a silent, lightning-fast exchange of acknowledgement.

And with no warning, the roc’s talons abruptly open.

Bright sunlight sears Death’s retinas, quickly accompanied by the realization that there’s nothing beneath him anymore.

The two Horsemen plunge downward. The fall isn’t far. Maybe six dozen feet. Any scream they would make is caught by the wind, too short to register to either Horsemen’s ears.

There’s nothing they can do to soften the impact- neither of them can fly or slow their descent.

Death collides with the ground and feels himself splinter and break like porcelain china.

He doesn’t die, though.

He’s gotten fairly good at recognizing whether or not he’ll heal from his wounds or end up dying. This kind of pain, combined with his clarity and lucidity, means he’ll heal.

It hurts.
He fell on his feet. He can feel the fragments of his pelvis lodged in his lower abdomen like scattershot. His collarbones have snapped. His spine is mangled. His legs are crushed into a pulp of muscle and blood and shards of bone.

It *hurts*.

He bit his tongue when he landed. Blood seeps into his mouth and he’s been unconsciously swallowing it. It’s just about the only muscle movement that doesn’t hurt.

Blood of the gods, it *hurts*.

After he crests the initial wave of agony, Death tries to move- to drag himself somewhere. He doesn’t know where. All of his thoughts are as fractured as his bones. Instinct tells him he shouldn’t be out in the open.

The roc comes back.

A great cloud of dust is stirred from its landing; the corrective flaps of its wings before it sets its talons on the ground nearly manage to blow Death away. His fingers dig into the earth, fruitlessly resisting. It’s all he can do against the creature’s might in his miserable state.

Each of the roc’s talons are easily as long as Death; the tales that rocs carry off fully grown elephants don’t seem far-fetched from where he lays.

Its feathers are a deep, whiskey-brown. Its beak, hooked and long- easily large enough to swallow a human whole- curves with a wicked black point, edged with yellow. It has two large golden eyes- one of them repeatedly punctured and weeping a gelatinous, bloody mixture. The roc is blind in that eye, Death assumes. It must be the one War had been targeting.

It folds its wings against its back and moves, sudden and sharp. Its beak prods at something on the ground, and the strangled cry of response is undoubtedly War’s. Death’s heart abruptly seizes with a dizzying jolt of fear, drowning out his pain for just a moment.

The resurgence of said pain hits him like cold winter air, and it works in tandem with his fear, which courses through his blood with every frantic beat of his heart.

It’s time to let go.

“*You!”* Death yells. His abdominal muscles scream in protest, objecting to movement when he’s trying to heal. The roc lifts its head up, and Death feels a touch of nausea when he spots the golden strip of flesh dangling from the tip of its beak.

“*Yes, you, you overgrown eaglet—*” Death’s not even sure what he’s saying anymore. Just that he needs its attention. “*Come here!*”

It works. The roc toddles towards him, surprisingly graceful for its stature. The ground *shakes* with every footstep.

It leans in close, head tilted to stare at Death with its good eye. The golden disc of its iris is as big as a wagon wheel. A deep, raucous thrum begins in its throat.

Pain surges back up, pitifully, from Death’s legs, desperately vying for attention alongside his adrenaline and terror. It makes it *difficult* to think, to plan. He had a plan. He’s sure of it. But concentrating is so *difficult*-
The roc rears up, its wings halfway sliding open. Its feathers blot out the sun, casting a deep and dark shadow over him.

“Come get me,” Death rasps, as loud and defiant as he can. The bird leans in, and its giant beak prods him, experimentally.

Death lunges out and grabs a fistful of feathers from the roc’s face. It rears back in surprise, and Death clings tight. It snaps at him with its beak, but can’t quite grab him. Desperate, the roc flails its head back and forth to dislodge him; Death’s body gets flung around like a child’s toy, but he holds fast.

Everything hurts so much.

It takes every last ounce of his willpower to just hold on.

But if he can just stay put-

If he can just let go-

A cloud of black smoke blazes from him, rushing over the roc’s feathers. The giant bird screeches, the sound earth-shatteringly loud, but it’s all faraway.

Death conveys, commands, a simple message to the roc:

Die.

It begins to fall.

Its gigantic eyes flutter, and the ferocious scream stalls in its throat and fades. Death sinks his fingers into its flesh, and feather gives way to skin, pliant and unresisting.

The crash when it falls seems to shake the mountainside. It jars Death from his single-minded urge to kill and kill and kill, and the last of his smoke wisps off his shoulders.

The pain from his shattered lower body returns with an unholy fury, and he unwillingly lets go of the roc’s feathers in the sudden shock.

He drops on his belly in the dirt, spasmodically twitching, in a stunned state of exhaustion and agony. No thoughts pass through him—just a hot, white pain that sears through his entire being.

The roc eventually stirs beside him. Its great yellow eye reopens, glassy and weak, but still very much alive. Its movement barely even pierces Death’s dome of shellshocked pain, and the realization that it didn’t die isn’t absorbed until its massive wings begin twitching.

No, Death’s only halfway coherent thought bubbles up from the agony-hazed void. No.

“Such a great creature, brought to its knees,” A voice muses. That, too, takes a while to process and comprehend. Death doesn’t even connect it with a person until Conquest limps into view.

He uses his hammer as a crutch, dragging himself along. His legs are also deformed, shattered, like Death’s; though unlike him, Conquest’s bones have remained inside his body. The big Horseman drags himself closer and closer, and Death makes a choked sound of acknowledgement when he gets near.

“I think I’ve had enough of you hurting my comrades,” Every breath Conquest takes is heavy, labored. He shifts his grip on his hammer, legs beginning to tremble as soon as he loses the thing’s
support. He lifts it up, high over his head, and brings it down on the roc’s eye. There’s an immediate explosion of chunky flesh and blood, and accompanied by a choked squall from the roc.

Pain begins to creep back in. Death squeezes his eyes shut.

The *squish* of the hammer keeps going.

The shrieks and croons of the roc slowly die off, and soon, the only sound is a viscous dripping and Conquest’s strained panting. The hammer thunks to the ground with a certain finality, and remains there.

There’s motion.

“Death. Friend.”

He forces his eyes open, to look up at Conquest.

“The battle is over,” Conquest’s undamaged eye looks like a chip of ice in its socket. His voice is deep and low, gravelly.

He extends his hand out and Death takes it, though Conquest has to do most of the heavy lifting to get the injured Horsemen on his feet.

Death’s muscles are still struggling with repairs, but his shattered bones have re-knit and the deepest tissues have healed. Soon the pain will be gone, and the only echo of it will be a bad memory.

“War,” Death says, clinging to Conquest for dear life. “The roc was eating him.”

“I left Lady Famine and War together,” Conquest says, tone somber. “She was tending to him when I came to your aid.”

Conquest looks back toward the roc, and Death follows his gaze. There’s a deep, blood-filled crevasse where its eye used to be. There are chunks of viscid, whitish-clear jelly, small bone shards, and flecks of what Death assumes is brain matter floating in the bloodied socket- like some kind of nauseating soup.

He looks away.

“There’s no triumph quite like that of teamwork!” Conquest chirps, upbeat, a stark contrast from his serious demeanor earlier. He proudly places one hand on his hip, the other occupied with holding Death up. “I may have struck the final blow, but you were instrumental in its demise! Excellent work!”

“Help me over to War,” Death says, impatiently. He doesn’t have the energy right now to deal with Conquest’s jubilation- he just wants to see if War is okay.

*Why would he not be? The Horsemen are unkillable. Any harm that would come can be fixed.*

He casts that thought aside and limps with Conquest over to Famine and War.

War’s mangled body has regenerated some of itself; the broad slash of his stomach that the roc tore out has mostly healed, though his clothing remains torn. His legs- shattered like Death’s- are in the process of healing. The bone looks repaired, and torn muscle and split skin diligently work at resealing themselves.

Famine appears rattled, but otherwise uninjured. Her braid has come loose, and there’s smears of
dried ichor on her slightly tattered clothes, but no visible open wounds or broken bones.

Famine had been helping War sit up when Conquest and Death approached. They’d been speaking to each other in words too soft for Death to hear, and when Death and Conquest draw near, Famine and War stop talking, turning anticipatory glances towards the approaching Horsemen.

War’s eyes rake over Death’s form, then swoop upward to meet his eyes.

“Good work,” War says, begrudgingly.

As if to spare Death from having to make a reply, the Horsemen’s horses bound up towards them from a thin trail on the mountainside. Their timely arrival provides the perfect excuse for Death to ignore the way his heart settles once he’s seen that War is okay.

He takes a step away from Conquest, shakily limping towards Shadow Step. The horse closes the gap before he has to move too far.

With a little assistance, he's able to get on horseback- War is, too, though he’s silently and amusingly disgruntled when Conquest picks him up and places him in the saddle.

The two of them will heal fully on their journey to Nepal.

Conquest and Famine mount their horses, and when they start moving, stray chatter picks up about their bad luck. There are a few mentions of congratulations and analysis of tactics- bits and pieces of conversation. Death tunes it all out.

He’s wondering what exactly had happened after he died.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will pick up where 27 left off. I just thought this would be a fun experiment.

Comments appreciated! There were really few on the last chapter. : ( 
Conquest and the other Horsemen begin their journey to find Fareeha.

As the deer promised, a lost friend returns.

Shrike delicately picks its way through the undergrowth, slow and assured. The horse looks none the worse for wear- its black coat shines, its mane elegantly brushed and braided in tresses that remind Conquest of Balderich.

Famine whispers a soft oath under her breath and runs at her horse. Shrike does not move, even when Famine’s arms are flung around its neck in an embrace.

“Oh, it’s good to see you again.” Famine breathes. “Is Fareeha okay? Did you keep her safe?”

Shrike does not respond, but Conquest knows what the answer is. He strides up to the two of them and strokes Shrike’s nose, beaming.

“Hah! It’s good you’ve come back. Balderich was getting tired of having two riders.” Conquest pats her snout, then turns to the other Horsemen, booming grandly. “Come on, friends. Now that Shrike has returned to us, we should waste no time in going to Nepal!”

War rolls his eyes, then whistles for Immortal. His stallion diligently trots to stand at his side, and War throws himself on Immortal’s back.

“That stag had better not have been lying to us,” He growls, idly, reaching for Immortal’s reins. “If we get there and there’s not a fight…”

Death makes a contemptuous little hmph in the back of his throat, and moves to mount Shadow Step.

Conquest glances between them, feeling a small touch of helplessness. They have been awful to one another in the recent months, and while that was not entirely a change, the way they were terrible to one another differed from the old ways. They were more keen to drop arguments, but they spat and hissed such venom Conquest would think them bitter enemies if it weren’t for the furtive moments of gentleness they displayed.

Troubled, Conquest climbs atop Balderich, and the four of them set out.

The chilly pine forest gives way to a field, then to another forest, then farmland, and so on. They thunder past a few towns- major and minor- and gradually, the landscape becomes less flush with trees and more sparse, hilly.

They eventually reach a yawning divide of water, and something seems strange to Conquest- he doesn’t remember if there were any bodies of water between where they were and where they’re going.
War and Famine are unfazed—though Immortal’s ears flick back uneasily, War stubbornly digs in his heels and forces him onto the water. Shrike has no such trouble, and once Death and Conquest step onto the surf, they continue.

They reach another stretch of land soon enough; the sun glares accusing and hot overhead, though it’s softened by the salty breeze at their backs and winter’s chill.

The land has gotten even more barren since they left the other shore. Sand and small rocks— all washed-out and white— and a flat landscape dominate their surroundings. Something does not feel right to Conquest, but he suppresses it. Famine and War look confident in where they’re going. He trusts them.

After a while, they’re met with another body of water. The nagging urge that something is wrong resurges, but he, again, tamps it down. He must have faith in his compatriots.

All of them gallop across the sea— it’s much longer than the one they’d crossed earlier, and the sun dips lower in the sky, around mid-afternoon, once they finally reach land again. There’s a stretch of beach, then hilly landscape, though this has more green than what they’d left. Green-grey mountains loom off in the distance, and Conquest gets the strong feeling that they’re most assuredly not going the right way. There are not two oceans and a mountain range between Germany and Nepal, he knows that for certain.

“Hold on!” He says, loudly, to catch everyone’s attention. “Hold, for a moment, friends.”

War and Famine slow and eventually stop— Death, who’d been lagging behind the whole time, takes the moment to catch up.

“Something about this…” Conquest gestures grandly to the sea, then back to the mountains. “Does not seem right.”

War frowns and glances up, at the sky, then around, at their surroundings. “Hmph. Now that I think of it, the sun isn’t at the right angle for being as far north as we’re supposed to be.”

Everyone mulls this information over, slow and silent. Death is the first to break it.

“Someone took us too far south,” Death says flatly, throwing War a pointed look.

“*I’m* not navigating. Famine was leading.” War informs him, sounding uninterested, but still a touch defensive.

“Me?” Famine says, shifting back in her saddle. “I was *not* leading. I thought you were.”

“Why would I lead?” War asks, fully defensive now. He sweeps one hand up to his chest, indignant. “I *hate* Nepal. And it’s your daughter, not mine.”

Famine gives him an incredulous, angry look. Death runs his hand over his face in extreme exasperation.

“Okay,” Famine says, clearly trying to compose herself, “Where are we now?”

“Hmm.” War takes another glance up at the sun. “Northern Africa, maybe.”

He glances back towards the body of water behind them. “… Hmm. That’s the Red Sea. Maybe Saudi Arabia. I don’t think we’re far enough south for it to be Yemen.”
“Great,” Death growls, quietly. “Why don’t I lead us? Maybe then we won’t go hundreds of miles off course.”

War turns to look at him, his lip curled. His tone is short, decisive. “You’re a terrible navigator. I’ll do it.”

“Well, according to Famine, you’re the one who lead us the wrong way. I couldn’t possibly do worse than that.”

War blusters. “That doesn’t count-”

“Yes, it does,” Death cuts in. “I’ll take over-”

Conquest clears his throat.

“Perhaps I could navigate?”

War, without breaking eye contact with Death, says: “Fine. Do you have any issues with that, Death?”

“No.” Death says.

“Perfect!” Conquest declares. “Let’s get moving, then, shall we?”

He spurs Balderich, who begins trotting forward.

“Northeast is that way,” War drawls, pointing.

“... Right,” Conquest adjusts his course. “Let’s go, friends! We have to make up lots of time!”

And they begin their journey again. They pass by a brilliant city, lights glowing and buildings ornate and towering, flush with traffic. Conquest makes the executive decision to skirt the city instead of going through it, even if it means they’ll miss the beautiful architecture. His destination is through those mountains, with no detours.

They eventually find a trail through the mountains, but the Horsemen need to slow down to get through. The pathway is steep and narrow, and they need to travel single-file. Conquest goes first, then War, then Famine, then Death.

Since they’ve slowed, they have plenty of time to take in their surroundings.

They’re pretty, in Conquest’s opinion- the steep valleys, the clusters of dark-leaved trees, the sparse grass and sloping brown hills. There are a few birds wheeling in the sky, looking for prey, but Conquest never sees them dive. The sky is bright and blue, but the sun is beginning to dip lower, towards the canted peaks on the horizon. Conquest estimates it is, perhaps, four or so in the afternoon.

Despite the sun’s imminent setting, the heat is terrible, and getting worse. It is markedly hotter than it was when they passed the first ocean, and much hotter than it was in Germany.

Every so often, the Horsemen pass by a crooked tree looming over the edge of the cliffside- it provides a deep, blessedly cool snippet of shade; a shelter from the sweltering, dry air.

“It’s hot,” War complains after a while, wiping the sweat from his face. It’s not the worst heat they’ve ever had to endure- the desert around Fareeha’s tower blazed at sixty degrees Celsius- but the extended time they’re forced to be out in the sun is wearing on everyone.
Including Death, who’s voice is haggard with heat: “I’m sure complaining about it helps.”

Conquest is sure he’ll need to break up their angry bickering, but War doesn’t rise to the bait. He growls at Death, but otherwise doesn’t respond.

Time lapses, gradually. The sun ticks lower in the sky, and there’s a palpable frustration building from Famine and War. They haven’t said anything, but Conquest knows them well enough to sense it- the both of them want to hasten their stride. Conquest knows better. If they hurry they might tumble over the sharp edge of a cliff they didn’t see coming; one bad misstep while galloping could kill both horse and rider in a terrible tumble down thousand foot slopes. With the urgency of their quest, they don’t have time to recover from that kind of unfortunate mistake.

“So,” Conquest clears his throat, turning his head back slightly to look at his companions. “Does anyone have any tales to tell? To shorten the time?”

“Conquest, we’ve been together for thousands of years,” Death calls back, irate. Sweat glistens on his brow, shining brightly in the sun. “You would’ve heard any tale we had to tell centuries ago.”

“... Right.” Conquest dips his head and sheepishly turns back to the trail. “... Maybe I could tell you about my days as a Crusader?”

Valiant giant troops at his back, whirls of fire and magic in the air, giant hammers crushing the bodies of constructs that stood in their way… Basking in the afterglow of battle, tending to the wounded… The triumph of victory as they waded through mounds of stone corpses...

“No!” War and Death say together, forcefully.

“We could try not talking,” Famine suggests, gently. Conquest sees it for what it is: an awkward attempt to agree with War and Death without making Conquest feel unappreciated or foolish. He takes her interpreted advice and nods, focusing demurely on the road.

Silence reigns for a while.

“There’s some good news,” War says, eventually. “It’s just a few more miles northeast and we’ll be out of the Asir.”

Death makes an unimpressed little huff. “Oh, g-”

A shadow blots out the sun. It’s so large Conquest thinks it’s a cloud at first, and it doesn’t process that the sky has been cloudless all day.

Talons surge through the air and tear cleanly through Death; they move at such a speed, and are at such a size, that he’s torn in two. His severed legs and pelvis soar through the air, ichor glittering in the sun as it’s sprayed; his top half stays in the claws of the beast that ripped him in half.

His lower body lands in front of Conquest’s horse, and Balderich rears in fright, a shrill scream bursting from her.

Conquest looks up, shock beginning to defensively kick in. The creature above them is positively massive- its wingspan must be well over a hundred feet, and its talons are large enough to encircle an elephant at the largest part of its bulk. Conquest’s only ever heard tales of such a creature- he has seen beasts nearly as large, archaic dragons that slumbered in the deepest pits of a volcano- but never seen one for himself, and certainly never gotten close enough to think about how to best it in combat.

It’s a roc, he’s sure. A gigantic golden eagle native to mountain ranges in the Middle East, known for
its ability to easily pick up and carry off fourteen thousand pound elephants.

There’s a beat of stunned silence from the three remaining Horsemen; the roc takes the opportunity to flap its wings and slowly circle overhead. Conquest knows, in the back of his mind, it’s preparing another assault for when it flies past, but the sight of Death’s mutilated legs momentarily cuts off his tactical thinking.

War is the first to recover.

“Blood of the gods,” He says, soft and understated. Then, louder, much more furious, as he looks up at the roc. “Death-”

War throws himself off his horse. His blue eyes blaze, full of an all-consuming anger. He conjures a rifle, posture rigid and furious, and drops into a crouch, taking aim. War’s visor snaps on, a grey faceplate with a crimson band over the eyes.

Conquest grabs his hammer. Famine shakes out of her shock and grabs her rifle.

War’s aura begins intensifying; an unholy tide of fury sweeps from him, so much that Conquest’s mind shudders at its touch, quaking and cowering before such insurmountable rage. A harsh, dizzying redness begins manifesting in the air around him, and there’s not even enough time to blink before he begins his assault upon the roc.

Bullets scream through the air, each one finding its mark- the roc’s eye is peppered with shots that burst the surface of its eye like bubbles in a boiling pot. It shrieks, and even far above, the sound shakes the ground and causes Famine and Conquest to clutch at their ears in pain.

War does not so much as flinch at the sound; he’s unwavering. Bullet after bullet pumps into the roc, until it gets too close and War forgets he is breakable.

The roc lands and brings its foot down with tremendous force right on top of the Horseman. War is crushed underneath its talons with a horrific crunch of his bones and a short, choked yell of agony.

War’s aura, which had forced Famine and Conquest to cringe before its might, disappears. It’s as though blinders Conquest didn’t even know were there have been taken off- he’s suddenly aware, able to move and think again.

The silence and stillness underneath the roc’s foot is deafening. War’s either dead or incapacitated. Death, too. That leaves only Conquest and Famine to combat the threat.

“We stay together,” He says. He doesn’t need to see her nod to know she does.

The roc’s toes curl around War’s now-limp body, nails scoring deep tracts in the earth. Its talons stay closed as it hobbles towards them, gait awkward but aggressive.

Famine’s eyes slide towards Conquest for just a second; her tone is husky, urgent. “Conquest, we could use your influence right now. It may be the only thing that’ll let us beat this thing-”

With no warning, it lunges at her- it’s impossibly fast for such a gigantic beast, and Conquest has barely enough time to throw himself to the side to avoid its claws. Famine drops to the ground, and it misses, staggering a step as it attempts to recover.

The roc attempts to grab her with its wicked beak while she’s in the dirt, but Conquest brings his hammer down on it with a resounding crack. The beak dents, slightly, but it’s a discouraging lack of damage.
Before Conquest has time to be disappointed by the ineffectiveness of his blow, the roc’s wing lashes out and slams straight into him. Conquest’s hammer goes flying from his grip, and he sails through the air only to land in the dirt a few dozen feet away.

The breath is knocked from him on impact. When he tries to inhale, pain stabs his lungs waringly and keeps him from breathing. He lays there for too long, in a haze of pain, then tries to sit up.

Where’s my hammer, where’s Famine-

The roc’s unoccupied foot is stomping. It shakes the earth with every mighty hit, the mountainside quaking under the force. Famine dodges, nimbly, managing to outmaneuver its gigantic talons with a few elegant vaults and less elegant flinging-herself-into-the-dirt.

Conquest tries to kindle breath in his lungs again, and is pleased to find that while he aches, he can draw breath once more. He sits up, eyes sliding from Famine to look for his hammer.

She screams, and it snatches his attention from his weapon. The roc’s beak has closed around her calf, and it lifts her up from the ground triumphantly. Golden ichor drips down her leg, and she dangles, upside down, her braid swinging.

She kicks it with her good foot, cursing and swearing. Conquest can hear the bone grind when the roc’s jaws close tighter, and Famine shrieks in pain.

“Unhand her!” Conquest gets to his feet, fists clenched. On his way up, he snatches his hammer from the ground- which had landed not far away- holding it threateningly aloft. “You want me, creature! Would I not make a bigger, tastier morsel?!?”

Conquest doesn’t know if it’s intelligent enough to understand him, but it drops Famine into the dirt.

On her head. From several feet up. She drops brokenly, limply, in the dirt, her leg nearly severed and gushing blood. His heart begins to burn with an indignant, righteous fury.

The roc looms over Conquest, its golden eye- the one that doesn’t look like a mound of ragged tissue- full of malice.

Conquest doesn’t know where to begin to fight this creature. He can’t kill it- he can’t even reach it. His weapon has a range of seven, perhaps eight, feet. This creature’s feet alone must be twice that.

But he has to try. He is Conquest, and in some form or another, he is always victorious.

He dodges its first few attacks. Its foot lashes out, attempting to crush him- then its beak lunges, parted wide so he can see the blackest part of its throat- then it slashes with its giant claws, trying to rend him into ribbons.

There is nothing he can do when its wing sweeps outward. Conquest cannot duck low, or jump high, or run from it. It’s too wide, too swift. The massive golden-brown cascade of feathers strikes him with tremendous and agonizing force, knocking him down; and the roc exploits it, immediately curling its talons around his prone, pain-stiffened body.

Conquest has enough of his wits about him to realize when he’s transferred from the roc’s foot to its mouth. He sways, limply, as it hobbles towards Famine.

It drops Conquest back in the dirt beside her, then carefully arranges the two of them with its talon. It scoops them up, together, and they’re enclosed in a small, dark prison.
“Blood of the gods…” Famine’s conscious, blinking in the shadows. He feels almost nauseated, knowing what the horrible beast did to her.

Her poor leg…

“Lady Famine, are you alright?” She’s dim and gray in the roc’s clutches, lit only by the tiny gaps between the creature’s talons.

“It tried to tear my leg off,” She says through grit teeth, her voice tight with forced calm. “It hurts, but I’ll live.”

“You fell-” Conquest begins, worriedly, but she sharply inhales and shakes her head.

“The knock I got when I fell wasn’t as bad as it looked. It just stunned me for a second.”

They unexpectedly move. Their prison jolts forward, and Conquest nearly slams into the scaly wall of its toes.

“Is it moving?” Conquest asks, breathless, as soon as he steadies himself.

“Yes,” Famine says, sounding troubled. “… To its nest?”

“I would hope not,” Conquest tries to not think deeply of it, but can’t help but add: “I will not let you get eaten, Lady Famine. Not without a fight.”

He thinks she smiles in the weak light, though it’s hard to tell. “I know you won’t.”

There’s a steady rocking, back and forth, as the roc takes a few slow steps. There’s a brief pause-stillness- then a loud sifting, grinding sound. Conquest can’t even fathom a guess as to what it’s doing, but the wait isn’t long.

He and Famine slam against its toes when it picks up speed; its uneven, loping gait rattles them around like produce in a truck. Famine cries out in pain as her calf, connected only by a thread of bone, is jostled.

Conquest grabs for Famine, blindly, and holds her to his chest amidst the onslaught. He clasps her tightly to him, hoping to shield her with his body.

Then, there’s nothing.

The jostling stops. Conquest’s stomach twists, unpleasantly, and it takes a moment to recognize that feeling as flight, as turbulence, as having no solid ground beneath him. He squeezes Famine tighter.

“We’ll be okay,” Conquest says, though he’s reassuring himself as much as he’s reassuring her.

“We always are,” She responds, weary. “I just need… A little bit, for my leg.”

It takes tremendous effort for her to speak. She sounds labored, pained, and it hurts Conquest that he can’t do anything more to help her.

He gingerly massages her other, uninjured leg, and she melts into his back, eyes closing.

It’s a slow process, but before Conquest’s eyes, she heals. Her shattered tibia and fibula thicken to their proper size, and her muscles slowly begin regrow, circling around the bone- veins start branching out, delicate and weak, like a spider constructing a new web. Fatty tissue- a surprisingly bright yellow- comes, though it’s a small amount, and Famine’s skin grows over the last of her new
flesh. Individual follicles of hair unfurl, and once the last one grows, she tenderly touches the former injury.

“I’m okay,” She sighs. She guides Conquest’s massaging hand to her other, newly mended calf, and he rubs, tenderly. “We need to get out of here.”

“Of course,” He says, nodding. “Do you have a plan?”

She pulls away from him and he automatically lets her go. She stands, a little wobbly, and he offers up his arm to steady her.

“No,” She says, troubled. “But I have an idea of what we could do. It may— Hurt.”

“Hah! I’ll endure whatever pain I must, my lady. Any alternative is better than being devoured by a gigantic bird.”

She brushes a lock of hair behind her ear, and tucks her braid into her clothing. “I’ll need you to summon a hammer.”

“Ah… It’s been a while.”

It’s been a long time since Conquest needed to conjure a weapon. His faithful hammer hardly left his back outside of combat.

“We’ll need it. I’m fairly certain that if you hit its talons hard enough, the roc will drop us.” Famine’s voice is low, serious.

Conquest holds out his hand, and with a slight application of effort, the hefty weight of a hammer’s handle fills his palm.

“We will most likely fall thousands of feet,” Conquest informs her. She nods, lips pursing. “Are you certain we should do this?”

“We don’t have to if you think it’s too dangerous,” Famine cautions, gently touching his arm. “Our chances might be better if we wait until it lets us go.”

“No,” He says. “I will take my chances with the fall, lady Famine. Are you ready?”

She nods, curt and tense.

He slams the hammer against the roc’s toe as hard as he can—there’s an immediate flinch from the bird and a rumbling sound of pain from faraway. Conquest rears the hammer back again and strikes the roc in its toe joint.

That does it.

The clawed foot reflexively spasms open, and Conquest and Famine fall.

The fall isn’t too far. It must’ve been attempting to drop them, or coming in for a landing— they fall twenty or so feet.

Conquest doesn’t have time to right himself in the air. He hits the ground with a crunch, his hammer thunking to earth beside him. A split second later, Famine lands on top of him.

The pain is excruciating.
He has to push Famine off in order to get rid of the terrible feeling of not being able to breathe, even though each breath feels like a knife in his lungs.

He attempts to fit his mind together enough to focus: His ribs have been damaged. His legs have fractured, but aren’t unusable. They may throb with what feels like an unbearable pain, but he’ll be alright.

He weakly turns his gaze to Famine, trying to assess her wounds. There’s nothing visible to indicate she’s hurt; there’s no bruising he can see, no broken skin or a bulge of snapped bone. Still, though, that didn’t mean that she didn’t have any internal wounds or ones beneath her clothes.

He weakly raises his hand to try to touch her, and his muscles shrieks in protest. He drops his arm to the dirt.

He won’t be moving anytime soon, it appears. So, he’ll need to do the next best thing: Get his bearings.

He’s in the middle of a trail of flat, brownish-red dirt. The ground is hot, but not enough to burn, and chalky, clinging to his perspiring skin. They’re close enough to the edge of the trail to tell that there’s a steep incline not too far away; it’s not altogether that different from the mountain path that they had just come from.

The mountains in the distance were even the same as they’d been when the Horsemen were attacked.

To Conquest, that did not make sense. Famine had been healing for a considerable amount of time, and the roc was large and swift enough to have flown a good distance since Conquest and Famine had been abducted. Had the roc just been circling overhead the whole time?

Conquest’s eyes dart about the sky, trying to locate the roc. He was sure it would come for its dropped prey, but it’s conspicuously absent from the cloudless blue expanse above. Were he and Famine such difficult, undesirable prey that the roc had decided they weren’t worth the effort?

The roc deciding that they weren’t good prey and moving on would’ve been the best possible outcome of this encounter, except that War was still in its clutches. They had to rescue him, even if it meant they had to battle one of the largest, most dangerous creatures that flew over the earth.

Conquest shifts, the urgency of War’s fate commanding he move. Pain bolts through him, harsh and reprimanding, mostly from his ribs and spine. He freezes, laying still, trying to keep a very undignified whine of pain from leaving him.

Famine moves. She stands, unsteady, but not severely injured. She clutches her stomach with one arm, slightly hunched, pain evident in her expression. Conquest’s vision swims, dangerously, and her figure blurs.

“Conquest, can you move?” Her voice is light and soothing, cutting through the haze. He struggles to focus.

“No,” He gasps.

She breathes a soft curse, then takes her rifle off her back. “I’ll be right back. I swear. I’m going to see if I can find the roc.”

Time is different, odd, when you are wounded. It feels like an eternity—insufferably slow, but also blurred and fuzzy, allowing time to elapse at a snail’s pace, but also strangely segmented and short.
She returns to him.

“She’s nearby,” She reports, weary. “It’s keeping to the south. It keeps... Circling, over nothing.”

“This creature may not be acting of its own free will,” Conquest rasps, pained. “Help me up.”

She aids him as soon as he asks. There is no pretense of falsified concern- she knows that he will insist if she refuses, so she doesn’t.

He ends up having to lean on her more than he thought, and once he’s on his own two legs, his entire body screams. Fire sears his nerves, but he suppresses it until it’s a blaze of hot white in the back of his mind.

His legs shake.

He uses his hammer as a crutch, with it and Famine supporting the brunt of his weight.

“We need to help War,” He says, voice tight and haggard.

“I had an idea,” Famine sighs, wearily. “But I don’t know if it’s a good one.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Conquest says, firmly. “Any plan is a good one! We will make it work.”

“I’m going to expand my sphere of influence,” Famine says. “I’m going to make that roc deathly hungry, and hopefully, it’ll attack us and drop War.”

“To be honest, my lady, I prefer this plan to your last one.” Conquest offers a reassuring smile. “What can I do to help?”

“Stay here and heal,” Famine says. “We need you in fighting form, or as close to it as we can.”

He nods, heavily leaning on his hammer.

She runs off down the trail, her gait a little slower, more stumbly, than usual. He watches, and waits.

Famine is a considerable distance from him when she begins to unfetter her power, but he can still feel it. His stomach turns, his posture slackens, and weakness settles into his bones. He shakes, and it’s not from pain, it’s hunger.

The roc responds. It lunges into the sky from behind the slope of a mountain, a raucous screech burning the air. It’s far enough that it doesn’t hurt Conquest’s ears, but it’s loud. He feels a sudden burst of pity for Famine.

The roc opens its talons. Conquest’s surprised to see two bodies fall from its claws- War and Death, he presumes, not a random victim.

Conquest watches them fall with a horrible sensation of helplessness, bile rising into the back of his throat. The two other Horsemen both fall to the earth, hard, and Conquest has to avert his eyes.

Famine dodges the swiping talons of the roc, and it seems to change tactics- it beats its wings to propel itself upward, then sharply wheels in the sky and picks one of the fallen bodies as its new target. The roc lands, dust stirred from its great wings, and leans in to one of the bodies, its wicked beak opening and closing, ripping a piece of flesh from the belly of its prey.

It must find a more inviting meal in the other fallen Horseman- it leaves the side of the one it’d taken
a bite of, stomping towards the other prone body.

Conquest can’t *take* it anymore. Those are his friends. His comrades. His closest allies. He will *not* stand idly by and let them be devoured like common prey, Conquest’s injuries be damned.

He limps, using his hammer to help him, teeth grit. Every step is slow- it *has* to be- but he moves with purpose.

Famine runs over to the side of the Horsemen who’d gotten his flesh stripped away, Conquest’s cue to aid the other.

As he gets closer, he can make out more detail. The more injured of the two is War, and Death is the one the roc is focused on.

The roc leans in close, the curve of its beak prodding Death’s stomach. Rage bubbles up in Conquest’s chest, alongside the momentary helplessness and shame.

Conquest will not let his friends be murdered by an overgrown eagle. He’ll stop it even if it means killing it with his bare hands.

Death suddenly grabs the roc’s sparse facial feathers, and it jolts its head back in surprise. Death does not let go, fingers locked in a death grip. Even when it tosses its head back and forth like a tantruming child, Death does not budge so much as an inch.

Smoke explodes outward from Death’s form, dark and misty. Tendrils of shadow blaze around the Horseman, ensnaring the roc’s head.

A sudden feeling of *exhaustion*, of the desire to *submit* and sleep, only to never wake up again, weighs heavy on Conquest’s shoulders. He has to force himself to keep walking, force his eyes open.

To the exact contrary of these feelings, there’s another emotion that comes with the soul-crushing desire to give up and die: *Happiness.*

That longing for the end means that Death hasn’t stopped fighting. That means that they have a chance.

The roc sinks to its knees, then drops on one side. Its wings splay at awkward angles as it falls; its body crashes to the ground, limp and lifeless, its head coming down with a titanic *thud.* Death is jostled by the impact, and lets go, dropping half a dozen feet to the ground. Conquest is close enough to hear his agonized wheeze.

There’s a few moments of silence from the roc, and Conquest stops. He pants, sweating from exertion and the heat of the sun, daring to believe that Death had killed the terrible beast.

When it stirs, his hopes have dashed. Its feathers twitch, its eyes slowly blinking.

Conquest lurches into motion. He *has* to kill it before it regains his strength. He *must.*

He limps as fast as he can towards it, his fingers tightening around the handle of his hammer.

“Such a great creature, brought to its knees,” Conquest forces the words out, attempting to temper his pain, anger, and fear into a calm, musing monologue.

Death gurgles as Conquest gets close, and he tries to spare the fallen Horseman a look of pity.
Conquest knows Death. He would sooner suffer the pain of his broken body for the rest of his existence before he would want someone to pity his sorry state.

“I think I’ve had enough of you hurting my comrades,” Conquest says to the roc. He shifts his grip on the hammer, hesitating for a moment, but ultimately holding it aloft in his own two hands.

There’s no responsive jolt of pain up his back- which means his spine has healed, at least a little- but there’s a sensation of soreness running across the plane of his lower body. Conquest’s legs shake at the loss of his support; they weren’t prepared to take his weight, and certainly not prepared to take his weight and his hammer’s.

He lifts the hammer in the air with all of his strength, and brings it crashing down with as much force as he can muster squarely on the creature’s eye.

It screams, the sound agonizing, but Conquest persists. He brings the hammer down over and over again, ignoring the waves of blood that pour from the creature and the slick and disgusting sounds that his assault produces.

Conquest beats its eye into a puddle of gelatinous fluid- there’s a crack of bone and a new sensation of squish; whatever is underneath is deeper, more spongey, than the fleshy resistance of its eye.

It’s brutal, gruesome work, but he channels his aura, his influence.

Conquest. Domination. Absolute victory, accepting no substitute or exception.

He brings his hammer down with a final, earth-shattering squelch, and he can feel the last of the roc’s life pour out along with its blood.

He was the victor.

As if there was ever any doubt.

Conquest drops his hammer into the dirt. It’s coated with blood and chunks of gore.

He moves over to Death, and kneels beside him.

“Death. Friend.” Conquest says, as gently as he can. Death looks up at him, his brown eyes full of suffering. Conquest’s heart twists in sympathy for his comrade, but for Death’s sake, he tries not to show it. “The battle is over.”

He offers his hand, and Death takes it. Conquest hauls him to his feet, doing his very best to not agitate his wounds.

In order for Death to remain standing, Conquest has to hold him up. Death presses close to Conquest, breathing deep and labored.

“War,” Death breathes, slowly. “The roc was eating him.”

“I left lady Famine and War together. She was tending to him when I came to your aid.” He reassures.

He casts a glance back at the pummeled roc, then glances down at Death, who looks… Uncharacteristically devastated, his eyes rigidly focused on the horrific display of gore Conquest had created.

“There’s no triumph quite like that of teamwork!” Conquest chirrups, trying to distract him. “I may
have struck the final blow, but you were instrumental in its demise! Excellent work!”

Death ignores his praise. “Help me over to War.”

Conquest hesitates for a moment, then half-drags, half-carryes Death towards Famine and War. On his way, he spots the battered, fallen form of his real hammer- not the conjured one currently slick with blood and brain matter- and promises himself that he’ll retrieve it once he delivers Death to War’s side.

When they reach War, Famine meets eyes with Conquest, a little questioningly.

Conquest nods, inclining his head slightly to the roc. She nods, too, visibly relieved.

_Is it dead?_ Her look says.

Yes, is his response.

_Good._

Conquest momentarily leaves Death, who doesn’t even seem to notice his departure; he’s too preoccupied with War.

Conquest hurries away from the other Horsemen to retrieve his fallen weapon. It lays in the dirt, expectant, waiting to be claimed. When he sets his hands upon it, its weight is comforting, familiar, in his grip. Conquest sets the hammer on his back- where it ought to be- and is promptly filled with a warm sense of completion. He turns back to the other Horsemen just in time to see the horses charge up the bluff.

Conquest takes that as his cue to reconvene with the others, and jogs over to join them. He returns to his place behind Death just as the smaller Horseman takes the first unsteady pace towards Shadow Step. The horse trots over to spare him the effort, lifting its head proudly.

Conquest aids Death in mounting his horse, serving as sturdy support to brace against and offering a boost to get him in the saddle. War is trickier. He’s coated in half-congealed blood, weak and less mobile. Conquest ends up having to essentially pick him up and place him in the saddle.

The lack of complaint or struggle is very telling, and very concerning- for both War and Death.

Conquest hopes that they’ll be okay.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is a certifiable monster. It took nearly three days to write, with non-stop attention and care, and there was SEVEN effin’ pages of storyboarding. Its final word count comes out to 6202 words.

( Second longest, I believe, had 4500 - 5000. hahahaha. )

anyway, on the next chapter I’ll be posting links to this chapter's storyboards, if anyone wants to see them.
and now, as every author does, I'll use the end of this A/N to beg for comments. I'm writing this story for my own satisfaction now (otherwise I would've quit after May) but they're still REALLY nice and help motivate me. It's a very nice feeling, seeing somebody pick out a certain phrase to analyze or point out a thing that I thought no one would notice. HIGHLY appreciated.

all that said: have a good weekend, everyone! next chapter should be next week. i'm hoping to kickstart that old "every friday morning" schedule.
A meeting of the gods takes place.

They say that there’s a place, far away from the mortal sphere, that the gods convene in times of woe and misery.

It’s a great meeting-hall, beyond comprehension from lesser beings, famous for arguments and battles and treaties. Pain was declared a damaged deity there, and the Angel of Death was elevated to a more godly status. It was there, in the hallowed halls, that Vulcan and Conquest declared a sacred treaty of brotherhood, and it was there that Vulcan introduced his daughter to all the gods, in reverence of her birth.

It was there that Death pushed an infant god into a crowd of many, one hand gripping his shoulder tight, and announced him as a new deity. The Spirit of the West, young and trembling before the council, declared he was the spirit of the American frontier, and the raised cheer was so loud it rocked the world.

It was there the Yeti announced his official separation, and took a slice of the gods in the pantheon with him; the Snow Queen was the only one to personally join him, but many- the Inventor, Time, the Shield-Maiden, Vulcan, the Faun, and countless others- echoed his sentiment, and declared themselves a step apart from the likes of Vishkar and the Lady of the Shadows and the Huntress.

The place was known by the gods as the Watch-Over Tavern.

It was a place where the cups were never empty and the plates were plentiful; it was staffed by constructs, gifts from the Iris, who repaired the tavern when it was damaged and offered food and drink for the gods, even though none of them needed it.

The tavern itself was a large, wooden structure from time-beyond-time and in a place-beyond-place. Other than that, it wasn’t too different than any other bar. There was a counter with stools, polished tables and chairs, curtained windows, a collection of alcohols and foods behind the construct barkeep, and walls decorated with flags and insignias- one for each of the gods, in a veritable rainbow of tapestry that shimmered dangerously when one looked too close.

The tavern had a roaring fireplace, oaken casks of liquor, and hearty food that never spoiled. There was a chandelier high above, lit with glowing candles that burned different colors and intensities depending on the mood of the patrons. The enchantment was oftentimes duplicated in other places, with other people; it had been one facet of this place that the gods were eager to share or borrow for themselves.

Though the candles weren’t the only things that changed in the tavern. The view from the windows
was altered sporadically. When you peeled back the curtain you would never be sure if it would be the German countryside, an impossible aerial vista over the Grand Canyon, the view of some bookkeeper’s shop in the middle of London, or miles beneath the ocean where no light could touch.

The place was kept neat and tidy by its tireless, whimless staff, and despite its age, it shone like new.

Not one of the gods remembered who its original creator had been, or even if it had been one of them. A few gods tentatively put forth that they had, perhaps, helped in its creation- Vulcan vaguely remembers sketching details, the Inventor says some places remind her of her designs, and the Iris’ magic was what animated the staff of constructs- but none remembered for certain who had laid the wood and hammered the nails. It seemed to many that it had always been- and for young gods, like the Spirit of the West and the Shield-Maiden, it had been.

“I never get tired of this place.”

The Shield-Maiden runs her fingertip over the grain of the wooden counter. The swirling patterns and lines are delicately traced under her rough, sturdy hands.

“Oh, yeah?” Time cocks her head. Her dark hair springs with the motion, caught with boundless energy. The candles burst brightly whenever she talks.

“How could you?” The Shield-Maiden says. “It’s got everything you could ever want. I’m seriously surprised people don’t just hang out here all the time.”

“Because they have lives,” Emily straightens up, eyebrow cocked. She’s Time’s girlfriend, which have long-since been the exception to the no mortals policy of the Watch-Over Tavern. She speaks in good humor, not intentionally reprimanding the god for forgetting there are unshirkable responsibilities, especially for mortals.

“Right,” The Shield-Maiden ducks her head, nervously scuffing the table with her forefinger. “Sorry. I just- Things have been so hectic lately, it’s nice to get an escape, you know?”

The candles dim to a smolder.

“Let’s not ruin a nice night,” Time urges. “What’ve you been up to, Maid?”

“Helping Pappa,” The Shield-Maiden says. “He’s forging something new, and he needs extra hands.”

“What’s he making?” Emily asks.

“Something for Conquest to play around with,” The Shield-Maiden twirls a loose lock of her reddish-brown hair around her finger. “A magical shield, like mine.”

“Conquest?” Emily raises a brow, looking from Time to the Shield-Maiden.

“Just another god, luv,” Time comforts. “We ain’t gonna meet ‘im. He an’ his buddies are secret-like. They don’t bother with our lot much.”

Comforted, Emily leans against Time’s shoulder. Time makes a slightly pleased sound, and Emily, beaming to herself, cups her mouth and whispers something in the god’s ear that earns a genuine, throaty laugh.
The Shield-Maiden watches, palm cupping her cheek. There’s a smile curving her mouth.

Time attempts to straighten herself up, clearing her throat and sitting taller, but she slings a subtle arm around Emily’s waist. “What’cha lookin’ at, Maid?”

“You two,” She says. Her tone is slightly envious, but not mean-spirited. “I want a flickvän, and watching you two is making me want one more. ”

“A what?” Time asks, grinning absently as she pats Emily’s flank. Emily places her hand atop the god’s, squeezing slightly.

“Girlfriend,” The Shield-Maiden clarifies, her expression light and dreamy.

“Why don’t you have one?” Emily asks.

“Mortals don’t live long enough, and I’m too young for most gods,” The Shield-Maiden says, tone rueful. “Besides, Pappa is a little… Overprotective.”

“Overprotective?” Time bursts out, grinning, lifting herself half-way off her seat. The chandelier flares, bright and yellow. “Your old man’s a bloody papa bear! Remember when you were doin’ that squire-knight thing with Conquest? When Vulcan found out-”

The Shield-Maiden laughs, loud and deep. It draws the attention from some of the other, more distant bar patrons, but she doesn’t notice or care.

When she composes herself, the Shield-Maiden tucks any stray furls of hair back into place. “Oh, Pappa… Yes, I remember. He challenged Conquest in a duel for my hono-”

The tavern door opens, unexpectedly.

The Shield-Maiden stops, mid-sentence, and a cabal of gods enters the main room.

The Snow Queen, timid, pats a bit of flyaway hair down as she heads in first. Mother Russia is right on her heels, expression stern, scar caught in the candlelight. Trailing further behind is the knowing smile of the Lady of the Shadows.

The Snow Queen joins the three up at the front of the bar. She’s unsuitably dressed for the warm tavern; she’s decorated in heavy coats and fur, thick gloves and spiked snow boots. Her round, chubby face fits slightly better along all of the amiable chatter and friendly faces, her thick black glasses approachably askew on her nose. Her dark brown hair is done up in a bun, a long pin holding it all together; a snowflake charm sways at the knob of the pin, almost as a little joke.

Mother Russia skulks off to sit at a table occupied by another patron, Roadhog, who hails her with his mug. The two strike up a conversation, a distant murmur seeming to involve pixies and kikimora and the headaches of small companions.

The Lady of the Shadows seemingly disappears, melting into the dancing shadows cast by the candlelight.

“Hey, Snow,” Time greets, raising her drink. The icy god gets settled on the barstool beside Time, wriggling a little to find a comfortable spot. “Long time no see! I thought you were settled in Gibraltar with Yeti?”

“Oh, well,” she dusts her hands on her pants, shy, not quite meeting the other god’s expression. “Yes, I am, but things recently have been…”
“Hectic?” The Shield-Maiden asks, sympathetically. She receives a vigorous nod.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” The Snow Queen says, bashful, rubbing her arm.

Emily glances between the Queen and the Shield-Maiden, then gives a questioning look to Time. Time shakes her head, wordlessly indicating that she’ll explain later. Emily leaves it at that and leans up against her girlfriend, affirming her support.

“Well, we don’t have to!” The Shield-Maiden comforts. “How’s the Yeti? I haven’t seen him in forever.”

“Oh, he’s good! We’ve been working on things.” The Snow Queen isn’t intentionally cryptic; she seems to realize how vague she’s being and quickly elaborates. “Innovations with snow and lightning! We’re experimenting with storms.”

“The two of you should be working on weapons rather than clouds.”

The chandelier’s light is dampened, flame cold and red.

The phrase comes as a soft, muted growl from behind them. The gods and human all turn to see the speaker- Mother Russia- whose cold green gaze could erode the toughest stone. She stands before them all, tall and muscular and imposing, shadows cast down her front due to the muted red light behind her. Her garb- a long, heavy winter coat, lined with fur, draping to her ankles- frames her as a larger, more imposing, figure. Time tightens her arm around Emily’s waist.

“Oh,” The Snow Queen says, soft and understated. She looks away, a light dusting of color to her cheeks. “What do you mean?”

“The monsters in my homeland,” Mother Russia drops onto the last barstool, her expression softening a fraction. The chandelier tentatively brightens, shifting from crimson to a softer, sunset orange. “The constructs.”

The chandelier goes out.

“Let’s not,” The Shield-Maiden pleads.

“Agreed,” Time says, a little too quickly.

“Constructs?” Emily asks, voice soft and breathless.

A frosty breeze blows from nowhere, and Time, Emily, and the Shield-Maiden shiver.

“I do not have the luxury of ignoring the constructs when it suits me,” Mother Russia snaps. “I am afflicted. My home is caught in the grasp of these wretched things. I think now is the time to talk about it.”

“We could call an official meeting…” The Snow Queen is shaking, though not from the cold. “Assemble all of the gods.”

Mother Russia places her hands down on the table, solid, and leans in close to the Snow Queen’s space.

“I want your help, snezhinka,” She says. “You may not be a warrior-god, but you have extraordinary strength. You could freeze the constructs in their tracks.”

“I can’t help you-” The Snow Queen says, seeming to find her nerve, “And you can’t force me to.
I’m not scared of you.”

They stare at one another, wills silently battling in the cold, darkened bar.

“Tch,” Mother Russia jerks her head away, breaking her gaze. “I don’t need you. The Reaper is in Russia now.”

It’s said with the inflection of a threat, though delivered nonchalantly. Mother Russia gets up and stalks away, footsteps heavy and slow.

The four women watch her stalk back to Roadhog and sit, snatching her drink and gulping it down. She and the other god speak in low, angry tones, too hushed to hear but stained with bitterness.

“The Reaper…?” Emily ventures.

“You don’t wanna know, luv,” Time says, shaking his head. “He’s a… He’s a spooky one.”

“Is he a god?”

“No,” The Shield-Maiden supplies, tracing the rim of her glass. She indicates, to a quaking construct bartender, to pour her another whiskey. “He’s a mantle. It’s like… A title, that comes with powers. Becoming the Reaper is usually the most dangerous a human can get.” She takes a considering sip. “Though Reapers aren’t always human…”

The Shield-Maiden jostles Time, grinning. “Remember that one time when there was a pixie Reaper, and they died from getting stepped on?”

Time disguises a snort. The chandelier returns to a relaxing yellow, washing the bar in candlelight once again.

Now that the light has returned, there’s a new figure sitting besides the rest of them- the Lady of the Shadows swings a beer bottle between her fingers, her eternal smile perched on her lips.

“Oh, constructs and the Reaper are bad, alright,” The Lady of the Shadows drawls, startling nearly half the bar, “But have you heard about what Doomfist’s been doing?”

Chapter End Notes

Girl's night! Now, those links I promised:

[Link to last chapter's storyboards]

[Link to guiding art for this chapter]

And I want to clarify here that no, Roadhog being there is not a continuity mistake.
The Spirit of the West lights a cigar, flips his serape up so the cloth momentarily billows behind him, and pushes the front door open.

Summery sunshine cheerfully greets his presence, and he cocks his hip and plants a hand solidly on the porch railing. Outside, on his flat dirt driveway, preparations are underway for a celebration.

It’s the first time in a while they’ve celebrated anything that wasn’t a seasonal holiday. Sure, they do birthdays and the Fourth of July and Christmas and Hanukkah and New Years and the Lunar New Year, but they haven’t partied for the sake of it in a long, long time.

A couple of ghouls bustle around, working on getting things prepared. Jane and Clara, together, haul a heavy table out onto the ground and throw a tablecloth onto it, gingerly patting it into place. King and James are right behind them, plunking down their own table. A little further off, Li and Etchemin tamp down a wooden platform. Esodawa strolls over to them, carrying a piano bench under one arm and a violin over the other. The violin case’s strap hangs loosely from the ghoul’s shoulder, causing the instrument to swing precariously as she walks.

She sets the violin down, soon followed by the piano bench. Li and Etchemin turn to one another, exchanging a glance, then look to Esodawa, questioning. The conversation is casual and muted, probably debating how to get the upstairs piano outside. If they can’t do it, the Spirit of the West’ll expand the door to the house, or turn the staircase into a slide, or something. You shouldn’t have a celebration without music.

A scent weaves through the air, meaty and pleasant, capturing the Spirit of the West’s attention. It’s the heady aroma of charcoal and steak, of hot dogs and burgers and pork... The Spirit of the West doesn’t experience hunger- at least, not without Famine around- but his mouth waters. He pushes himself up from the railing and trots down the short porch steps, heading straight for the grill.

Before he can get there, a pair of ghouls darts in front of his path. Estefan, happily chortling, clutches one of Valdez’s shoes to his chest. Valdez, with only one shoe, lopes after him, yelling playful
threats. They don't even notice that they nearly knocked the Spirit of the West over.

Most people probably would've called out to them, reproachful, but the Spirit of the West doesn’t. Instead, he grins.

Joy is infectious. And, if he’s being frank, it's nice to see after these trying couple of months.

He straightens himself up, adjusts his hat, and strides with purpose towards the grill.

“Boss,” Jane calls. The Spirit of the West glances over. She’s got her hands on her hips, hair in a loose braid. “We’re gonna need help with getting the piano downstairs. Can we get a hand?”

As he’d thought. The Spirit of the West shakes his hands out and takes a slight breath; the manor shifts, obligingly, to his will. The front door broadens, and all the stairs become gently sloped and easier to move a piano down.

“Jonah, Elizabeth, can you get the ivories?” Clara yells, cupping her hands around her mouth. There's an affirmative holler from deep inside the manor.

The Spirit of the West turns back to the barbecue. Paul- their resident griller- turns over a dripping cut of steak, sheened with delicious juice.

The god makes a beeline for it. He ought to be the first to sample the food… It’s his ranch, after all.

As the next in a series of unnecessary obstacles, an unexpected gunshot causes the Spirit of the West to freeze, mid-step. His recovery takes less than a split second; he turns away from his coveted steak to glare at the assembly of ghouls.

“I keep tellin’ you guys, shooting one another ain’t funny, no matter if it was in the nutsa-”

“Sorry,” Wyoma calls, sheepish. She sets the revolver she was carrying down on a nearby table, the one that James was trying to dress with an elegantly pressed white tablecloth. “I didn't realize the safety was off, I just wanted to feel it, before the competition-”

Ohh, right. Marksmen competitions. The hallmark of any good celebration.

He cranes his neck and spots David, Sarah, and Xiang setting up targets a little ways off. There’s lanes for twenty, fifty, and a hundred feet.

The Spirit of the West’d try his hand at a shoot-off if he didn't think he’d win by a landslide. Like usual, he’ll probably end up spectating and placing bets.

“Please jus’ be careful, Wyoma,” The Spirit of the West says, patiently. “We got a fleshy one with us today, an’ if he gets shot, no guarantee he’ll get back up again.”

“Sounds like his own fault,” Sarah calls from a ways off. It was a wonder she’d even heard him. “The rest of us had to die to get on this ranch, why not him?”

Ah, the bitter taste of… Jealousy, maybe? Resentment?

“I know your mama didn’t raise you t’talk about a guest like that,” The Spirit of the West challenges. “You shut yer mouth, Sarah, or I’ll come over there an’ shut it for ya.”

Sarah’s head turns back to the targets so quickly it’d make a man dizzy. The Spirit of the West allows himself a satisfied smile- aw yeah, who’s the boss, it's me- and saunters towards Paul and his sizzling sirloins, licking his lips in anticipation.
But, unfortunately, yet another distraction catches his eye: the sight of his surly little mortal guest.

Hanzo slinks out of the manor a little after Jonah and the grand piano, blinking slightly in the light. The archer looks a little bit like a kid playing cowboy; like one of those little rascals who made their dad take them to every John Wayne movie, and watched Texas Ranger religiously despite their mom’s complaints.

Or, on closer inspection, maybe the opposite. Like his dad forces him to listen to Gene Autrey and his mom won’t stop buying him pop guns and obnoxious belt buckles for his birthday. He looks like his clothes- his boots and dusty jeans and white cotton shirt and leather vest- are wearing him rather than the other way around.

Not that they’re ill-fitted or anything. He just looks like, with every movement he makes, he’s *slinking*; like a three-legged barn cat who’s avoiding the new herding dog. It’s a bit like he knows he doesn’t belong and he’s trying to make himself smaller rather than fit in.

Pity crosses the Spirit of the West’s mind, but he puts it down. He isn’t gonna pity or patronize a grown man. Hanzo’ll find his place here, without the Spirit of the West to hold his hand. Tough love is the best kind, after all.

( A philosophy the Spirit of the West derived from Death, although the Horseman’s never said anything of the kind and very frequently pretends that he doesn’t give a damn about the Spirit of the West; which they both know is a crock of shit, because guess who presented him to the other gods when he was newly born? That was just about the nicest thing you could do for a new deity. )

There is *one* thing that’s bugging him, though.

The Spirit of the West chews on the inside of his cheek, considering, and casts a longing glance back at the grilling meat.

He leaves Paul to the cooking and turns, sauntering nonchalantly towards Hanzo. When the archer notices the Spirit of the West’s slow, friendly amble towards him, wariness flickers in his eyes.

It surprises the Spirit of the West, really, how much that look of distrust hurts him. It feels… Wrong. His ranch hands are supposed to banter with him, call him ‘boss’ in one breath and laugh at his stupidity in the other. They’re never *scared* of him, or, at least, not scared when he’s perfectly happy and content.

Maybe it’s Hanzo’s mortality; it stands to reason that a fragile little human would want to preserve his shatter-glass life, and would be wary of a mighty deity, no matter how amiable he happened to be.

The Spirit of the West has no idea how humans are capable of being so on edge all the time. Didn’t it get tiring to constantly be worried about death and injury? They must not be able to enjoy their lives very much if they’ve got to be concerned with whether or not a stroll on the street could result in their little existence getting snuffed out by an errant automobile.

He fleetingly rethinks his stance on pitying Hanzo, though it’s more generalized this time, pitying all the little mortals who die and stay dead.

Hanzo momentarily hastens his stride, then falters, then stops walking altogether. The archer turns to the Spirit of the West, arms folded behind his back, and stoops slightly in respect. A stray lock of hair, long but not long enough to be confined in his ribbon, sways with the motion.
“Don’t look so nervous,” The Spirit of the West advises, voice light. “The ghouls can smell your
fear.”

Clara throws him an exasperated look, and West shoots back a smile.

“... Right,” Hanzo says, vocalizing only to encourage the Spirit of the West to get to the point. An
awkward silence comes between them.

The Spirit of the West clears his throat.

“How’re you doing after yesterday?”

“Sore,” Hanzo responds, discomfort flickering across his face.

“Aw, shoot.” Your fault, West. He’s a ticky-tacky, breaky-takey little mortal. He can’t just keep
going forever. “Anything I can do?”

“Ah…” Hanzo seems to genuinely consider it, which is a good sign. “No. I will need a little rest.
That’s all.”

“Well, I could get’cha a seat, if you want it.” The Spirit of the West presses his thumb and middle
finger together in preparation for a snap, but Hanzo shakes his head, declining.

“I will be fine.”

That puts the Spirit of the West out a little bit. “... You’re sure?”

Hanzo nods.

“Alright, well…” The Spirit of the West shifts. “Preparations are almost done. We’ve got horseshoes,
shooting competitions, booze drinking competitions, music, dancing, good food, cards, footraces,
horseraces, poetry contests, maybe even a calf-roping contest, uhh-” The Spirit of the West starts
ticking it off his fingers, until he runs out of fingers to count on.

“I will watch,” Hanzo responds, taciturn.

“D’you want a chair-?” The Spirit of the West’s voice is almost feeble.

“No,” Hanzo says.

“Boss, stop messing with him,” Li complains. “He doesn’t want to join in. Leave him alone.”

“... Yeah, alright. Whatever.” The Spirit of the West thumbs his nose. “Good talk, Hanzo. We’ll
catch up later. Take it easy.”

He leaves the archer, who retreats towards the porch and watches from the shade. The Spirit of the
West momentarily turns his head back towards Paul, who’s just finishing up a new steak, but he’s
found that he’s lost his appetite.

What a damned shame.

“King, Li, Eso, we almost ready to start?” The Spirit of the West asks.

King surveys the amount and positioning of the tables, then nods. “It looks like everything’s ready.”

Esodawa plucks the strings of her violin, Etchemin experimentally checks the tightness of his drums,
and Shasa, who’d been inside up until now, sits lightly on the piano bench, her elegant fingers poised over the keys. Jonah teases his cello strings, checking for pitch, then rosins his bow. Shasa plays a G and the string instruments respond in kind.

“We’re ready to go, boss.” Esodawa assures.

“Food’s ready,” Li says, setting down a bowl of sliced fruits. The serving tables have been neatly decorated with arrangements of food and drink; clean plates and silverware sit on standby.

Xiang, Sarah, and David all plod into view, David flashing a thumbs-up. “Range is ready to go. So are the horseshoes an’ other stuff.”

The Spirit of the West claps, then rubs his hands together. “Then let’s get this shit started!”

It starts pretty well, everything considered.

The food is delicious. All the fruits are home-grown, succulent and ripe. The steaks are (with Maria’s help) seasoned to perfection, tender and juicy. West, personally, likes them almost completely raw, but after a few mouthfuls, he forgets all about his preference and stuffs his face. There’s a short, spontaneous hot-dog eating contest, only ended when Sarah nearly throws up on David.

The official competitions begin with the horseshoes championship first. Surprising no one, their resident hundred-time horseshoes winner, Jonah, ends up winning. Xiang and Elizabeth put up a valiant fight, but they can’t beat the champ.

David, already drunk before noon, throws a horseshoe and nails Estefan in the crotch, which ends up causing a fight between David and Valdez while King tries to see if there’s any serious damage. The Spirit of the West breaks in and ends the fight, ultimately disqualifying both of them. Valdez and Estefan sulk off to do something else.

The next competition is foot-racing. They start off with female-only, male-only races to find the victor from their respective category. Esodawa throws everyone a saccharine smile and competes in both, and ends up being the winner in both races. There’s rumbled complaints of cheating; she competes against second place in the males (Jonah, again) and second place in the females (Shasa, who’d taken a break from piano) in a three-man race, and ends up the ultimate victor.

Horse races is next. Li and Esodawa fiercely vie for victory, and end up tying in the initial race. Maria, abandoning her duties at the grill, asks to participate, and wins by a landslide. The upset prompts a third race to be run, and Maria wins that one, too. She struts, proud as a peacock, back to the grill, and Li and Esodawa argue about who got second.

By now, Hanzo has crept off of the porch and edged closer to the spectators, standing a dozen or so feet behind everyone.

The Spirit of the West glances back at him, offering up an encouraging grin. Hanzo averts his eyes.

They tidy up, collecting plates, and then they’re right back at it. The next competition is poetry-
Everyone gathers in a circle, gets a glass, and pours themself a drink. Liquor, champagne, wine, beer; couples sit down and cuddle while one of the ghouls goes up to recite poetry.

It occurs to the Spirit of the West that a poetry contest probably isn’t very fun for Hanzo, seeing as he couldn’t hear what was being said.

“The peach
Gently falls
From the tree
And smacks
My head
Ow
Oh God
Why am I collecting peaches
I hate peaches”

Is met with laughter and applause, and Esodawa bows, deeply. The Spirit of the West glances around to find Hanzo, who’s leaning against the porch railing, watching from a distance.

He thinks about asking him to join, then doesn’t. Hanzo shouldn’t get any special treatment; he wouldn’t ask the ghouls to join in if they didn’t want to.

Yes, you would, a small voice in his head argues. You hate seeing people not having fun. It's not some kind of hyperfocused fascination with the mortal, it's unhappiness because he's not joining in.

He tries to think about something else.

“The light, so rich and golden,
Frames my darling, sweet, beholden,
My bunch of grapes, my freckle-faced moon,
My gorgeous sunbeam, my golden-voiced tune,
You are my stars, my soil, my water, my rye,
And all I can say, dearest, is that I,
Love you more than the sun loves the sky.”

There’s another round of uproarious applause from the assembled ghouls; wolf-whistles and yells accompany Jane as she scurries off the stage to Clara, both of them red-faced and giddy.

The next contest- calf roping- is short-lived. The Spirit of the West doesn't even watch most of it. He’s distracted- again- with his guest.

He keeps finding his attention wandering away, like an untrained puppy let off the leash. The Spirit of the West’ll be trying to focus on a skillful lasso throw, but at the last moment his thoughts will
disobediently meander to whether or not the archer is having fun and he’ll miss it.

It's really annoying.

So, the Spirit of the West decides to do something about it.

While everyone is distracted by Maria’s expert roping skills, West gets up and heads to where the archer is watching- a good couple of feet apart from everyone else- and says what he’s been needing to say plainly and simply:

“You should compete in the marksmanship competitions.”

Hanzo jerks, slightly, like he’d forgotten that people could talk to him.

“What?”

“I think you should compete,” The Spirit of the West repeats, trying to sound gentle and kindly. “I wanna see what you’re made of. An’ it shouldn’t irritate your legs none.”

“... I do not have a weapon. My bow is back in my room.” Hanzo tries.

“Shuu, I can whip a li’l somethin’ up for ya. Guns- least, non-automatic rifles an’ pistols- are in my jurisdiction.” The Spirit of the West spins his fingers in the air and materializes a shiny Colt revolver, which he flips in his hand and offers to the archer.

Hanzo takes it. A very good sign.

“I would prefer my bow,” He says.

“You’re gonna enter a bullet competition with an’ arrow?” The Spirit of the West arches an eyebrow.

“I am better with it,” Hanzo insists. There’s a crackling undertone of tension to his words, like he’s preparing to be hit or hit someone else.

“Yeah, alright,” The Spirit of the West cocks his head, trying his damndest to not patronize the archer. “What if y’entered with the pistol first? Then your bow?”

He snaps his fingers, an idea striking him. “Oh, oh, y’know what? Etchemin an’ Esodawa an’ David an’ Shasa are all good bowmen. They could compete against you-”

“No.” Hanzo shakes his head. “I do not need to enter a separate competition. My arrows will find their mark better than any bullet.”

Yet again, Hanzo’s taken the wind out of West’s sails. But this time, instead of feeling put-out, he’s grinning on the inside.

Hanzo’s that confident, huh?

“Benedict can get your bow for you,” The Spirit of the West says. “Y’don’t need to go back for it.”

He snaps his fingers and the revolver in Hanzo’s hand vanishes. The archer’s wrist bobs upward, unexpectedly freed of weight.

“Benedict,” Hanzo says, thoughtfully, and for a moment, the Spirit of the West thinks that he forgot who Benedict is. “Where is he? I noticed there’s someone missing.”
“Three people,” The Spirit of the West corrects. “Benedict’s bein’ punished, Chi never joins these kind’sa things, and Shade- Well, we don’t talk about Shade.”

He claps Hanzo on the back and turns away, heading for the manor. Benedict’s left the house already, sulking by the porch stairs. The gangly ghoul’s glasses reflect the light, his arms folded defensively and posture angered.

“C’mon, Ben,” West says, entreatingly. “Don’t sulk. It’s just for the rest of today.”

Benedict remains silent.

“I need’ja to grab Hanzo’s bow. S’up in his room.”

Benedict sighs. “Whatever you say, boss.”

With that, he gets up and slowly saunters back inside. Feeling just a little bit of sympathy for the ghoul, the Spirit of the West waves his hand and returns the front doors and stairs to normal.

A minute or so later, Benedict returns, bow in hand and quiver slung over his shoulder. He turns them over to the Spirit of the West, who takes both and tips his hat in respect.

“Thanks, Ben. You can rejoin everybody after the shootin’s over.”

Benedict grumbles something probably disrespectful, but the Spirit of the West waves him off. The ghoul heads back inside, the door shutting with a heavy thump.

The Spirit of the West turns back to the competition, where the crowd of ghouls suddenly interrupts into cheers and hoots and hollers; the god picks up the pace, Hanzo’s arrows jangling in their quiver.

“Here y’are, archer,” The Spirit of the West declares, thrusting both bow and arrows out at Hanzo. The Bowman accepts them, and some shred of that wariness in his face dissipates.

“Thank you,” Hanzo says. There’s a different kind of look to him now- his flightiness isn’t gone, but it’s different, more eager and anticipatory. The Spirit of the West internally commends himself for telling Hanzo to compete.

Esodawa skillfully wins the calf-roping competition, and then it comes time to move on to marksmanship. Everyone files towards the fields; the competition is being held on the grass rather than on the dirt driveway. Maria and Paul pull out checkered red-and-white blankets for everyone to sit on, and the fabric catches in the breeze, billowing for a moment, before they’re laid to the ground. The sun shines, warm and confident, and the sky is a clear, perfect blue. The scent of cut grass is sweet in the Spirit of the West’s nostrils, familiar and sugary. It’s a beautiful day- though he was the one who made it so.

The ghouls all sit; a few of them even toe off their shoes. David offers glasses of booze to whoever will take one, and Paul asks if anyone wants any chips or popcorn. After everyone’s gotten their food, it begins.

Not everyone competes. Li, Esodawa, Sarah, Estefan, Valdez, David, Wyome, Xiang, and Shasa all volunteer to try, leaving ten or so ghouls as spectators. Hanzo trots out after everyone else, evidently deliberating his entry, arrow nocked but string loose.

“Jesus Christ,” Sarah shakes her head, disbelief coloring her tone. “Boss, you’re not going to let this idiot compete, are you? What’s he going to do with some pointy sticks?”
David snorts, in semi-sober agreement. Valdez looks skeptical, too.

“You know, I’ve killed a fair number of your kind with those ‘pointy sticks’,” Esodawa says, tone low but tight with repressed anger. She seems to have taken the insult personally. “Don’t underestimate anyone, Sarah. It’s why you haven’t won anything today.”

“You bitch -”

“Sarah, settle, or I swear to Christ you’ll join Benedict inside,” The Spirit of the West barks. “This is a nice, clean game, an’ you can’t insult the other shooters.”

Hanzo’s eyes flicker from the Spirit of the West to Sarah and back again. His fingers tighten on the bowstring.

Sarah bites the inside of her cheek, but West gets the sense that his reprimand didn’t snuff her rebellious fire. Her bold, I’m-better-than-you bravado seems to be getting her in trouble more than helping her today.

The Spirit of the West folds his arms and sits in the grass, gesturing for the tournament to commence. Etchemin strikes his drums in a sharp, repetitive tattoo, and the first shooter steps up. The Spirit of the West wordlessly stops the breeze from blowing, and the entire world is silent and still, waiting with baited breath for the first shot.

Li is good with a gun. She scores excellent marks on the first target, only slightly worse on the second, and decent on the third. Esodawa does better, but only just. Sarah does worse than both of them, but not terrible; personality faults aside, she’s still a reliable shot. Estefan does better at longer ranges than shorter, and Valdez scores between Li and Esodawa. David barely even hits a target, cackling in drunken triumph when he wings the side of one of them.

The Spirit of the West steps in, possibly unnecessarily, to slightly slant the sun to get in David’s eyes; forcing him to stand with his back to Hanzo in order to see.

He doesn’t want the mortal to die because David can’t shoot straight. That’s all it is.

When David saunters off, reaching for his hip flask, the Spirit of the West returns the sun to where it’d been.

Wyome is almost as bad as David; she manages to hit the first target, then clip the second, and can’t even land a shot on the third. Anticipating her shame, there’s a boisterous cheer when she slinks back to the congregation of ghouls. Etchemin opens his arms and embraces Wyoma; his wife is hiccuping, red-faced, somewhere between laughing and crying. It was out of her character to compete in anything, let alone a marksmanship competition, but she had tried, and no one could fault her that.

Xiang is next. He does nearly as well as Li, and he awkwardly shuffles back to the rest of the ghouls, evidently embarrassed to have shown Wyoma up.

Shasa places somewhere between Xiang and Li’s scores, skill and grace guiding her shots. Her walk back is slow, angelic, and she sits down beside Jonah and Elizabeth, already laughing and trying to downplay her ability.

Hanzo is up next. The Spirit of the West can see nervousness in every muscle and sinew; he can practically feel the archer’s heart pounding in his chest, desperate to prove his talent and to not make a fool of himself.

Hanzo starts walking. The pace he’s set isn’t too fast, but it’s not slow, either. He pulls the string
tight, an almost unnoticeable tremble to his muscles from the weight of the bow’s draw, and releases. The arrow sails through the air to hit dead-center in the target, planting solidly next to Esodawa, Li, and Valdez’s shots. Hanzo does not stop walking.

He pulls an arrow from his quiver, and the pale curve of his bicep ripples with the motion, fluid and practiced. Hanzo’s face is oddly relaxed; possibly even serene. There’s no tightness in the cords of his neck, no indication of the anxiety West thinks is brewing within.

The next arrow hits the center. The spectating ghouls have gone silent, their milky eyes fixated rigidly on the archer.

Hanzo keeps walking. He nocks another arrow. The Spirit of the West gets an odd, tingling sensation in his stomach that he can’t quite identify.

The arrow tears through the air and buries itself in the last target, dead in the center. Hanzo turns, not halting his steadfast pace, and he journeys back to the ghouls.

“Holy shit,” David slurs, pleasedly.

“I think he’s our winner,” Esodawa says, smugly, and while she’d normally be furious she lost, she looks pleased as punch. Sarah’s eyes are wide with rage and disbelief.

“That’s got to be cheating,” Sarah blurts. “He used a different weapon than us, that’s not fair-”

“Are you kidding me!?” Esodawa throws her hands up in the air. “He won-!”

“I’m with Sarah,” Valdez pitches in. “The reliable range of a bow with that draw weight is longer than our pistols. He had the advantage over us.”

Esodawa glances around, looking for support. There’s a few mumbles, scattered, both positive and negative, but no one is willing to be outspoken. When her fellow ghouls won’t help her, she turns to the Spirit of the West.

“Boss,” She insists.

“Yeah, I heard, I heard,” The Spirit of the West says. He pushes himself to his feet and saunters over towards Hanzo, regarding him with a smile. The archer looks to have relaxed, at least a shred.

“Hey, Hanzo. Y’did good. Prol’ly better than anyone else here could do,” The Spirit of the West drawls. “But there are some naysayers who want to disqualify you ‘cos you used a bow rather than a gun.”

Hanzo’s eyes sweep across the assembly of ghouls, momentarily lingering on Sarah, who glares resentful daggers at him. Hanzo looks back at the Spirit of the West, his expression hardening.

The Spirit of the West holds out his palm, and a Colt revolver appears in a flash of silver.

“Wanna give a gun a shot?” The Spirit of the West asks, canting his head slightly.

“Yes,” Hanzo takes it from him. He weighs it, in his palm, expression considering. “Someone will need to remove the arrows.”

“I got it,” Esodawa says, getting to her feet. “Sarah, you too.”

Sarah looks expectantly to the Spirit of the West, a scowl on her face that plainly reads I don’t have to do this, do I? The god arches a brow, gesturing for her to move.
The two ghouls remove the arrows, and Hanzo waits for them to clear out; once they’re gone, he takes a solid stance before the first target.

It takes considerably longer for him to take a shot- he considers the gun in his hands with care, taking aim and shifting the angle of his arms. The Spirit of the West could hear a pin drop.

The gun barks. Hanzo’s wrist flicks upward with the recoil, but he compensates quickly.

The bullet tears through the center of the target. There’s some small murmurs from the crowd.

Hanzo walks, a little stiffly, to the next target, and stops. He takes careful aim. Another bullet dead in the middle.

It’s quiet again. Hanzo moves.

The mortal deliberates a little longer at the final target. He checks the wind- there is none- and adjusts his stance. The Spirit of the West feels a hunger, separate from Famine’s sphere; he finds his eyes captured by Hanzo’s clear stance, by the rigid line of his gun, by the looming circles of his target. He leans forward, breath caught in his throat, willing the archer to win.

The gun kicks. The shot lands, just slightly above the precise center. The Spirit of the West’s mouth splits into an untamed grin.

The silence remains, even as Hanzo turns and walks back towards the ghouls, his head slightly stooped.

Esodawa is the one who breaks it. “Looks like he didn’t need a bow to kick your ass, Sarah.”

Sarah lunges at her, and the rest of the ghouls scramble out of the way. The Spirit of the West lurches into a stand, yelling for her to stop, but Sarah’s hands are already around Esodawa’s throat and her body’s furiously flickering between opaque and translucent. Esodawa’s fingers tear into Sarah’s wrists, nails bloodying her skin. King grabs Sarah around the waist and Jonah grabs her legs to try to pull her off.

The Spirit of the West draws his Peacekeeper and fires into the air. The sun turns a bloody red, and the sky a bright crimson, casting a hellish light over his Domain.

“You get the fuck off her right now, Sarah!” He shouts.

“She fucking started it!” Sarah screeches. Esodawa socks her in the face, expression contorted with fury and outrage. When Sarah doesn’t let go, she keeps punching.

The Spirit of the West abandons negotiations and shoots Sarah through the head.

She rocks back, like she’d been pushed, and her grip loosens enough for Esodawa to escape; she scrambles out from underneath Sarah, breathing hard, her throat darkened with finger-shaped bruises. Jonah and King grab Sarah, dragging her away. The ghoul’s eyes are still alight with fury, panting from exertion; her nose drips blood from Esodawa’s blows, and the hole in her head leaks a steady stream of black ichor down the side of her face.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” The Spirit of the West pauses, fist stopping mid-swing before he can hit Sarah himself. Sarah doesn’t respond, her eyes smoldering with a bitter kind of hatred, and the Spirit of the West glances up at King. “Put her in the basement.”

“Got it, boss,” King murmurs, dipping his head in respectful acknowledgement. The two of them
carry her off, with no resistance.

The Spirit of the West turns to Esodawa, offering his hand, but she shakes her head.

“I’m fine,” She wheezes. “It was worth it if it meant she got shown up by some newcomer.”

“That’s not what this is about,” West says, frowning.

“Yes, it is,” Esodawa spits. “You’re dense if you think otherwise.”

She stumbles, a little bit, but she rejoins the group. There’s soft chimes of concern, but she waves them off.

The Spirit of the West turns to Hanzo, who looks uncertain. His knuckles have gone white from clutching the pistol’s grip so tightly.

“What was that?” The archer asks, his voice slightly coarse.

“A little disagreement,” The Spirit of the West waves his hand, flippantly.

“They tried to kill one another.”

“Well, y’know- ranch hand blood runs pretty hot.” The Spirit of the West shifts his shoulders. “Don’t worry about it. You won. It don’t matter.”

Without waiting for the Spirit of the West to say anything else, the archer retreats towards the manor.

The red sun softens to its usual golden-orange, and the bloody sky wanes to a robin’s egg blue. The Spirit of the West puts his Peacekeeper back in its holster. There’s a visible release of tension among the throng of ghouls; a breeze ruffles them, the first since the competition began.

The Spirit of the West waves his hand and Hanzo’s revolver disappears. The archer doesn’t turn back, doesn’t react, even when his hand closes on air.

“Alright,” The Spirit of the West says, turning back to his ranch hands. “We’ve got shit to do. Anybody up for dancing?”

Nobody immediately volunteers. The mood has markedly soured.

Fuck.

“Who wants to get drunk and set off fireworks?” The Spirit of the West tries instead.

There’s nods and considering mumbles. The Spirit of the West turns and gestures for everyone to follow him.

They re-assemble in the dirt driveway, sitting down at the tables and pouring themselves drinks. For a long time, the only entertainment is idle chatter; gossip about Sarah and Hanzo and the world outside the Spirit of the West’s Domain. Gradually, the sun begins slipping lower in the sky; the Spirit of the West may or may not hasten it along so they get a five o’clock sunset in his Domain’s eternal summer.

Li and James rig up some fireworks and they explode, beautiful and vibrant, against the dusk sky. The first couple of stars begin cropping up, and the Spirit of the West slows the descent of the sun back to its regular pace.
The whistle-boom and the bursts of color become almost relaxing. The Spirit of the West reclines in a patch of grass, pouring himself shots from a nice liquor. Benedict eventually creeps out from the manor to join everyone, and he’s met with a warm reception. David offers him a drink.

The Spirit of the West figures, after a while, he’d waited long enough. He knocks back another shot and gets up and to search for Hanzo.

He find the archer relaxing by himself with a bottle of sake that looks suspiciously like Li’s, though he assumes it was a willing gift and not stolen. At the Spirit of the West’s arrival, Hanzo narrows his eyes, but that guarded fear from before is gone.


“It could have been worse.” Hanzo crosses his arms. There’s an audible slosh from his bottle. “I get the feeling I am not liked.”

“Esodawa’s in your corner,” The Spirit of the West says, “Li, too. But I think that’s bang on for the rest of ‘em. No one likes being outshined by a guy who just showed up and didn’t even need to earn his place.”

“I thought so,” Hanzo says; his voice is cold and dry, betraying no emotion.

“Don’t sweat it too much,” the Spirit of the West says. “They’ll warm up eventually. Jus’ give it time.”

Hanzo takes a swig of his wine.

“Why do you keep concerning yourself with me?” The archer asks. “I found you constantly hanging off of my shoulder or staring at me today.”

The Spirit of the West purses his lips. “D’you want the truth, what I’m telling myself, or the reason I don’t wanna acknowledge?”

“All three,” Hanzo stares him down. His face is silhouetted in the blossoming night, impossible to gauge.

“Truth is, I’m worried about you,” the Spirit of the West states. “I’m tellin’ myself I’d do it for anybody, but that ain’t the case. You’re a mortal- first one I’ve seen in a long time- and you’re… I dunno. Interesting. Interesting in a way that gods ain’t.”

He had never understood how Time could love mortals, with a deep and passionate and romantic love; how she could love them as furious and deep and wild as she would a god, even though humans last as long as a candle flame in a breezy night.

He kind of gets it now, though.

Hanzo’s face is illuminated by a burst of green light, and the firework booms. His expression is unreadable.

“An’-” The Spirit of the West hurries on, “I know ’bout you. I know what’cha heard last night and I know that Doomfist is lookin’ for you.”

Hanzo stiffens.

“Don’t worry,” the Spirit of the West encourages, soft and soothing. “I kicked him out an’ if he
comes back, I'll kill him myself.”

Hanzo doesn't quite calm. “I did not mean to eavesdrop. But I heard his voice.”

“And you wanted to see what was up,” The Spirit of the West finishes, sympathetic. “That's fine. I don't care that you heard us talkin’.”

The reassurance relaxes Hanzo. “How did you know I was there?”

“I heard you,” the Spirit of the West says. “Could hear your clothes rustling when you left.”

Hanzo looks away, and there may have been a miniscule nod of acknowledgement, obscured by the darkness.

The ghouls start yelling a little ways off, and the Spirit of the West turns, partially hoping Hanzo will stop him from leaving.

He doesn’t.

The Spirit of the West saunters over to the ghouls, who’re squabbling about who was the overall winner of the contests, and he summons himself a bottle of strong whiskey. He drops down between Jonah and Elizabeth, throwing his arms around their shoulders, grinning at his ranch hands.

“Well, I’m jus’ sayin’, by my count it’s gotta be Eso…”

The accompaniment of complaints are warmer, more harmonious, than any choir could ever be.

Chapter End Notes

A quick little strawpoll I'd appreciate if everyone took: [Click Here!](#)

I want to clarify that the most popular answer won't necessarily be what the next chapter is about; this is more gauging interest than looking for where to focus my attention.

That said, thank you all for 13,000 views! This bad boy's been going for almost a year and a half now, and god willing, it'll keep going for a while longer. Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, kudoses, and subscribes. I appreciate each and every one of you more than you'll ever know.
Time

Chapter Summary

Genji, helpless, lost, gets a message from a god.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s snowing.

He loved the snow when he was younger. Now, he’s not sure what he feels anymore.

It seems to him, however distantly, that you change when you are resurrected. Sensation feels distant- touches are always feather-light and smells are too faint. His eyes work, but the sun’s glare is not as sharp or unforgiving. Darkness does not frighten him like it used to. The coldness of the snow, when he plunges his hands in, does not cause his skin to burn. He is tired, he thinks, though not tired in the same way one is tired after a long day of hard work. He does not get tired anymore. There is no urge to sleep, no urge to dream; there’s merely the dim memory of a green-haired boy who once curled up to bed every night on a soft mattress surrounded by a phalanx of pillows.

His soul is tired. He is not supposed to be alive. Half of him- though half is arbitrary, there is no number that will properly fit into his feelings, what matters is that some of him- is gone. Robbed when he died and unreturned to him after.

Genji curses her, the Angel of Death, who made an unfair bargain- had he known he would be cursed with this emptiness, he would have chosen to pass on. Now she is dead, and he has less than nothing. No family, no home, no friends, no prospects- his only tether to this world, other than his life, is Hanzo, his killer, protected by a deity of unimaginable power. He cannot even slake a thirst for vengeance.

Genji brings his knees to his chest, and shivers, unrelated to the snow. He should have known things would be awful once gods and Horsemen were involved. He should have known.

He is tempted, almost, to seek shelter. To hole up in a cabin or cave or create a scoop to protect from the biting winds that do not bite. It's futile- it will not change things- but he has a sudden craving for warmth, for domesticity, for normality, that urges him to get up from the snow. It is not leaving pain or seeking pleasure that drives him away- it is habit.

Genji stands, scattering snow that’d started to pile up around him. He wraps his arms around himself, looking around for someplace to shelter.

He wasn’t far from the cowboy-hatted deity’s ranch. He could try to find shelter there- it had been summer, warm and welcoming, and outside of the overwhelming hatred for Hanzo, he had felt something while there. Something that his maimed spirit cried out for.

The very grass of a god’s Domain was impossibly enchanted; woven with a heady peace and a rural ease. Genji turns south, takes one step, then flinches back.

He will not be let in. He knew that before he even began fantasizing about going. What he seeks is
not there. Perhaps not anywhere.

The whisper of contentment, the foggy happiness the god promised, would temporarily relieve him, but it wasn't real. Only a placeholder.

“Hey, wot’cha doin’ out in the snow, huh?”

The voice is soft and startling. Genji’s hand very nearly flies to his sword.

Standing before him, five foot four and unassuming, is a small woman of about twenty-four, twenty-five- she’s a brunette, with hair that sticks up in every direction, tinted aviators, and a white scarf that drapes nearly to her waist.

Genji settles, moving his hands to a more neutral position. The woman has a hoodie on. Slightly too large for her. Smudged with paint. Her leggings are far too flimsy to insulate, and are also splattered with a generous flair of color.

“I’m… Going on a walk.” The words taste wrong in his mouth. His tongue flops, inexperienced, unaccustomed with speaking.

“With’a sword?” She asks, beaming. Genji notices that there are no footprints nearby. It's not snowing hard enough to cover fresh tracks.

Where did she come from?

“You're not dressed for the weather, either,” she says, frowning, though her voice is still light. “Aren't you cold?”

“… No, I have… Good cold tolerance.”

“Aw! You ‘spect me to buy that? No, I've seen this before!” She lifts her chin. “Angel o’ Death messed you up.”

The shock of that name quickly calcifies into something hard and bitter in the pit of his stomach. He clenches his fists. “You are mistaken. I’m going to finish my walk.”

He turns, but she is there, in front of him, seeming to appear out of nowhere.

“Don’t freak,” she advises. “I'm Time.”

“Time?” He echoes.


He stares, in disbelief.

“Oh, were you s’pectin’ an old man with a beard?” She says, playfully.

“No- I don't-” he takes a moment to formulate. “It- isn't often I am spoken to by a… god.”

“Hah! That's not true!” She doesn't stop smiling. “Look, I've already skipped ahead to see how this conversation goes, in a couple of different ways. I am here for a reason. See, we were at the pub, talkin’ about how effed the world is right now, with Doomfist an’ the Yeti and the Second Crisis and all, an’ everyone was sayin’ ‘We can depend on the Horsemen, or ourselves!’ But I think we need a mortal hero.”
“You!” she says, at precisely the same time he says, “Me?”

Genji gives her a strange look.

He is wary of her motivations and intentions. This entire conversation feels like entrapment. The Angel of Death was unassuming and helpful, or so she seemed, until she sprung a trap and stole his… Whatever was missing. Time could be the same way. All the gods seemed to be hellbent on screwing Genji over.

“Yeah, you! A mortal hero! Like Doomfist, but, y’know, a good guy! It’s not a bad job. I mean, you’ll just be on standby with a sword if things go tits-up! And it’s only if we can’t do it ourselves.” She leans in, conspiratory, and whispers: “I’ll admit, it was mostly Emily’s idea.”

He has no idea who that is. “Why me?”

“Because you’ve got everythin’ to gain an’ nothin’ to lose,” she chirps. “If you want, we could go back an’ stop Hanzo from trying to kill you! We could fix this whole thing with the Angel!”

“That wouldn’t work,” he says, daring to hope it would.

“Yeah, you’re right.” She admits, ruefully, though she has the decency to look guilty when he deflates. “No! I mean, that’s not what I meant, exactly- we could do that, but we’d build a new timeline, not change this one. Trust me, we tried that in other timelines, before I learned. We accidentally turned you and Hanzo into century-old vampires by infecting your great-great-grandfather, I don’t know what we were thinking-”

“We did what?” He demands.

“We turned you and Hanzo into vampires, on accident, and oh, boy, there was all that stuff with the Reaper-”

“Who?!” He says, louder, distressed.

“Nevermind,” she shakes her head. “I’ll keep it simple, yeah? I can't really use my powers to permanently alter the world unless it's in what everyone else perceives to be the present. So if I try to alter your whole life, it doesn’t change this time, it just makes a new one. I haven't made permanent, completely time-altering changes unless I had to. Continuity errors are the worst.”

This is not what Genji expected when he came out of his meditative, self-pitying trance.

“... What do I do now? As... As your hero.” Genji ventures. He really has nothing better to do. Perhaps this will give him a semblance of purpose.

“Oh, uh... Ooh. I don’t know. I didn’t think that far ahead.”

He gives her a disbelieving look.

“Hold on, I’ll give myself a couple days to think about it. Ideas are like steak, yeah? You gotta let ’em marinate.”

There’s a split second of pause, and she takes a breath. “Okay, so what I want you to do is meet up with Vulcan-”

“I don’t know who that is,” He says, agonized.

“God of the forge and engineering! He’s at odds with Order and the Inventor sometimes. They have
these great, big inventing contests—"

“Why will I go there?” He says. There’s a kindling of hope beginning in his chest. He is beginning to feel. It may be mostly confusion and helplessness, but it is emotion. It is hope.

“Cos that’s where the Horsemen are gonna go in a couple of months,” Time says. “And you’ll be needed. Trust me.”

“A couple months?”

“I think so. Maybe a few days, maybe weeks, maybe years… But I think months.”

“Why am I leaving now if they won’t arrive any time soon?”

“You need Vulcan’s help, and he needs yours,” She says, confidently. “Besides, if I sent you to the Shambali now, it’d just mess everything up!”

“The Shambali?” All these new names. He’s struggling to keep up.

“Some monks. From Nepal.” She clarifies. “There’s a bit of a… Timeline conflict. It’ll be hard to iron out, but you need to go there, just not yet.”

“I am confused,” Genji tries, as neutrally and patiently as he can.

“Okay, very simple timeline: You need to go to the Shambali so you can protect Zenyatta from Liao—” She stops, shakes her head. “Hah! Oops, I’m still thinking of the vampire one. Sorry. Okay, so, real timeline: you were killed by Hanzo, Hanzo escapes, you’re resurrected by the Angel of Death, the Angel makes you systematically kill your family, the Angel o’ Death tries to use you as leverage to get her lover, who’s Famine’s daughter, you say no and run off, the Angel of Death dies, you’re unbound, but the Angel o’ Death took some of your soul and it kinda feels all messy an’ will until she gives it back, you need to go to Vulcan’s to help him help you, then you need to join up with the Horsemen, who’ll be there for the Shield-Maiden, and then… Ooh, boy, anythin’ after that is just spoilers.”

“… I must go to Vulcan.” Genji tries to focus amidst all the noise.

“Yes!” She beams. “That’s it! Precisely! From there, everything’ll basically run on its own.”

“Will this help restore my soul?” He dares to hope.

“Yeah,” She says. “At the end, you’ll be different, but a better different.”

“That is not reassuring.”

“You’ll turn out okay,” She promises. “You, at least. Everyone else… Ooh, Hanzo—”

“What happens to Hanzo?”

“Welllll, let’s just say that the Angel of Death’s ‘kill all Shimadascept you’ thing ends up kinda happening, but, I think that’s too many spoilers already.”

“He dies?”

“… I mean….” She scratches her scalp, sheepish. “Yeah.”

It doesn’t quite sink in. “Do I kill him?”
“Let’s focus on gettin’ to Vulcan first, luv,” She guides him away from the subject gently.

“Are you taking me?” He says, surprised. He had assumed it would be several weeks, if not months, of grueling foot travel, like he had to do when tracking Hanzo.

She offers out her hand. It’s surprisingly small and dainty- she has narrow fingers, slightly obscured by fleecy gloves. He tentatively lays his hand on hers, and she grips.

It is almost instantaneous. One moment, he is nearly ankle-deep in the snow, and then, heat blows around him, sweeping and hot.

It looks like he’s been transported to hell. The sky is blotted with thick, dark, smoky clouds- the sun hardly pierces the veil of the smog, only appearing as a dim, faint circle of red behind the clouds. There’s a steep mountain not far ahead, grey and ashy, with the occasional skeletal bush protruding from its slate-colored crags. Far in the distance, there is a ring of broken, jagged peaks, encircling them.

Genji coughs, his eyes already beginning to sting from the smoke. “What the- hell-”

It is hot. Gusty and swirling. Small dust devils of ash spin over the ground.

“Kuso -”

When he turns back to see Time, she’s got goggles and a respirator on, her eyes crinkling, sympathetic.

“Sorry,” She’s muffled-sounding. “I forgot that mortals can’t handle bad conditions as well. It’s better inside.”

“Inside where?” His throat is raspy.

“The volcano.”

That mountain was not a mountain. Genji tears a strip of cloth from his pant leg to form a makeshift bandana, which he wraps around his nose and mouth. His lungs already feel labored and shallow, like they’re filling up with coal particulates.

Time helpfully points out a trail, leading up the volcano. “This way! Faster we get there, the faster we can get outta this.”

They forge ahead. When they walk, they disturb mounds of cinders that’d piled like snow over the vague path of hard-packed earth. When the path goes up, winding around the volcano, it gets much worse. Genji feels as though he’s trying to breathe through a metal trash can in the hot sun. He needs to stop a few times to cough, and he feels starts feeling light-headed and faint after less than a mile.

They pass by a massive pile of rubble, rubbish, and ash. Twisted, melted metallic things, shining brightly in the sun. Burned, spent logs. Ashes. Lumps of coal. Skeletal, warped figures, and some recognizable objects, like chrome toasters and stray washing machines. There are big rocks, boulder sized, and small stones that could fit in a palm. Embers. Piles of burned trash. On their way, the ash is disturbed- something moves, and shifts through the pile of refuse, and lurches its way out. It turns out to be an oblong, awkward-looking pile of rocks held together by crackling electricity where its joints would be. It has a single blinking blue eye, centered in the stone where its head would be.

It burbles an unnatural-sounding tune, like computerized birdsong, and begins wading through the trash to reach them. Genji reaches for his sheathed wakizashi, wary.
“Poor thing,” Time says, quiet and sympathetic.

“What is it?” Genji asks.

“A golem,” She says.

It shrieks, low and desperate, and drops brokenly back into the pile. A cloud of ash flings up from around it at the impact, and slowly drifts back down to settle in the ash-heap when the golem doesn’t get up again.

“What’s wrong with it?” Genji feels some strange war between pity and uncertainty.

“I don’t speak their language,” Time says. “I’m not sure.”

“Should we… help it?” Genji ventures.

“I’ll help it out,” She says, already beginning to wade through waist-deep trash. “You go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

He hesitates for a beat, to see if he should help; she begins makes kissy noises at it, and it barely stirs. A wracking cough and stabbing pain from his ribs is enough to convince him to leave her. He turns and begins to hurry up the path. On his way up, where the smoke gets thicker, he tries to take shallower breaths, to minimize the amount in his lungs. Genji’s grandfather smoked all his life. He had gotten lung cancer. Died. Genji had been very young when he went to his funeral.

He’s definitely inhaling more smoke right now than his grandfather ever did. He tries to not dwell on it.

The path comes to a halt, in front of a great pair of iron doors set into the stony cliffside, three times as tall as Genji, with massive brass handles that are nearly at eye level.

This Vulcan must be a giant, with doors like that. The thought makes him nervous.

He rears back his fist and knocks, in a few steady pounds. There’s a tickle in the back of his throat, rapidly blossoming into an uncontrollable cough. He doubles over, all but retching, and nearly drops to his knees.

“Oh, not another one-” The voice is male, complaining, and seems to seesaw, up and down, in pitch and lilt. A hand, thick and meaty, grabs Genji by his shirt and pulls him forward.

He staggers, caught in the throes of his coughing, and stumbles inside. The door slams shut behind them with a woosh of air.

There’s a decisive difference in temperature. The oppressive heat becomes an air-conditioned, sixty-degree coolness. It’s not as relieving as it would be, were he human, but he feels like he can breathe now.

He hunches, hands resting just above his knees, panting laboredly.

“You must be Genji.”

He looks up, and finds that he’s looked too far. His gaze wanders down a ways to be met with a small, stout man, no more than four and a half feet tall. His blonde beard is ornately knotted, his nose large and round, singular eye harsh and squinted, topped with massive furry eyebrows. A horned helmet caps his head, though tresses of his hair spill out, seemingly braided into his beard. It’s hard to
determine where beard begins and where hair ends.

One of his arms is missing, replaced with a prosthetic-like carving, in the shape of a wolf, or lion, or some kind of sharp-eyed creature with a gaping mouth. A tiny, fur-trimmed cape is fastened at his shoulders, smudged with soot.

“How do you know me?” He wheezes, pounding his chest in hopes of clearing his lungs.

“Time dropped by a few years ago and told me to expect ya. Been waitin’ on you ever since.”

*A few years ago?* Genji momentarily thinks about asking, but he supposes that Time, like the force of nature itself, isn’t linear. Perhaps she remembers things that will happen and are supposed to happen at random times.

“There was a…” Genji makes a little, aborted cough, and tries to clear his throat to ease the scratchiness and pain. “... thing in your junkyard.”

“Something alive?” His eyebrows look like massive caterpillars, wriggling in alarm whenever he changes his expression. “Oh! *Ja,* that’s my fault. I borrowed a golem from the Reaper. I must’ve thrown it out a few years ago and forgot about it.”

*Years.* In that ash-pile.

This further cements Genji’s belief that most gods are horrible.

“Come on, then,” Vulcan turns, abruptly, and the tiny swatch of his cloak unimpressively flaps behind him. He begins walking down the empty stone hallway, without waiting to see if Genji is following him or if he’s even okay.

“Where are we going?” Genji says, uncertain. He lays a hand on the wall for support and trails after the god, not wanting to be left behind more than he wants to stay put. “Time did not tell me what I am supposed to be doing here.”

“We’re headed to the Forge,” Vulcan’s voice is vicious, edged with an unsettling, savage pleasure. “You’re going to help me build the end of the world.”

Chapter End Notes

I am incredibly sorry for my absence over, I believe, a whole month.

In this time, I celebrated Halloween with my mother, went on a date with a girl I'd known for years and was gently let down (though we are still friends) and splurged in *Fallout: 76* and *Elder Scrolls Online.* In addition, I've been mostly focusing the time I would spend writing on grades to make my mother happy, and I want a good foot forward before finals begin.

It's November now, and this piece, which was my NaNoWriMo last year, is still going to be my NaNoWriMo this year. Hopefully updates will be more regular and frequent from now on.
Thank you for reading, comments incredibly appreciated!
The Horsemen arrive at the Shambali monastery.

“Is that it?”

War points to distant structures on the horizon.

The sandy-orange brickwork, ancient and sprawling, is a slight contrast to the mounds of white snow blanketing the mountainside. The Shambali monastery is large, complex; War knows, from the singular visit that he had, that there are three different parts of the monastery, all at three different heights. There’s the village, at the lowest, where the low-level monks and pilgrims live and sleep. Above that is a large, open courtyard, where monks do whatever it is they do; make peace with nature or think about pacifism. Even higher above that is the final level of the monastery, nearly at the tip of the mountain’s peak. It’s their primary house of worship, its hallways lined with the bronze statues of valiant monks who’d undoubtedly made some advancement for spiritual or world peace. Other than serving as the nucleus of their religious day-to-day activities, the highest part of the monastery is important because the leader of the djinn monks lives there. War wonders just how insufferable he’ll be.

“It must be,” Death says, breaking War out of his thoughts.

The dark-clad Horseman casually lifts one hand off of the reins to brush snowflakes off of his shoulder pauldrons. Snow has been falling, lightly, ever since they got up into the mountains; though the horses’ movement is unimpeded by by it. They walk over the snowfall as easily as they would water, leaving light hoofprints in their wake, shallow indentations that are leisurely filled.

Conversation has been sparse. Famine is tense, ever-growing as they get closer to the monastery, and the consequent gnaw in the Horsemen’s bellies overpowers their desire to speak.

Just for something to do, War inhales, deeply. He can scent the alluring promise of conflict up ahead, and he knows Death must smell the same; the other Horseman is shifting, his nostrils flaring and eyes darkening in anticipation. A stray thread of thought crosses War’s mind, something he had never contemplated before- does Death actually enjoy War’s hunt for conflict? Bodies have a way of following violence.

The suddenness of the idea disturbs him. Why had he never wondered that before? Perhaps he was self-absorbed, as Death had claimed.

Something writhes in his stomach, oily and unpleasant. War does not need to think about Death; only the carnage he’ll revel in once they reach the gates of the monastery.

“Do you smell that?” War asks, trying to keep his tone subdued, distant from the excitement of the hunt. “They’ll break in and kill the monks any moment now.”
“If pressed to defend themselves, the djinn will put up a better fight than these interlopers.” Conquest rumbles, though his tone is deep, disturbed.

War does not know if this is true, but it does not matter. He can sense the impending bloodshed and he is anxious for it. So is Death. He keeps sniffing the air, searching for the first hint of spilled lifeblood. Famine, too, is not immune, though she looks wary instead of eager.

“We will not let them break in,” Famine says, tone hard and controlling. “We will destroy them first.”

“I don’t like interrupting battles.” War responds, loftily. “Do it yourself.”

“So disrespectful!” Conquest admonishes. “As I recall, you were eager to fight when the stag told us of this quest!”

“It’s been too long since I felt two opposing sides in conflict,” War says, not bothering to hide the longing in his voice. “Too long. I nearly forgot the feeling.”

Death leans forward in the saddle, voice low and smooth. “War, if we fight, we’ll get through this visit more quickly.”

It’s a blatant manipulation, and it makes him bristle. “You want to get through the most interesting part of this visit so you can cut to the part that you like. I don’t think so.”

“Fine,” Death sounds slightly annoyed that his trick didn’t work. “You watch us work, then.”

It’s surprising how much Death’s words sting, though there is no taunt or jibe attached. The statement feels barbed, though the words are innocent.

War hastens Immortal’s stride, and the horse overtakes Balderich, who had otherwise been in the front. Conquest throws him a look as he passes, and War pretends he did not see it.

War throws himself into the chase rather than dwell on his peers, and before long, he and Immortal come upon the simple wooden fences and brick-laid huts of the pilgrim village. He slows his stallion considerably, to barely an amble, and takes a careful look around.

The first thing that strikes him is that it is quiet. There’s no sound, other than the subdued ringing of bare wind chimes, caught in the occasional soft breeze that drifts through. There’s no motion; curtains have been torn from the windows, anything that could be picked up by the wind picked clean. The snow only seems to enhance the stillness, muffling what little sound there is to muffle. When War had been here last, the sight of children playing on the dirt paths, pets snuffling curiously at the grass, monks walking with one another with wind-swept robes, was not uncommon; now, all of the merriment and life is gone.

War notices, with an eerie feeling flickering through him, that it has stopped snowing.

The hoofbeats behind War- the other Horsemen- begin slowing, then stop altogether.

“Gone,” Conquest says softly.

The wind pulls, harshly, at them. A shiver seizes War’s muscles.

“No one died here,” Death tells them, certainty stitching his words. “No one recently.”

“They must have barricaded themselves in the monastery,” Conquest says. “Fled once the invaders
arrived.”

Famine whispers something soft under her breath. Undoubtedly about her daughter, or her daughter’s safety.

“No one has died yet,” Death assures her again, voice sharp, but not loud or unkind. “Least of all Fareeha. I would know.”

Famine nods, though her expression does not change. The Horsemen dismount, issuing firm instructions for their steeds to remain where they were, unless the Horsemen had need of them. They slog the rest of the way to the monastery on foot.

The Horsemen have more issue with the wintry conditions than their horses did. The snow slows them down and ensnares their legs; Famine, the shortest and smallest, gets the worst of it, constantly pulling her feet out of drifts and shaking ice from her pant legs. The roads have not been cleared for at least a few snowfalls. It makes War wonder how long this occupation of the monastery grounds has been.

Another thought comes to him, more unsettling- Why hadn’t he felt this until now? He had known that there was an issue of some kind in Russia- had for a year or so now- but he did not feel it, nowhere nearly as strong as he had felt those two in Japan so long ago.

The Horsemen pass through the second level of the monastery, which bears more present signs of habitation… As well as violence. There are scattered bricks and shards of wood, half-buried in the snow. The decorative, gilded animal statues lining the stairs of a high-ceilinged brick pavilion show some sign of damage. Most are dented or scratched, and one has been ripped off its pedestal and left face-down on the ground. Candles and flowers left at a shrine have been scattered or stomped on- the bricks around it show some sign of wear, like someone had taken a hammer to them and given up half-way.

“Was there a battle here?” Famine asks, stopping to examine the battered walls.

“I would have felt it,” War sniffs.

“Not a battle,” Conquest straightens some of the candles. Death, who’s been standing off to the side, casts his gaze away. “It looks as though the monks fled, and the protestors destroyed whatever was in their wake. Perhaps the monks evacuated the village when they saw the mob coming, but were not as swift as they needed to be, and this was where the malcontent began to catch up.”

“No one died,” Death repeats, as if to reassure himself. “They made it to the monastery.”

“But how long have they been trapped in there?” War asks no one in particular. He is not expecting a reply, and startles slightly when Famine speaks.

“They are starving,” Famine says, grief bleeding into her words. “Both the monks and the protestors. They’ve been there for too long.”

“Still, the conflict is coming to a head,” War warns. “I can feel it. They’ll break through the monk’s defences soon.”

“If they’re strong enough to fight,” Conquest rumbles, dubiously. “If what you say is true, Famine, the battle may not be so glorious. Hungry warriors fight with the last echoes of strength they have. Starving warriors have nothing left.”

Annoyance prickles at War’s mind, though he does not know why. “We should continue.”
“Agreed,” Death says.

The signs of habitation continue up the hillside. Various objects are half-buried in the snow, increasing the further they go; the concentration of cast-off trinkets gets so thick that merely walking through the drift guarantees they’ll hit a discarded item nearly every time they take a step. Every so often, War’s toes will meet with something metal or wooden, and he will move his stride, only to inevitably hit another abandoned thing. Blankets, prayer beads, vases, statues, clothing; none of the Horsemen make any comment on the items, nor look at one another as they wade through.

War prefers to concentrate on how the scent of conflict grows with every step. He lets it wash over him, rejuvenating and warm. Famine, too, sighs in reluctant pleasure as they get nearer to the monastery’s peak. Undoubtedly, she is feeling the impact of so many hungry people; it’s enriching her, satisfying the itch in her skull, though concern for her daughter may outweigh the gratification of ravenous masses.

Death and Conquest show no sign of enjoyment. Death still looks anticipatory, impatient, waiting for bloodshed; Conquest is the same way, though he looks more grave.

The Horsemen crest the hilly path and find an encampment outside the monastery’s entryway. Roughly a dozen tents have been erected, cobbled together from pilfered blankets and wood in a small, flat area, cleared of snow. They’ve been arranged in such a way as to encircle a central bonfire while still being close to the monastery’s doors. Multiple people huddle next to the blaze, trying to stay warm, wrapped in furs and blankets. There’s a small amount of bears milling around-transhumans, undoubtedly- either scratching at the monastery walls or sharing their warmth with human companions.

It’s a dismal state of affairs. War can feel their helplessness and rage rising in the back of his mind, summoning a tight grip on his stomach. He relishes in it, for a moment, and lets it pass.

“This is more sad than anything,” Death murmurs.

They look like refugees more than an angry mob. And, perhaps, they are.

War is not certain if they think they will be safe here, or if they think they are diving into the most dangerous part of enemy territory. Most of them are young- he gauges the youngest at, perhaps, sixteen, and the eldest in his forties- with no children or elderly among them, though they have a fairly even divide between transhuman and human, and male or female.

The Horsemen are noticed. One of the werebears chuffs an uncertain growl, alerting everyone else. The huddled throng of people turn from the crackling flame and ready their weapons; ranging in technology from the humble wooden board all the way to assault rifles. The bears flatten their ears, narrow their eyes, and show their fangs, stance braced and claws gripping the frosty dirt.

“We are not here to harm you,” Conquest steps forward, shouldering War aside, and the smaller Horseman feels a murderous wrath flood through him that he smothers. “We want the same thing you do!”

The werebear in front shrinks into the form of a man- a human, dressed in heavy coats. He turns back to his fellows, and either gives an order or a translation. The bristling crowd lowers their arms and goes back to seeking warmth, wherever they can find it.

“You are here for help?” The man queries. “You want help us?”

“We want the monastery open,” Conquest says, calm and clear. “The same as you! We are the Four
Horsemen! I am Conquest, this is War, this is Famine, this is Death—” He begins indicating with his hand.

The man stares, in a wide-eyed mixture of fascination and horror. “Horsemen. Vot der’mo. ”

The name murmurs through the miserable congregation, parroting it to one another. Horsemen. Horsemen. Horsemen.

“Have come for kill djinn?” The man asks, hesitates, then repeats what he obviously thinks most important: “Kill djinn?”

The Horsemen all exchange glances.

“The Iris will not be pleased,” Death says, casually. “She’ll curse us, and Nature will be angry as well. The djinn are their favored children.”

The two- the Iris and Nature, the Cosmic Wives- are the strongest of the gods. Their curses could blight a deity for their entire existence, permanently marring them or their Domain. Vulcan’s Domain had been cursed by Nature in his attempt to take the ability to create life from her, permanently choking his land with ash and death.

While the Horsemen do not have Domains to be afraid for, they do have their lives, and they do enjoy them as they are.

“We are not here to kill the djinn,” Famine declares, plenty loudly enough for the crowd to hear.

The man’s brow darkens, his face wrinkling in anger. “Friends of djinn?”

War barks a laugh. “No. Not even close. We want someone in there.”

The man’s expression twists, momentarily confused. “Want…”

The crowd begins murmuring while they speak, uncertain, strings of confused Russian running through the air. A few of them start speaking small snippets of English to one another.

War steps forward, a scowl etched on his features. He can already tell that the conflict between this encampment and the monks is not what he wants; it’s tainted with the undercurrent of desperation, cold, hunger, and illness. There’s a weakness that infests the lot of them, and it stokes a burning fire that’s been kindling in War ever since his conversation with Death in the roc’s talon, maybe before. He is angry, impatient, wrathful, and does not care to control his sphere of influence anymore.

“Move,” War seethes at the werebear, stalking forward. “I’ll open that door myself.”

The werebear silently moves aside, cowed by War’s aura. Similarly, the wretched masses melt away at his passing, clinging to one another; not for warmth, but because they are afraid. War sweeps past them, to the great monastery doors.

He raises his fist to knock, but a resounding noise from the other side- like a fist smashing against the doors- gives him pause.

“A moment, please,” A smooth, patient voice comes from the other side, though it’s muffled. War’s hand remains in the air for a moment, then lowers to rest at his side. He’s aware of snow crunching under the other Horsemen’s feet, and more aware when their bulk at his back stops the cold wind from blowing over him. He resists the temptation to glance behind. He will not appear as though he is seeking reassurance from their presence.
The doors jolt, and a tiny deluge of snow is shaken from the cracks where it’s taken root. War takes a few steps back in preparation for the doors’ arc.

They swing outward, a flood of warmth and light accompanying, and War does not try to hide his scowl.

Standing before him, tall and ever-lofty, is the leader of the Shambali monks. He’s adorned in grey-and-white robes, his nine piercingly blue eyes fixed on War. The djinni has delicate fingers, spindly, that seem to have too many joints. His ears are slightly pointed, and he has a neat row of golden skin on his chin, a characteristic marking shared by many monks. War had heard tale that it is the Iris’ blood, spilled upon her favorite children, permanently altering the color of their flesh.

Flanking the monk is a curious addition that War would have questioned, had it not been for the angry Russians outside his doors. The leader of the Shambali is surrounded by an entourage of six atronachs, all of them eight-foot monstrosities with joints arcing electricity, smelling of ozone and sea salt. They glower, with their singular eye, at War, issuing an unspoken challenge to assault their leader. Obviously, they do not know his mood, nor who he is- or they would be staring at the ground.

Or, perhaps, they do not care for their own lives.

The Shambali leader bows, steep and respectful. “Hello, Horsemen. I am Mondatta, leader of the Shambali, the head of this monastery. I’ve been tracking your arrival for some time, though something obfuscates my sight from why you have visited me. Would you care to ease that burden from my mind?”

War hates him nearly immediately. He despises Mondatta’s calm, melodic voice, his gentle, soothing cadence and timbre, and the ancientness that radiates from him, far older than even some of the gods. Death’s facial expression, in the corner of War’s eye, tells War more than Mondatta could ever explain: that the djinni has cheated death, and was supposed to relinquish his life long ago.

This Mondatta is a coward, War thinks, and he does not very much like cowards.

“My daughter,” Famine says, stepping forward. “Where is she? Where is my Fareeha?”

“With the rest of the pilgrims,” Mondatta provides, agreeably. “She arrived in companionship with a strange creature. A centaur spirit cast in a body of stone and wood. Both of them are in the atrium, with the other monks.”

“Is she safe?” Famine demands.

“Pinched by hunger, as is everyone. I wish we could have cared for her better, but I could not jeopardize our own monks by giving her more than everyone else.” Mondatta says.

Conquest makes a small sound in the back of his throat, deep and considering. “How long has the siege been?”

“A week, perhaps more. We have melted snow to drink, though our rations are all but exhausted; we were not prepared for an occupation. There was no forewarning, and these malcontent struck when we were weakest, dependant on resupply.” It’s surprising, how cold Mondatta’s eyes and voice can get. “They don’t even need to break our doors down. They’re intent on letting us starve.”

“We’re not partisan,” Death says, crisply. His eyes narrow as he goes on. “I hear your unspoken plea for help. We just want her and then we’ll go.”
“We will die,” Mondatta says, desperation bleeding into his words.

“What benefits all of the Horsemen,” Death says. “You’ll starve for Famine. You’ll die for me. Those outside will have victory for Conquest.”

“And I will get nothing,” War seizes his words with a hiss. “As always.”

Death fixes him with a stare.

“Perhaps I’d like a conflict,” War’s voice swells, as Death offers no alternative. “Perhaps I’d like there to be warfare. Perhaps I would like grand battles and healthy warriors.”

“Are you saying you’ll help the Shambali?” Death’s lips twitch in surprise.

“Perhaps I am,” War seethes. “There’s no glory or excitement in two sides wasting to nothing.”

“Agreed!” Conquest booms, unexpectedly. “If there will be a fight, then let it be between warriors who can bear to wield a weapon!”

Famine interrupts, her singular eye flashing impatiently. “I won’t suffer any more of this meaningless talk of warfare. I am going to get my daughter and there is no army, monk, or dissenter that can stop me.”

And with that, she storms past the atronachs, who flinch aside at her passing, and disappears down a hallway bathed in warm orange light.

“Perhaps we had all better go in,” Mondatta offers, quickly, “Before my opponents decide that I’ve been in their sight and unhurt for too long.”

War glances at the crowd of Russians- they shift, anxious, angry, but none of them courageous enough to throw the first stone.

Weaklings, the lot of them.

War trots up the steps, not bothering to see if Conquest or Death follow him. He turns a separate corner, opposite from where Famine had gone. He fully intends on brooding by his lonesome for a while, perhaps manipulating a monk or two into some kind of competitive bloodsport.

“This isn’t the right place for this, War. Think.”

Death’s words flicker in War’s mind, unbidden. He shakes his head, trying to concentrate on something else. His anger at the cowards, on both sides of this little monastery conflict; the way the brickwork looks in the candlelight, the ornate decor adorning the walls, the fact that he’s gradually getting lost in the complex of airy open-air chambers and short hallways. War’s stride hastens without his input, as if he could outrun his thoughts.

Like a persistent fly, his thoughts refuse to be swatted away. Waiting for Death’s severed torso to regenerate in the roc’s talon, the scent of blood burning War’s nostrils. The sight of Death, limbs stretched, in the grip of the impassive stony guardians in the Angel of Death’s Domain. Death’s eyes, soft and wide, when he realizes War’s counter-betrayal. The moments of gentleness when they stared at the stars together in silent companionship. The journey to find Death after his accidental deicide. The first hints of dawn and the quickening, the awakening, of something hungry and undeniable when Death first kissed him.

War shamefully submerges himself, abandoning the pretense of resistance. He’s denied himself the
opportunity, banished his thoughts as distractions, but now that he is by his lonesome, he may freely torment himself with memories and, disgustingly, feelings.

This isn’t the right place for this, War. Think.

Death had been right, of course. It was not the place for that conversation.

But that didn’t diminish War’s burgeoning feelings of helplessness and wrath any. What right had Death to deny War when he was the one who had initiated? What right had Death to be cagey and spiteful and rude, manipulative, even, when he was the one that wanted this?

A hand grabs War’s shoulder from behind, and the Horseman’s instincts take over, telling him that he’s about to be grappled. War instinctively throws his elbow out, and is denied the pleasure of sturdy flesh underneath his blow when his assailant dodges out of the way. War is shoved, and he reels, trying to process who is attacking him, how he should respond; his brain rattles in his skull when he’s slammed into the nearest wall.

Once the initial shock has worn off, he realizes his attacker is not an attacker at all. Death is kissing him, beard tickling War’s mouth, lips meeting his with a warm, firm pressure and a slight, nearly unpleasant, moistness. His hands encircle and pin War’s wrists, flattening him against the brick wall.

War’s knees nearly buckle, his eyes slipping shut of their own accord. Death’s chest is less than an inch from his, and War can feel the heat coming off of him, the difference stark in the chilly air.

Death pulls away, expression uncharacteristically anxious, his eyes shiny and dark with something unreadable. War rips one of his arms out of Death’s grasp.

“What is this?” War asks, breathlessly. He gathers his wits, attempting to summon some anger. He feels emptied of his wrath, and that scares him. “An apology?”

“No,” Death says, a little hoarsely. “... Perhaps… But there was no good time to act, War, Conquest and Famine were omnipresent, and I-”

He chokes, slightly, but War knows his issue, and he agrees. This is private. They could not very well declare their feelings in clear view of the other Horsemen.

“I understand,” War cuts through him. Death relaxes his grip on the wrist he still holds, and War shakes him off. “But I do not appreciate being stalked and pounced on. I am not prey.”

“No,” Death agrees. “No, you are not.”

Death moves back, to give him some room. War, feeling spurred, and more than impulsive, closes the gap and defiantly kisses him again.

The next few moments are a blur. Death endeavors to pin him, and War attempts the same; they flip against the wall, both fighting for a place on top. They soften their blows enough to not bruise or draw blood, gentle even in violence. The urgency of it all keeps War ignorant to all but the fact that they are moving and that Death’s lips are on his; Death’s hands, his body, seems to be everywhere, touching and squeezing.

Not that War isn’t. There’s a mortifying craving driving his hands to touch and touch and touch, and his heart swells with something sickeningly saccharine and sappy, overflown beyond the point of bursting.

Death tries to kiss the muscle of War’s jaw, and when he receives no protest, mouths at his ear;
War’s heart *purr*rs with denied satisfaction and he rakes his fingers down Death’s back, tearing the leather with his nails.

War buries his mouth in Death’s neck, kissing the cord of muscle beside his throat; Death shivers and War is bolstered, growling possessive nothings into his skin. Death, not to be outdone, flips their positions, pinning War against the wall.

War does not understand what this is. He does not understand what he wants, what Death wants, what the end result will be; he is far, *far* too preoccupied to ponder it. He’s rapidly sinking into something warm and syrupy, numbing his ever-present wrath and resentment. There is a deluge of *good* feelings, though they are *fuzzy* and *impossible* to pin, the same way Death is, slippery and ever-escaping War’s attempts to put him in his place.

When the frantic movement ceases, and they both still, they stare at one another. Death’s pupils are dilated, thick and round, expression slightly vacant, though pleased. War imagines he must look the same way.

“Lust?” Death tries, whisper-soft and scratchy. It’s an answer to a question both of them are thinking, though neither have asked. *What is this?*

“No,” War responds, with a head shake that feels too small, so he shakes it again, for emphasis. “I think—”

“Don’t,” Death says, sharply. “Horsemen *can not-*”

War swallows, and he wonders if he can taste Death, if he *should* taste Death, what Death tastes like. “I know.”

It doesn’t *feel* like what War suspects it is. Or maybe it does. War has never felt it before.

Is always so violent? So aggressive? Famine and Conquest, who’ve come as close to it as a Horseman can, aren’t the same way War and Death are.

Death’s suggestion has merit. Lust is violent. Lust is carnal. Lust is all-encompassing, a drive that made men and gods alike slaves to desire. Lust demanded a clash of two bodies, working in tandem, to chase common pleasure.

But it doesn’t *feel* like lust. There’s a desire for closeness. War yearns to have Death nearby, to breathe in his smell, to feel his arms, to lay his head on Death and rest beside him. Not all of it is carnal, or intensely passionate, or relating to physical action. When he watches Death scowl, or cross his arms, or fold his legs, War feels an absurd thing that he tentatively names as *affection*. War appreciates, with the warmest satisfaction, when Death *agrees* with him. He enjoys the moments when Death is happy, though only when the moments are not at War’s expense. It hurts when Death is dismissive or cold. None of these things are sexual, nor are they physical— they are evidence of something else, something that is *not* lust.

Sometimes, he longs for Death so badly that it *hurts*; but at the same time, Death is *infuriating* and stubborn and manipulative and uncompromising. Whenever Death strongly disagrees, War cannot *believe* the gall of him, *cannot believe* how bull-headed and foolish he can be.

Death slowly slides his hand up War’s arm, over his shoulder, and up his neck, coming to cradle his jaw.

Their gaze exchanges the word neither of them will say, like a small, shameful secret.
Chapter End Notes

Hopefully I can keep pace and we'll have another update next Friday. Heh. Heh heh. Heh.

;;

Thank you all for a preemptive 14000 hits!

( and comments incredibly appreciated! )
Famine meets Fareeha.

The monastery is a maze.

Famine has not been here very often due to War’s stubborn dislike of the Shambali monks, and thus, she does not know the sprawling, intricate layout of the complex. Every individual nook and cranny and prayer room looks completely the same. She feels harried the longer she walks, pace increasing in tandem with her concern. Time is up. She wants her daughter, to see her progeny safe and not wanting for anything.

Famine was not usually motherly. She was not a kindly, gentle figure, flinching at the first sight of harm. She waded into battle with the rest of the Horsemen with her teeth set and her legs strong, killing and brutalizing with the best of them. She hardly spared concern for those who anguish in their starvation, preferring to bask in their hunger until it was Death’s turn to reap the reward.

But it was all different when it was her own blood. Conquest and War and Death didn’t understand; truly, really, they didn’t. Death may have some denied familial connections with the Spirit of the West, but it wasn’t the same. War was calloused and barnacled all around, rarely sympathetic to anyone. Conquest was the only one who came even close to knowing, though it wasn’t love for Fareeha that drove him to worry, it was love for Famine, his concern tethered to hers, caring when she cared, though he had no personal stake in it.

Famine wants to take Fareeha back to her home in Death Valley. She wants to take Vulcan by the beard, Vishkar by her hair, and force them back into the pocket Domain- the enchanted land around Fareeha’s century-old home- and build it safer, more restrictive, more careful.

But she had promised she would not. She had grit her teeth and let her daughter walk away, had let her daughter steal Shrike, and potentially get herself killed.

She was not a cruel stepmother in a cliche fairy tale. Her daughter was old, entitled to live her own life, with, perhaps, a hand guiding the worst obstacles away. The Angel of Death remained a constant threat in the back of Famine’s mind, haunting her thoughts, permanently braced for her reappearance. Fortunately, the Angel’s resurrections took much longer than the Horsemen’s, who could regenerate in a matter of minutes or days, depending on how vicious the killing blow was.

Famine could feel, somewhere in her mind, the wretchedness of the starving monks. There’s a hive of them, a den, all huddled together like the ones outside. She follows their miserable scent down the labyrinthian corridors, passing vases, candles, prayer rugs, banners emblazoned with the Iris’s visage, until she reaches a massive, open-air chamber.

One of the monks is relaying a sermon. His frame is small, touched by hunger, though his hands are clasped and his posture is straight. His voice lifts, echoing due to the curves in the roof. He is self-
assured, though melodical, solid, yet humble.

“There were monks before us,” The monk says, voice clear and calm, “Beset by men who congregated at our doors with ill thoughts in their minds and toxins seeping from their lips. Mondatta was there. Maybe even a few of you were there, in past lives. You hungered, both for a balance of uniformity, for equal standing, for peace, and for physical and spiritual nourishment. We have all looked ahead, barring the few of us held in a mother’s womb, born of blood, and while our fate is fogged, most of us see sunny skies amidst the tempest.”

They are future-seers. Now that she is closer, she can more easily parse that the stink of desperation comes from the huddled pilgrims and not the monks themselves; whatever the outcome will be, they’ve accepted it.

*The monks had been taken by surprise*, Famine recalls. *But how? They’re future-seers. They see the future as easily as they see the present. And Mondatta...*

Famine doesn’t want to think about the complexity of future-sight, nor what will inevitably happen to the monks here. Perhaps there are simply ways you must behave when you can see the future; or time is more flexible than it seems.

Famine scans the crowd for her daughter. There are, perhaps, a hundred and fifty people calmly sitting before the speaker, some of them dressed in warm, furred robes, other in more elegant silken garments. Her eyes rove over a massive creature, the centaur that Mondatta had mentioned, made of wood and stone, with great, viney horns. Beside it is Fareeha, Famine’s daughter, her baby-

Famine does not care that she interrupts the monk’s lecture. She runs when she spots Fareeha, a cry wrenching itself from her lips:

“*Fareeha!*”

Fareeha startles, and the monk’s lips pause, inclining his head slightly at Famine’s passing.

“Mom?” Fareeha’s voice is quiet, caught in the echo of Famine calling her name. The centaur at Fareeha’s side shifts slightly, to give Fareeha more room.

Famine all but tackles her daughter, throwing her arms around her and burying her face in the young demi-god’s neck.

Famine can feel, with a sense of dread and sting of bile, the hunger coming off of her daughter; the pinch of starvation pulling at her skin and caverning her belly. It’s overpowering this close, a vice grip choking all but Famine’s maternal fear.

“You’re hungry,” Famine whispers, a few inches from her daughter’s neck, slowly pulling away. She scans Fareeha’s face for any stark change. There’s a sort of new confidence in her eyes, something slow and contented, but Fareeha now knows what she had not- the ravenous gnawing at the belly of those touched by starvation. Famine feels a sudden, immense tide of shame that is just as swiftly swept away, because hunger is her nature and not something she can change.

“We’re all hungry,” Fareeha’s voice is less self-conscious, unperturbed, even poised. There’s a certain newfound dignity and peace to her entire being. Whatever she had sought, whatever she had learned, it became clear that this was not the little, naive girl that Famine had loosed from the Angel of Death’s Domain. Guilt resurges, but it does not as quickly dim as before. Famine was supposed to be there when Fareeha changed, when she grew into herself- and she was not. “The monks said it’ll get better soon.”
“We’re leaving,” Famine says, defaulting into a harsh authority.

“No, we aren’t.” There’s a slight touch of amusement to her voice, as if it’s humorous that Famine thinks she can order her around. “I am not a Horseman. I’m not going with you.”

“You are half a Horseman,” Famine says. “That’s plenty enough.”

“Mother,” Fareeha’s voice is icier than it’s ever been, “I didn’t want to see you again.”

That hurts, like a knife in the stomach, like a fall from the roc’s talons, sudden and jolting. Fareeha reads the expression on her face faster than Famine can formulate words.

“No forever,” Fareeha amends, easily. “I love you. But I didn’t want to see you again this soon. I wanted to see you on my terms.”

The knife is twisted, the roc’s wings rattle Famine around and her ankle, connected by only a ligament, jostles and it is agony. “I wanted to see if you were safe,” Famine feels unusually small, voice numb.

“I’m safe,” Fareeha says, quiet and clear. “You may go.”

Famine gathers her parental authority, as much as she can muster in her shock. “You are starving. You’ll die if you stay here.”

“I’ll leave with you,” Fareeha says, agreeably enough. “But we will part ways. I will go by myself. It’s… Better that way.”

There’s a detached sense of loss, of pain, but Famine had known, distantly. It was an adjustment that had come from months with no words from Fareeha, the months accepting that Fareeha would be gone; there were also months of comfort, both from Conquest and from within, that had trained her for this.

“Alright,” Famine says, completely blankly.

Surprise finally kisses Fareeha’s face. She had not expected Famine to give up so easily. That, more than anything, pushes at Famine to fight harder, to say something, to deny her daughter and grab her around the wrist and hold her tighter.

But that was exactly what they had killed the Angel of Death for - an iron grip and a refusal to let go.

“Good,” Fareeha says, quietly.

The monks are staring. Famine has only very, very rarely been touched by self-consciousness, but in this room, humbled by the daughter she had run to like a frightened babe, there’s a mild feeling of mortification.

She doesn’t know what to do. To retreat, meekly, backward, pretending she had never been there? To settle beside her daughter? To apologize for the intrusion?

That last thought is almost laughable. She is a Horseman. She goes where she pleases.

She strokes Fareeha’s hair, once, then gets up and turns back, holding her feelings tightly to her chest.

Conquest is there, in the shadows of the entryway Famine had come from. As she draws near, he holds out his arms, offering an embrace.
The monk continues with what he was saying, though he sounds distant, faint, now.

“There is uncertainty as to what will come. Most of us are young, with unclear sight and many diverging possibilities before us. Mondatta has assured me that this is not where most of us return to the Iris, and his word is enough…”

Famine sinks into Conquest’s embrace, denying herself the rising rage and grief. Conquest is warm, accepting, and helps shoulder, momentarily, Famine’s distress.

He may shoulder it, but he does not know it, and that hurts, perhaps, most of all.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for a shorter chapter than usual, and a warning that next week may not earn another chapter, because I’ve got a week off for thanksgiving and Fallout: 76 just came out.

But in the mean time, if you missed it, you can take a look at the previous chapter ;)
Rain

Chapter Summary

It rains on the ranch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sky is overcast and gloomy.

The Spirit of the West’s ranch is very rarely rainy longer than it needs to be- it rains for a few hours once a week or so, regularly, but the clouds clear up quickly and leave the world smelling of dew and marshy grass, with clear skies and watery sunlight, nary a cumulus or nimbus left behind.

It’s been cloudy for a few days now, with a dreary, cold drizzle that drives everyone indoors, even the animals. The hens stay in the coop, only skittering out when a bundled-up ranch hand throws seed in the mud or when they’re shooed out so the ranchers can collect eggs. The horses prefer the stables, or big congregations beneath the densest, leafiest trees, where they can stay warm and dry. The cows huddle beneath the trees in large herds, with a stray heifer venturing into the muddy grass only to swiftly return once a cold, wet wind whips their pelt.

The Spirit of the West’s master bedroom is cast in a gloomy grey from the shaft of muted sunlight glaring in through the window; the usual bright reds and golds are dulled and flat. The four-postered, canopied bed seems oddly lifeless in the way it is neatly made, with the red-and-gold quilt tucked beneath the mattress and the pillows clinically arranged. The grey light leeches the color out of the ornate, cowboy-and-diamond patterned carpet, and it seems limp to an unnatural degree. The glowing, rosy-orange wood is stained slate, as are the dressers and shelves. The cow skull mounted above the bed now seems unsettling rather than rustically charming, and the still, torpid air begs for the unturning ceiling fan to stir it.

The Spirit of the West himself sits in front of the window, red curtains partly drawn, in a carefully carved rocking chair. He teeters slowly with the heel he has on the ground, the other perched on his knee. He hunches, elbow on the window sill, hand cupping his jaw. Peacekeeper shines, tinted red, in his holster.

There’s a knock at the door, and the chair creaks as the Spirit of the West comes to a halt.

“Yeah, c’mon in,” He calls, straightening his spine and adjusting his hat.

Li and King step in respectfully; the fact that it’s them and not any other pair means they must be coming on behalf of everyone else. Li and King are respected- both by the Spirit of the West and by the other ghouls- and their petition would come with more authority than anyone else, barring maybe Shade or everyone all at once. The Spirit of the West won’t admit favorites, but he takes them a little more seriously than the others, too.

“What can I do ya for?” The Spirit of the West asks, with a winning smile.

“I’m not gonna sugarcoat it, boss,” Li says. “We wanna know why the rain isn’t stopping.”
The Spirit of the West throws a glance out the window, as if to reassure himself of what he already knew. “Heh. Uh… I dunno.”

Their chalky-white eyes seem to bore right through him. “Well, can you stop it?” Li asks, plainly.

“Sure,” He says. “S’about time, anyway.”

He snaps his fingers and settles back into his chair.

Li and King do not leave, continuing to occupy doorway space. The Spirit of the West glances over at them, perturbed; he had been expecting them to leave.

Li steps forward, expression cool and polite.

“Is something wrong that you’re not telling us, Boss?” She says, measured and patient.

“Course not,” The Spirit of the West puffs.

“You wouldn’t lie to us, would you?” She’s eerily still, as motionless as the room.

“Who d’you think I am? I’m as frank as frank can get. Nothin’s wrong.”


“It’s jus’ a li’l rain!” He says, exasperated. “It ain’t no big thing.”

The Spirit of the West pushes himself off of the rocking chair, striding up to the two of them. King is taller than the Spirit of the West, though Li is not, and standing together, with that look on their faces, the people he’s known for over a hundred years seem suddenly cold and detached.

“Boss,” King says, quiet and stern, “If there’s something going on, we ought to know.”

“I’m thinkin’ about stuff,” He says, defensively. “Deep stuff.”

Li’s voice is sharp. “Hanzo?”

The Spirit of the West recoils. “No! The hell do you think I am? If you want the truth, it’s jus’, these are bad times. We’re safe here, but there’s some people out there who ain’t got the luxury of immortality and a Domain.”

Li is quiet for a moment. “Are you concerned for Death? The other Horsemen?”

“They can take care of themselves,” The Spirit of the West snorts. “It’s everybody else I’m worried about. Janes and Johns and Tyrones and Stevens and Jills and Marys and what have you. Humans in my jurisdiction. Little mortals who can’t even see gods like me or apparitions like you. They have no idea what’s comin’.”

“What’s coming?” Li asks.

“Beginnin’ of the end, I think,” The words drop weightily from his mouth, like stones, remorseful and clattering. “The gods told me that once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a big war kind’a thing. Looks like it’s gonna be another one of those. But… That ain’t all of it, neither.” He shifts, gaze flicking from Li to King, lips pursing. “You ain’t sharin’ this with nobody, got it? Coupl’a weeks ago I got a visit from a demi-god. I know I don’t talk too much about god stuff with y’all, but he’s kinda a big deal, and the steam he was huffin’ at me seemed more bite than bark.”
“What did he say?” Li crosses her arms.

“Asked me to help him with some kind’a… Revolution. Wanted me to help become a godslayer, and when I refused, threatened me, after.”

“You say godslayer as if you haven’t killed gods before,” Li says. “What about Pain?”

“She regenerated in jus’ a coupl’a years. I got the impression, from what he said, that he was talkin’, like… Permanent godslaying.” The Spirit of the West shifts his weight, uncomfortable.

King and Li both look horrified. “Permanent? How?”

“Dunno. Maybe he found a way to get around it. Maybe I’m wrong, an’ he jus’ wants to put the Yeti out for just enough time that he can convince everyone that he’s powerful enough to drop the ‘demi’ from his godhood. It don’t matter, he’s proved somethin’ concernin’.” The Spirit of the West turns towards the window, head tipped slightly down. “Every god thinkin’ he was just a little upstart demi-god who wasn’t worth his weight was wrong. He’s more dangerous than anybody gave him credit for.”

“What do we do, boss?” Li asks, firmly. “We’ll help anyway we can.”

“No ‘fense, you two, but the ranch hands can’t do shit. Y’can’t even leave the ranch.” The Spirit of the West scratches his beard, concerned. “I ain’t even sure I can do anythin’.”

He walks back towards the window, where the rain has stopped, but the clouds haven’t gone.

“Do me a favor, will ya? When you see him, send Hanzo in t’me.”

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for a shorter chapter, and uploading on an off-Friday date.
Hey everyone!

I debated for a while whether I should post this as a new chapter, because it seems kind of an asshole move to announce a cancelation like this, but here goes:

This is a sort of heads-up that this fic is going on an indefinite hiatus. My apologies, but I was feeling shackled to the Four Horsemen, and it was stifling in ways that I didn't even realize until I decided to stop.

If anyone has any questions, I can elaborate in the comments, but the bottom line is: I am done.

The bright side is that sometime soon there'll be a new release from me; another supernatural r76 story ( because I can't help myself ) currently called "The Grim Reaper", a hopefully short little story about an overworked Death who meets a foolish man who keeps ending up on death's door, and for some reason, seems awfully happy to see him...

Finals are coming up soon, but you can expect the first chapter before 2019, one would hope.

And, finally: thank you all for following this work with such dedication and vigor! I appreciate everyone who commented, bookmarked, and kudosed more than you'll ever know.

See you in "The Grim Reaper"!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!