Don't You Forget About Me

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Summary

I fall in love. Over and over again.

And each time it ends catastrophically.

But here is where it gets hard:

The person I fall in love with each time is Marco.

(Reincarnation AU)
Chapter Summary

The reason I live is you.
The person to love me is you,
Shine on me in the darkness.
To the place where you are...

Chapter Notes

Based off this and this.

(I recommend you check out those links before reading! Mostly the first one, okay?)

(Seriously, It will help you understand this!)

Marco does die, in every lifetime, but there is one thing I promise:
A happy end for the both of them.

I will NOT kill a character permanently.

Occasional violence and sadness, however I balance it off with happy moments too :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I'll always choose you.” Yes that was the word. "Every single lifetime, I'll choose you. Just as you have always chosen me. Forever. I'll love you with all my heart, in every life, through every death. I will not be bound by anything but my love for you.” – Passion, Lauren Kate.

Trost, 8/4/1994

Fact: Coffee was only brought to the obscure city of Trost in 1713.
Now, I'm not a historian, I just know a hell of a lot about Trost. Despite its, well, obscurity.

I, a man with not much talent to speak of, know many, many things, such as the exact amount of freckles on each of Marco’s cheeks, even though they multiply or fade away in certain seasons, I know, at least, that they suit him best in Spring.

Anyway, back to the coffee: I stand at the counter of Kaffihúsi with a cup in my hand, one of those cheap papery ones for take away orders, probably made in batches of a hundred in no more than a minute, and hold it under the coffee machine. The bitter liquid pours out effortlessly, swirling around in a shade of umber, seemingly more black than brown. When the cup is filled, I hand it to the scowling lady by the counter, and she hands me a ten pound note in return, with crumpled across its every square millimetre, and leaves without a Thank you. Her coffee, dull and unsweetened, suits her very well.

"Rude bitch," I curse as she exits the building, and hope to God she doesn't hear me. I glare at her as she disappears into the dark fog that covers Trost on this awfully sombre day. The sky is a grotesque shade of purple. The same morose shade that has tainted Trost since before even coffee was introduced here.

I can say for sure, and the way I have been describing today's events should have already indicated it, I'm in a terrible mood. And this time I will not blame the weather and its strange effects on my mental state. It is the 8th of April, 1994, just one day after my birthday, and as much as I love the 90s, I’m bored and lonely. It’s been years since I last saw Marco, and I’m not patient enough to wait any longer for him to find me. And I'm not patient enough to go out and search for him.

The news drones a report through the little radio we have on the counter side about Kurt Cobain, about suicide, and all the other details I've heard before, considering the 90s is a period in time I am familiar with. So that being said, I have heard this very same news report once before, over seventy lifetimes ago. After all, today is the day that Kurt Cobain is found dead.

Death is such an impacting thing. Though in many ways it’s underrated. It’s strange to think that,
even though Kurt died in 1994, Nirvana’s music is still popular even in 20 years time. I would know. I know many, many things. Mostly about Marco, and also about time.

Actually, that’s the furthest into the future I’ve been before – twenty years from now - August 28th 2014 to be exact.

Lord, it just dawned on me that this sounds like I’ve got some sort of time travelling machine, like the microwave in Steins;Gate…or a DeLorean or that phone box from Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure. I don’t, I assure you. I'm no time traveller; my existence isn't worthy of such a great accomplishment, as I said before, I have no talents to speak of.

Marco Bodt is very fond of time travel, you know. He loves it. Back to the Future has always been Marco's favourite film, obviously not in the lifetimes before 1985 though. Which means that if or when Marco and I meet this year, in the early nineties, it will be his favourite again.

Because this, right here in the present, is 1994, in the obscure city of Trost, a dull year in a modern lifetime, which I spend yet again in hope that Marco will find me and we will share some noteworthy moments together. I miss Marco, and his freckles, and how much he loves watching Back to the Future, and right now, I would beg on both knees to see him once again.

The so-called positive side of this situation is that I know, with a level of certainty you will be uncertain is true, that Marco and I will find each other again, it is one of the many things I know, and I know it like I knew it when we met in 1713, in Trost's very first coffee shop, as well as many lifetimes before and after that one, we will find each other, we always do.

An hour after the rude woman threw her crumpled money upon my fingers, a voice calls, "Jean," from the kitchen of Kaffihús, and the sound waves are not so closely followed by a petite, strawberry blonde woman who I just happen to be recent friends with, Petra. She says, "I've got business to attend, do you mind closing up tonight?" Her smile is like sugar, how can I resist?
"Fine by me," I reply, "You got another date with Hanji?"

At this she blushes and averts her eyes in an impossible amount of directions, "Jean, don't say that so openly!"

"I take that as a yes," I tease, “Plus, no one is here to judge anyway. We’ve been empty all afternoon, deadly quiet. Hand me the keys, I'll lock up, have a nice date Petra."

She rolls her eyes and hugs me goodbye, it is a tight hug, the kind that childhood friends might share, or friends with strong emotional bonds, not two people who barely know one another. Handing me the keys, she realizes what she just did and gasps in surprise, "God Jean, that must have been a hug of instinct sorry. Goodbye!" She hurries out of the café and I watch her scurry across the road, dodging the traffic.

Petra is shocked, as she has only known me for three days in this universe, as it was three days ago Hanji finally introduced us to each other. Thus she is surprised at how her instincts told her to hug me. What she doesn't know is that we've met on four occasions in the past, but she won't remember them like I do because they were in alternate universes. To me, the hug was natural, because we have been best friends before.

Don't feel sorry for me, this is my 247th lifetime, I'm used to being forgotten by my closest friends at this point. You could say...I'm numb to the pain. Old news. Built that wall 200 years ago. *Suck it up, Jean.*

And plus, there is a person much more significant to me who has forgotten me too many times to count, so a lost friendship is just a step compared to that.
The doorbell chimes, the clock reads 4:56, and I drone Hanji’s entrance speech, "Welcome to Kaffihús, coffees and European desserts."

Usually, people ignore this and slam their orders in my face in the form of speech, but today a voice replies, "O-oh! Hello!"

I almost laugh because he is such an idiot and yet I still fucking love the shit out of him.

"Hello," I say to Marco as he shuts the door behind him in his faded jeans and red and black jumper, smelling sweet like vanilla. As he steps closer, he becomes all the more vivid, and even the false peonies in the vases on each table seem to bloom as he steps towards the counter.

He grins at me, God, his grin is beautiful, and parts his kissable peach lips to state his order, "Hmmm, let me see...I'll have a-"

"Medium size hot chocolate with white marshmallows?"

He pulls a completely bewildered expression. Unsurprising to me, of course, he doesn't know who I am. He has, but he forgets, I already told you this.

"Y-yes, please, no pink marshmallows. But-" He begins with a sentence I have already predicted, "How on earth did you guess that?"
By this point I'm already filling the White Kaffihús mug with the hot chocolate because I know he'll be sitting down to drink it. He hates not staying in cafés after buying, it makes him feel rude and he likes to tip the staff after having his drink. And plus, he never liked those cheap, papery coffee cups.

“You know what they say: A man must be blessed with the ability to read minds before getting a job at an Icelandic café.”

Marco blushes, tapping two fingers in a hushed beat against the granite counter, “I don't think I’ve heard that before.”

"You get used to customers. I can tell what people want when they walk right in, just like you, Ma-" I pause and swallow the rest of his name, "M-Man it's chilly today." Nice save, idiot.

He chuckles and I hand him the drink, with a chocolate cookie on the side, how he likes it, "Thanks. And yeah, I guess it is."

He takes the drink and starts walking away, but turns back in an instant, "Hey. Two things: 1) I haven't paid for any cookies."

"On the house for our nicest customers." I respond with a smirk. I love the thrill of spoiling the man I love.

He blushes once again, its a subtle pink that creeps along his cheeks, "2) Do I know you from somewhere?"
Ah, the inevitable question.

This is the official 247th time being asked it, and that's not even counting all the friends that I've made over time, like Petra and Hanji.

"Trost is," I explain, "a small city. Might have just walked past you a few times."

He nods, "It's strange, you just...feel so familiar. Thanks for the cookie."

I smile and don't reply. I know that when I look in the tip tray at the end of my shift there will be the exact £1.10 in shining change for the cookie sitting in a neat stack in the corner.

Reading the clock in the kitchen, I decide that it's time to close early and that the batch of cookies I just made aren't going to be eaten with the lack of customers.

Damned Brits and their fear of foreign culture. I can say, from experience, that it has been worse.

When I get to the counter and check the tip pot, it's completely empty and a fucking tumbleweed may as well roll across it because it looks that damn barren.
This leaves good old Mr. Sherlock-Kirschtein with one possible explanation. I scope out the room, and I am correct. I'm not talented, just very good at finding Marco.

There is a table, one of the tables that stands against the wall and not the big glass windows, much more private and notably warmer than the other tables. Marco has his head rested and burrowed upon his left arm, which is folded inwards for extra comfort. I can hear all of a sudden the slight inhaling and exhaling from his mouth, I love the sound of him breathing, and he has the MP joint in his index finger lightly tucked against his lips. His hair is looser, each strand falling effortlessly against his forehead. Marco looks at peace in his sleep, but it is closing time, and I would much rather he sleep in a bed than uncomfortably against a table in Kaffihús.

"Marc- I mean, hey, wakey wakey." I pat Marco’s shoulder gently and it feels nice to touch him again.

He stirs a little, and his eyelids flutter open. He shivers at the coldness of the room now that I've turned the heaters off.

"Oh, Jean, sorry...I fell asleep," he completely freezes, looking more awake now, "Sorry, I must just be tired...I just made up a name, I-"

I shuffle in my place and do my best to save him from confusion. When he blinks I pull my badge reading ‘JEAN’ in big blue letters out of my pocket and clip it onto my shirt, "You must have read my name tag! I…I was wearing it earlier!"

He exhales looking at my chest to see it, "God, I must have. I don't have as much skill as you, Jean, when it comes to guessing things about people."
He seems to blush when saying my name, as much as his tanned cheeks let him, and look as if he's just woken up speaking Dutch after doing so, "Jean." He repeats again, reaching to run a finger across the petals of the faux-peonies we have in vases on the tables, "Such a nice name."

_Yours is too_, I want to say but cannot, "What's your name?" I ask even though I know it so well.

With a grin he replies, "Marco. Marco Bo-" And then his stomach growls with hunger and he doesn't finish saying his surname.

I already know it of course, so I just laugh and look down at him. "Say, would you like some tomato soup? I was going to cook some up before leaving." I lie.

"Jean, I don't want to appear rude at all by accepting the offer, but tomato soup is my very favourite...I'm not sure if I can resist."

"Come on, lo-" I bite my tongue at the 'lo' and replace the 've' with, "Y-You know that phrase: _You never deny the soup of a French man_." Shit, Jean you've done this already tonight...

"No, I don't know that phrase...but you sound like you just made it up anyway. I'm starting to note this as your habit. Okay, I'll have dinner with you, Jean." he smiles, softly this time.

His feelings from the 1st and every time we’ve met since have reached him. Feelings of love, torment, passion, rapture and death. They surround him like the bars of a prison cell, and when he looks out of the bars and see's such wonderful sights he thinks he will explore them. However he looks at the bar he's holding, all rusty and cold, and in the blurred reflection hangs a rope from the ceiling creating such a harrowing loop.
The thing with meeting Marco is that you can never get out of it. He was born only to suffer and it's all my fault. Every time he meets me it's already the end, and he has to repeat this over and over and over. And for the 247th time I will take the blame yet again.

He helps me chop the fresh tomatoes and I cook the soup for him just how he likes it: sweet, salty and hot. When it's over, we sit together on a table by the only heater I kept on, sipping the soup from our spoons. He grates Parmesan on top, grinds a little pepper because I never add enough and takes a sip of water after every spoonful.

I clean the plates so Hanji doesn't gut me when he finds out I'm giving leaving him dirty dishes eaten from by non-paying customers, and pick up the keys and my coat from the hooks by the counter. I hold my coat over my arm, and swing my keys round my finger, walking over to Marco who stands patiently by the door.

"Thank you, Jean, so much...for everything."

I laugh at him, "For what, Marco? Dinner isn't much, it's barely anything."

"It is!" He spits, "It is a lot, I don't know why, but it was wonderful and I'm allowed to thank people when they make me happy, okay?"

He shivers and I unfold my coat from over my arm, patting his shoulder and turning him so he faces away from me. The notion makes him jump and he almost melts at my touch, despite even the cold Trostian April weather.
I place my coat over his shoulders and he pushes his arms through the sleeves before he has even processed the situation.

"Jean." He mutters, letting the name roll from his tongue. He turns back to me and lets his hand search inside his pocket. When he has done, he pulls it out and holds a flat palm to me, filled with £4 in gold coins, for the soup and the cookie.

Marco always gives and hates taking. If he takes, he gives in response. Marco is a man with a kind heart, and he gives no shits about money. He holds out this £4 to me and I know he could use the money for something better than me. I don't deserve it. I don't want it, he is enough for me.

I place my palm on top of his and he isn't scared of the feeling. I roll his fingers into a fist with the money safe inside it.

"Free," I say, "For our most treasured customers."

I feel tears brewing in the sensitive under-eye area beneath my skin, my tear ducts twitch, and my temples ache horridly. I blink the water away.

He smiles at me, not commenting on how I changed the original phrase completely, and I think he is going to hug me. I look at him closely, how his hair is a little longer and curlier than when I last saw him, how he is slightly less muscular than the previous few times, how there are these beautiful dimples in his cheeks and how the glow of the streetlights illuminates his golden-brown eyes as if they are stars.
“Thank you Jean.” He mutters, “I hope I see you again…t-to return the coat, of course!”

“You will see me again,” I reply with watery eyes, not mentioning the coat because I want him to keep it, “It’s a promise.”

I watch him cross the road carefully; looking left then right like a cautious child, and heading to the train station down another street.

When he is out of sight, I cup my hand over my mouth and drop to the floor. No one is around me, thank god, as I sit there and choke on my tears in the street corner.

Marco had said my name and I hadn’t even had to tell him.

Fucking fuck, that has never happened before and it worries the shit out of me. Anything unknown in my goddamned hectic life is terrifying, because I have no one on the entire planet to talk to.

Everything so far I have figured out alone, all by myself. I have been so scared on countless occasions.

But not in one single lifetime I have lived has Marco Bodt known my name already. He didn’t read my nametag; I didn’t even have the damned thing on. It’s tucked in my chest pocket 24/7. And god, that’s strange…uncanny.

I pick myself up off the floor and head home via train to my apartment to make myself a damn good hot chocolate and snuggle up in my duvet. It would be so wonderful if I had someone to talk
to, but the sad reality is that I don’t.

As I sip away at the hot chocolate with a lovely teaspoon of vanilla syrup mixed in, my lips taste so much of Marco Bodt’s and it’s like I’m kissing him.

His taste, his scent, his touch, his voice…I feel them. I feel them and it hurts.

We are so in love that our hearts could stop beating in an instant. Thorns chain our souls, our emotions, our pain and our happiness together. The 247th petal will soon fall from its rose.

The next day begins with rainy skies, no Marco and a buzzing alarm that wants nothing else than to annoy the shit out of me. Hanji sends about 80 messages to me within the five minutes of my awakened state. Sometimes his enthusiasm is too much. But, you know, it wakes me up. (More like forces me up).

I brush my teeth until they’re minty as fuck, shove a slice of toast into my mouth and exit my apartment within the space of approximately eleven minutes. The rain stops pouring only when I get to the train station, my luck, and I sit by the window all soaking wet.

The train takes about 2 minutes to get to the shopping area of Trost (I don’t know why I don't walk) where Hanji awaits with his dumb smile and tiring excitement. I slither out of the doors and he practically jumps on my back from somewhere in the crowd.
“Good God, Hanji,” I spit at him, “Learn some decency.”

He laughs and pulls me out of the crowd to the start of the big row of bakery’s, butchers and cafés, including the one and only Kaffihús, currently occupied by Petra and Oluo. Hanji waves at his girlfriend through the window and she pulls a face of despair – probably from having to deal with Oluo to be honest.

We walk away after Hanji’s waved enough, and blown a few cheesy kisses through the glass. The entrance to Trost’s big shopping centre is just down the street. In a ninja-style run, we dodge the cars that constantly zoom past Kaffihús at full speed and make it safely to the other side. Pro-ninjas, I know.

“Okay, we’re going to pick up a binder and then we’ll do something more fun, kay?” He says with a beaming grin.

“Sure thing,” I smile, “But please get a less dangerous one this time.”

He just grins effortlessly in response.

When Hanji talks, it’s a one-way conversation. He updates me on just about everything in his life despite me only seeing him two days ago. With a guy like him, a lot can go on. Whether it be unintentionally ordering an escort, accidentally ending up at a seminar in Thailand, or dancing alone to Billy Joel, Hanji can squeeze a lot of random shit into two days.

Honestly, he never shuts up, even if you want to reply to whatever babble he’s spitting out, he doesn’t give you a single chance because he changes the topic in an instant.
By the time we’ve bought his binder, and gone to a few shops (including the music shop where he bought me a present, despite me telling him not to) the sun is actually showing through the big glass ceiling of Trost shopping centre, and the watch on my wrist reads 12.00 on its super vintage clock face.

We go for lunch, choosing this Japanese restaurant to eat at. The name is ‘Op-pie’, which makes Hanji piss himself. God, it’s not even an intelligent name. I bet the place’d be shut down if any of the other shops or the people in charge of the shopping centre understood the meaning of the name.

It’s got some kind of sushi conveyer belt and the table is all one thing, forming a big rectangle around the sushi belt. It’s nearly empty so we don’t have to wait, sitting near the far end of the table in what feels like seconds.

The waitress brings us tea and we inform her that we’ll be having some sushi before ordering a main meal. She nods, smiles and walks away.

I listen to Hanji talk again about god-knows-what while taking sips of my drink. It’s green tea, bitter and a little bland (in my opinion), I can’t see any sugar in sight to sweeten it either. More people arrive some sitting beside me, and the room is filled with a familiar smell of vanilla. My head hurts and I pay attention to barely anything.

More food is added to the belt, and I’ve already eaten like 8 plates of sushi by the time it turns 12:30.

“Are you ready to order?” The waitress says from behind me.
Nodding, I reply, “Yeah, I’ll have the yasai-tempura-udon-noodle-things. And he will have”—I point to Hanji who is currently occupied on the phone, probably talking to Petra, “-the chicken curry.”

“Okay, it will be ready in 10.” She smiles again, making her way back to the kitchen while writing down my order on her notepad.

I decide that the green tea tastes seriously gross, and thus I lean forward to get one of the sushi dishes from the conveyer belt to flavour my mouth with something else. It’s cucumber sushi, and it looks pretty good, but I’m not the only one that reaches for it.

So gently my hand brushes against someone else’s, the touch feeling so familiar and I instantly know who’s sat beside me. How did I not notice him? The thought makes my stomach churn.

I look at the hand while I can, tanned a beautiful colour and sprinkled with galaxies of freckles. My eyes water a bit but I blink it away. They wander up his arm, still freckled until his elbow-length shirt begins. It’s a deep blue colour which compliments him so well, V-necked showing his collarbones, and tight fitting too.

My eyes travel to his, and they lock together. It feels like I’ve collided with the universe when I look into his eyes…that deep, golden brown world in his irises. He’s beautiful.

I’m dragged out of my thoughts like an angel being ousted from heaven.

“Jean,” Marco says, “Who’d have thought I’d see you here.”
I laugh, genuinely. It’s just hilarious to me every time that I hear him say that line. It’s no coincidence at all, there’s no way of avoiding him. Somehow or another, we bump into each other again and again and again. If we were a film, it’d be like watching an infinite washing machine cycle. Of course to me, and to Marco, that isn’t the case.

“I dunno,” I tell him with a shit-eating grin, “Must be fate or something.”

He giggles, but doesn’t say anything. His eyes look a bit sad, but in a lost kind of way. Wistful and lonely.

“So,” I begin and he snaps back to life, “The cucumber sushi...belted away.”

“Har Har. There’s some coming up now, you want it?” He asks.

“You can have it,” I say as I take the sushi from the conveyer belt, handing the little dish to him, “You’re vegetarian, right?”

“What the fuck, Jean, you’re like a magical gypsy man or something,” He chuckles, pushing forward the cucumber dish to me, “I’m vegetarian, sure, but you can have these. Again though, are you magic?”

I snort, picking up the sushi in my hand and parting my lips. When I push my fingers towards my mouth, two chopsticks swipe at the sushi and it’s gone in a flash.
The crime is committed by none other than Hanji, “Magic, no. A creep? Yeah. He fits that better.”

“Hanji, fuck you, I was hungry.”

“Uh, 1) I paid for your present, I’m paying for this meal, and I’m paying for the cinema, so I’ll eat what I want. 2) Hungry? You’ve eaten most of the food in this building and your main hasn’t even come yet! 3) Who’s this dude you’re creeping on? You said you have no friends!”

A laugh from beside Marco is heard loud and clear before I even have the chance to sass at Hanji, the laugh is more like a cackle though, painful to the ears and coated in bitch.

“Marco has no friends either!” The voice cries, laughing between words.

Marco pouts and turns to the girl beside him, “Ellie, that’s unfair. I do have friends.”

I turn to ‘Ellie’, she's the ill mannered lady that showed up at the cafe yesterday, Miss. Rude-Bitch.

The waitress interrupts with her monotone smile again, repeating the order we made earlier and watching for our nods. She hands us the meals and leaves, stopping beside a couple to take their orders too.

“So, Ellie, Marco,” I start harshly, picking up one of the fried sweet potato’s between my chopsticks, “You two together or?”
Ellie snorts way too dramatically, “God, oh god no.” She flicks Marco in the face earning a little distressed whine from him, “He’s my stepbrother, and he’s not half as good as my fiancé.”

In an instant, I hate this girl. If Marco’s half as good as her fiancé, her fiancé must be some fucking celestial god from another universe. Jesus fuck. It takes a hell of a lot to be anywhere near as good as Marco.

“And you,” She speaks again, pointing at me, and I try not to shove her face in my noodles, “is she your girlfriend?”

Ellie points to Hanji, who sits carelessly munching on rice. But after hearing and processing Ellie’s words, he freezes with wide eyes, not knowing what to do next.

“He-” I begin and hear Hanji gulp from behind me, “-is not my girlfriend. And he is not my boyfriend either. He’s just a lame-arse guy that so happens to be my best friend. Now as well as that, I’m sure your fiancé is the bee’s knees or whatever shit you think of him, but it’s a little bit of a twatty move to tell Marco that 1) he’s half the worth that your fiancé is, and 2) that he has no friends.”

I look back at Hanji, but his mouth is gaped open like a cave or something. Marco has his lip bitten tight under his upper teeth, so much so that it looks as if he might bite through the skin. It’s something he does when pained or nervous. Ellie looks like she’s just drowned in bleach.

“I didn’t like fucking Japanese food anyway,” is all she says.

I watch her lift herself from the seat, glare down at the ring around her finger to prove a point about something, though I have no idea what the point is. She tutts and begins to walk away, but turns back to Marco and says, “I’m dumping this shit on you. You pay.”
“Wow, touchy.” I whisper, quiet enough for both Hanji and Marco to hear, but she doesn’t – thankfully.

The walks past the people who sit staring at her as if she doesn’t give two fucks about what people think. Maybe she gives one fuck, one singular fuck. I’ll never know or care.

Marco exhales but chuckles in an awfully forced manner before turning to me. “Sorry, my sister is a rollercoaster with no end.” His hand rubs the back of his head, “I’m sorry Ellie called you a ‘she.’” He says to Hanji.

Hanji shrugs, “Sure, it bugs me, but sometimes my hair and face fool people. Don’t you apologize either, you’ve done nothing.”

“Exactly!” I add with a hiss, “What a bitch she is to assume things. Fucking hell Marco, she said some rude things to you.”

Marco laughs in response, turning to take the miso soup that the waitress just brought for him and stood holding, “She’s always been like it, no worries. She’s nice I assure you, but has a…bitchy nature, you know? Her bark is worse than her bite. And sometimes she can be really cool to hang out with.”

“Whatever, I still hope she fucks herself with a chainsa-” Hanji swats me in the face before I can finish the sentence. I hope to god that Marco is forgiving enough in this universe to pardon me.

Everything feels resolved when he throws his head back into a laugh that makes me want to fall to
my knees and cry for him. His laugh is breath taking, goddamn beautiful. It sounds like music to me. His hands clutch at his stomach as usual, the sound of his sweet voice still being heard through his spurts of laughter.

“Sorry!” He laughs, “You just amuse me.”

“You don’t say…” I respond as I feel Hanji’s eyes roll at the back of my head.

“Hey, man, I laugh easily, you should know that,” Marco says with a grin, though that grin suddenly turns to a look of confusion, “Well…I have no idea why or how you should know that… this makes no sense.”

I find myself biting my lip too. I know he likes it by the small blush that fills the apples of his freckled cheeks, subtle but obvious – to me anyway, and probably to Hanji too.

“I mean, I am Jean after all. Handsome, magic and omnipotent.”

It’s a habit - looking stronger than I am, that is. I do it for Marco. I have to act the kind of person that makes him feel protected.

Hanji snorts, “More like gross as fuck, magic at sarcasm though as magic as a wandless wizard in bed, and you can see it coming already but I just have to say it: impotent.”

Honestly, he could have said worse. I’m not impotent by the way, yes in the powerless way but definitely not in the…dick way. Marco knows that well enough. Wait, not in this lifetime.
“Sorry, Marco, it seems my friend here has no manners.” I grin evilly.

“Oh, don’t worry Jean,” He places a hand on my shoulder (and doesn’t bother being surprised about it), looking me right in the eye, “I’m impotent too.”

I choke on air and every chemical on the periodic table that floats aimlessly around the little room of the Japanese restaurant, “Marco!”

Then both Hanji and Marco glare at each other with that fucking sadistic glint in their eyes, as if they’ve been conspiring about me this entire time, hidden in the backroom or one of the big cupboards of Kaffihúsi with the spare uniforms, just sat there giggling and plotting even things to torment me with.

When the smiling is over with, they laugh, like really laugh. Marco is clutching his stomach even tighter this time and choking on each laugh. Water builds from his tear ducts and he can’t even bring his fingers up to wipe the water away. I love seeing him happy, as much as I *dis*pise him for laughing at me.

“Wow, Jean,” Marco snorts, “I can’t believe you. You’re really something.”

I pout and mutter something about not knowing what I’ve even done.

Hanji makes it clear by patting me on my upper back aka punching me and notifying me that my facial expression was utterly splendid. In Hanji language, that means, ‘My god it was fucking
hilarious, Jean dear god if I’d have taken a picture of you I could have used it for so much blackmailing.’

Soon all the laughter has been done, and therefore we go back to eating our meals. The restaurant is pretty cheap, so we risk leaving some behind (it’s majorly filling) without feeling too…money conscious? You know, I like to get what I paid for!

I have to say, the food is pretty awesome for it’s price.

When we’ve finally eaten, the three of us leave together, but before we exit, Hanji tips the waitress and tells her, “This has to go to whatever genius named this place Op-pie.”

The Waitress tries not to smile (and fails).

“Well then,” Hanji grins and looks at me directly in the eye which only tells me he has some shady plan, “turns out I have this super important and completely true, actual thing like a date or something with Petra so Jean you’re going to have to take someone else to the cinema.”

“Yeah? When did you organize this?” I raise my eyebrow, thin and sharp.

“Hmmm, around when I said ‘Well then,’ you know me and my wild ideas!” He does jazz hands as he says ‘wild’.

With a big old sigh, I turn and ask Marco, “You wanna go see something in the cinema?”
“I mean,” he replies, “I would love to see a film with you, Jean, but I just bought *Back to the Future* and I’d really love to watch that instead...”

I want to facepalm, but I resist. *Nerd.*

“You could watch it with me?” He mutters.

“I’d actually really like that, Marco.” His name feels good on my tongue, “You can come over to my apartment if you like.”

Hanji hums a little tune to get my attention. He pulls the bobble out of his hair and re-ties it to make it neater but to no avail; it still looks like he’s been dragged backwards through a hedge. He contemplates what to say for a minute, leaving us hanging on the edge of a cliff while he thinks.

His eyes finally light up and he says he’ll be setting off to Kaffihúsi, going over to Marco and shaking his freckled hand enthusiastically. Of course Marco returns the enthusiasm in equal measures. He says something like *come to the café sometime, kay?* but it’s like white noise; I’m not really listening.

He nearly goes away however remembers something as he’s walked two steps. It’s so obviously acted, it hurts to watch. He turns to me and looks me dead in the eye, his lips finding themselves and inch from my ear before whispering, “Get laid tonight, my little *chick.*”

Then he runs, fast away into the crowd, probably doing a few cartwheels along the way. I shout
loudly, while he’s still in hearing distance, “I’M A COCK YOU IDIOT!”

The words only process as everyone in the entire of the shopping centre is staring at me like I should be sent to bedlam, a few women pulling their kids away from me, a few men tutting and a few teenage girls calling me a pervert. A bunch of guys by the sweet shop start laughing too. I know that Hanji, behind that huge crowd of confused-as-fuck people, is actually pissing out Niagara Falls at a shop entrance.

I turn to Marco, blushing, and his eyes are wide, his lips inverted as he puff out his cheeks trying to hold in laughter. Grabbing his wrist, I pull him out of the shopping centre, and to an area outside where no one is around us.

I pull out my index fingers and press both into each of his cheeks forcing his mouth to open and a mix of air and laughter is sent flying out from his lips like an aeroplane about to crash into a mountain.

I want to say something sassy, but I end up laughing too, though my laughs are a little softer than his. My mind, as well as being mostly focused on Marco and all his elements, is still somewhat melancholy. It’s unavoidable, inevitable, unstoppable.

It starts raining again, droplets falling from the sky and landing on our skin with ice-cold kisses. His laughter dies, but a smile is born, and he keeps it all the way to the station.

We luckily settle on seats for what it’s worth, standing up when we know it’s about to stop by my apartment. He stays by my hip all the way to the front door, a constant rose colour in his cheeks the entire time.

We sit with vanilla hot chocolates, snuggled under a duvet for hours, chatting about each other. I have so little to say about myself. When I came into this lifetime, I was 15…literally two years ago. (I don’t tell him this, of course. Just that my parents live up north, which is a lie. I have never
had parents. Only once, and I barely remember them…it was in the first lifetime).

I only have two friends to talk about, though I only know the shallow depths about them. There is so much to learn about the people I meet, but so little reason to learn those things. After all, I’ll loose them anyway.

God, if there was a lifetime in which I could just be with Marco, living a normal life til I die. That would be heaven.

In that life, I’d make friends…many friends. I would try my best to know them to the marrow of their bones, to the wrinkles on their hands. That would be a dream. A dream in this nightmare of mine that calls itself my life.

Marco, on the other hand, is someone I understand. I know everything he has to offer, even things he doesn’t know himself. I know that he’s probably wearing odd socks, I know that he sometimes sleepwalks and brushes his teeth at 2am, I know his favourite flower is a peony and that he is personally offended by the fake ones in Kaffihús, I know he has a major crush on Michael J. Fox in Back to the Future, I know he has a weird obsession with Mercutio, I know that sneezes make him laugh, I know he prefers cats to dogs, cries in the shower, sings in his sleep, snores loudly if he lies on his stomach, eats most the cake batter before it’s put into the cake tin, hates French pastries except for croissants…

God, these little things are endless. I know them more than I know my own language.

In the time we spend sitting under the duvet, he tells me everything.

By the time we actually get the film playing, I know his life story already. It’s a bit warmer now under the duvet, but I don’t think it was the hot chocolate that warmed me up. My hand brushes
against his and I so badly want to hold it again.

He’s honestly so lame through the entire film, saying quotes perfectly in time with them. Laughing at little things like when Doc says, *There’s that word again. ‘Heavy.’ Why are things so heavy in the future? Is there a problem with the Earth's gravitational pull?*

“*Roads?*” Marco quotes as the film is about to come to an end, “*Where we’re going, we don’t need roads!*”

I admit, I laugh. I play it of as laughing *at* him. But it’s actually because he’s really cute and I don’t want to seem gooey blushing over him.

“Hey, I should go home now…” He says at around 11pm. It breaks my heart a little bit.

“You can stay over if you want, as it’s late and really dark out,” I offer, “But I understand if you need to go home.” It was worth a try.

He considers something, like standing up perhaps, though his shoulders relax and he flops back into the couch. He looks at me for a while, eyes burning gently into mine. He looks deep in thought.

His thumbs twirl together and his lips part with only a millimeter gap between them.

“I should talk to you.” Is what he says.
“What about?”

“Well,” He pauses in thought, “it’s going to sound really weird.”

“I’m friends with Hanji, Marco, I’ve seen weirder.” He laughs at this, and looks a little more comfortable afterwards.

“Well, usually I’d be weirded out at a sleepover invitation after knowing someone for two days,” His voice is like a whisper, soft and sweet, “But…I’m not. I’m confused and it’s probably déjà vu, but it feels like I’ve met you before. No – that’s not it. It feels like we’re really close. I don’t get it.”

I freeze in front of him with my eyebrows furrowed. Marco, I know why, but I can’t explain it. Last night I spent hours holding back tears…I’m as confused as he is. But I’m scared too. I can’t handle more things to try and understand with just me, myself and I. You can’t give a man 100 quadratic expressions and expect him to understand them when it’s the first time he’s ever even seen numbers or letters.

I’m still trying to figure it out.

I can’t assure Marco of anything, explain anything, tell him anything. All I can do is place my hand on top of his and rub my thumb back and forth across his soft skin. I do this, and neither of us flinches. There is no awkwardness in the situation at all, despite the loud silence and the fact we’re sat staring hard at each other.

“Do you believe…in parallel…or alternate universes?” I ask him at some point. I’ve given up on
checking the time.

“…I don’t know.” He mutters, “Do you?”

I hesitate to speak, but the words eventually come, “I do, I really do.”

“If they were real, and I’m not saying they aren’t, nor that they are, but if they were, hypothetically, would that explain what I’m feeling?”

It's colder in the room now so I make a mental note to turn on the heating after the conversation is over, “It would explain why you’re feeling this. It wouldn’t explain what you’re feeling. I think you have to figure that out on your own.”

“You’re a good guesser, Jean. You seem to know a lot about me. Say, do you know what…I’m feeling?”

I do I do I do I do I do. You love me, Marco Bodt. This is the 247th time you’ve fallen in love with me, “No,” I answer instead, “I don’t.”

Sometimes you lie for the sanity of the people you love.

He hums a sad little tune for a while; I have to break the silence.
“Something’s changing,” I tell him. He will understand me, but not what I mean as such. He doesn’t know that I’ve met him 246 times before this. He doesn’t know my pain. And god, he doesn’t know how much he has suffered. I repeat, “Something is changing…for the both of us.”

He nods 5 times, exhaling and standing up with watery eyes, “I’m going home. Thank you…for everything, Jean.”

He reaches the door. His hands are shaking and he looks distressed. I watch him shiver for too long. I have to help him. I stand up and walk towards him.

Fuck it, I think, may as well do it before it’s all over.

Marco looks at me wide eyed, but I swear I see him smile beneath his surprise. He probably knows what is coming – it’s already natural to him, and so presses his back hard against the door ready for me.

When I reach him, we collide once again. A firework explodes inside us, our own Big Bang. I ignore any black holes, any anomalies, any dangers. It's me, and it’s him. Lips pressed together and breathing forgotten. The waves between us are at their highest frequency. I’ve missed this. I didn’t get to kiss him last lifetime.

My hands are on him, my right on his cheek, my left on his waist. We kiss for a long time, until we physically can’t carry on any longer. It feels like the planets have aligned. It’s a soul-lighting feeling.

We don’t speak much afterwards. It’s just muffled sounds and hums. Breathing intertwined. I let him borrow my hat, scarf and gloves (he gets cold very easily). I have to zip up his coat because
his gloves are on and he is unable, we laugh the whole while.

I open the door for him, and press my lips at his cheek before he goes. Instinctively, I sit at the entrance to my apartment, on the cold concrete steps, and watch him disappear into the half-lit streets until the dark orange glow engulfs him and he is gone.

The next day is Sunday.

Not much happens on Sunday. The café isn’t open, but I lounge around with Petra and Hanji the whole time. I decide that I’ll look more normal if I go over some school revision with them even if I don’t actually need it.

There’s loads to complete, mostly English lit though so it’s not so hard. Hanji does Maths, which must be fucking horrid. How do you do Maths? It’s literally like…like…

(See: I can’t even explain why I hate maths, never mind actually doing maths. In conclusion, Maths isn’t my forte.)

Hanji makes omelettes for lunch, along with constant questions about Marco and whether I got laid or not. I refuse to talk about him at all, to Hanji’s utter despair.

He and Petra act like a married couple the entire time too, which is cringy in itself. They fucking feed each other, and I just thank god that they don’t do it like penguins do. That would make me
barf. Like, barf my organs out. And bones. And then spontaneously combust.

It’s way too warm for April. It’s not usual to actually feel heat in Trost, never mind April in Trost. The thing is, it’s only 5 or 6 degrees today, and Hanji and Petra both complain of the coldness that apparently surrounds them. That’s just weird…abnormal. I wonder if I just feel warm because of Marco. I doubt it, (but then I totally feel like that might be the case).

However, it is in fact raining outside which surprises absolutely no one. Rain is an everyday thing. But today it’s that heavy stuff that sounds like bricks when it rains on the glass ceiling of the Trost Shopping Centre. I’m glad I’m not there. Kaffihús has a slate roof, phew.

What I don’t expect, even more than the heat, is Marco Bodt to start tapping on the glass door of the café and pull a face of helplessness as the rain drenches him from head to toe.

I’m aware of Hanji’s smirk, but it doesn’t stop me from running to the door like Usain Bolt and opening it in 0.5 seconds.

When I pull him in, he sighs with relief. Hanji is already beside us, still grinning.

“What brings you here, Marco?” Hanji raises both his thick eyebrows; with that annoying face I want to punch but absolutely cannot out of pure guilt.

“I dunno,” He cheeses, “I guess I just was curious as to the meaning of Kaffihús. Felt like trudging through the rain to ask you about it.” He lies with poorly used sarcasm.
Hanji laughs, Petra even chuckling from the couch by the table we were sat at.

“Well that’s absolutely top secret!” Hanji exclaims, “Though I can assure you it’s nothing like Ooppie.” Even I giggle at this.

We all move away from the door, halting before the couch. Marco is dripping wet. His hair has gone super curly from the water, and even his eyelashes have droplets lingering on them.

His lips look wet too, slightly, chin and neck too. His clothing is 10 shades darker and plastered to his skin. He’s carrying an ocean in jeans and a jumper.

“Hey, Hanji?” I whisper unsurprisingly in Hanji’s ear, “Do you have any spare uniforms in the other room?”

His face goes from plain, to one raised eyebrow, to a half-smirk, to a full smirk with two raised eyebrows, to a full evil grin, “Indeed I do. Let me show you both the way!”

Hanji grabs us mercilessly by the wrists and drags us at full speed to the meeting aka ‘the storage and chill room’, pushing us both in and pointing to the cupboards, slamming the door shut behind him as he walks away.

I hiss loudly, hoping he hears, but instead I receive a giggle from Marco.

“The spares should be in here,” I say, rooting through the cupboard until I find some uniforms. One is in his size. Of course I know his size, god, “Here.”
“Thanks, Jean,” He takes the clothes from me and places them on the coffee table.

I take a seat beside him as he removes his clothes.

I barely resist looking, but when I do, I practically preach.

_Goddamnit Marco is undressing in front of me for the first time in a long time and what the hell have I done to deserve this?!_

He pulls his jumper over his head by the hem. Sure, it was a really nice fitting jumper, but it doesn't do justice to what lies beneath. He’s got these beautiful and familiar narrow hips. Beautiful structured hip bones...and yet still he has a softness about him that matches his personality. He has curves, at his waist, stomach and ass. Nothing drastic, but it all seems to work out into the proportions I can only think to dream of.

There are freckles everywhere, entire galaxies of them. His skin is a little more tanned than in the last few lifetimes, and he has a little more meat on his body – nothing to complain about obviously, _god._

He undoes the black button on his trousers, pulling them down slowly. Soon his trousers are off, and all that’s left are white boxers, tight and wet…anything but opaque. I like it, a lot.

My God, his _thighs._
The silence is broken when Marco says, “Jean, close your mouth. You’re actually drooling oh my god,” He laughs musically, “Do you have any decency?”

“Oh Marco, Sunday is a holy day but I think I’ve sinned.”

He snorts and falls back into the soft sofa next to me. I find his eyes gazing into mine, all happy and sweet, “Kiss me.” I think it’s a joke at first. It’s probably half a joke. Well, joke or not…I still kiss him. It’s pretty great.

I may be used to pain. I may be used to sadness. I may be used to loss. But I’ll never get used to kissing Marco, each time is so different and so amazing that no words could explain how it feels. You get close to someone after 246 lifetimes, you know.

“Jean, for the love of God, commando is a no go.”

I flick his arm, “Oh yeah? So you’re going to wear squelchy boxers until you get home.”

I can't help but point down at them, literally if you took them into your hands and squeezed a damn river would come out.

He pulls a face as if he’s in pain, though it's really just stupid decisions, “Hnnnnnnnokay. Fine, I’ll go commando, but if you tell a single soul I swear to Go-”
“Secret’s safe with me, and boy am I happy to keep it.” He blushes, bingo.

I watch him pull off his boxers and consequently drool once again over his really nice butt. Goddamn, it’s so rounded and toned at the same time. What he’s got is not humanly possible. It just looks so fucking hot. He’s ethereal, anything but mundane. Maybe it’s just my insane feelings for him, but I can honestly tell you he is perfection.

When he’s finally dressed, he grins at me, “Look okay?”

Nodding, I say, “Yes, holy shit Marco. Really good.”

He smiles and walks over to me. In a perfect world he’d straddle me right then and there, but the world is full of disappointments. He offers a small kiss on my jaw, though. It’s just enough, still getting me flustered all the same. I find that any affection I receive from him makes my heart flip in every way possible.

We go back to the main room where Hanji and Petra sit opposite each other. When they turn to see Marco, and proceed to turn crimson in literal synchronization.

Hanji! For god’s sake, you’re a straight man – don’t you dare blush!

Marco mutters something really quiet, probably embarrassed, bringing his hand to the back of his head.
The silence is uncomfortable so I find myself walking behind the counter to make some coffee, its some kind of Taiwanese mix which tastes damn good if I say so myself. I manage to make a whole cup before the silence ends

“Marco,” Hanji says loudly, “Good god, please start working here.”

I snort like an elephant, feeling coffee come out of my fucking nose. Not that I wasn’t thinking the exact same…but hearing that from Hanji is just hilarious.

“I, uh, actually work over at Karanese…” Marco replies, he’s blushing at the back of his neck (hoping to god no one notices he’s commando).

“That place?” Petra laughs, “The two managers there are horrible, I went to College with them both, it’d be way nicer if you worked here Marco.”

“The managers are my sister and her fiancé.” He states monotonously.

Petra pulls a face that can only be labelled as the ‘Oh shit, I just killed my child by accident’ face, like she’s just seriously messed up. I know Marco actually doesn’t care. Believe it or not he has some mischief within him, and it shows in moments like this.

Hanji seems to find it fucking hilarious, throwing his head back and laughing like a horse, if horses could actually laugh anyway. Marco chuckles under his breath, I’m the only that hears it though.
“S-Sorry!” She squeals and Marco flops his hand around as if to say no problem, “God, I never would have guessed. Ellie looks more like Jean than you.”

“She’s my stepsister. We’re only related because my Dad married her Mum. She’s more like a sister though cause they married when we were really young.” He explains with a gentle smile. It saddens me to think he spent his childhood beside such a horrid girl. Well, he said she’s actually nice so I’ll trust him…for now. “Were you serious, though?”

“About what?” Hanji asks him with a raised brow.

Marco’s thumbs twirl together again, “About, uh, working…here?”

Once again, I snort on my coffee, “Marco, god, please do!”

“We’d love it if you worked here!” Petra says too.

“We were looking for more staff, and I’m sure Jean would like it a lot if you worked here,” Hanji adds with a wink. In a stage-whisper he finishes with, “Especially if he gets to see you in that uniform more often.”

Marco smiles and looks around the room. He looks at the glass shelves with all the cakes and pastries and little pots of mondrukaka (a favourite of Hanji’s). He scopes the coffee machines and the assortment of foreign teas and coffee’s all on display. He glares at the menu with it’s cake list and drink list and the little poster saying that ‘Kaffi og kaffa’ (coffee and cake) parties and ‘get togethers’ can be organized for people who’d like to hire out the café.”
It’s a friendly place. From the staff to the interior design, with snowflake patterns on the ceiling and baby blue walls, the white tables and blue flowers that each one beholds. The floor is wooden and light, all the menu’s hand-made and hand-written. Marco can see easily that it’s a nice café, a place that he deserves to work in. I think that he is persuaded.

“Okay!” He says, sounding a little excited and a little bewildered, “I’ll work here.”

With a grin, Hanji leaps out of his chair and runs over to Marco, wrapping two thin arms around him and swinging him as much as he can before Marco’s weight gets too much. He laughs afterwards though, not a sign of tiredness within him. It’s probably coffee, keeping him over excited for eternity.

“Well Petra and I had better get off then!” He states and earns a puzzled expression from Petra, “Cause we have that super important thing today, remember?”

*Super important thing my arse, don’t you bullshit me, Hanji Zoë.*

Petra pauses and then her eyebrows shoot up and she nods too many times, “Y-Yeah! We gotta go real fast!”

They both move to each other’s sides and start zipping up their coats, getting their umbrellas from the handy pot by the door. I appreciate their efforts of ‘shipping’ but Marco is probably smart enough to pick up on their lies.

“Jean, you teach Marco the basics and we’ll sort out shifts and money tomorrow, kay?” Hanji grins. Suddenly, the door closes behind them and their figures become a blur in the rainy distance
as they cross the road, hand in hand, through the busy Trost traffic.

“Wow, why do they have to lie?” Marco mutters with a small chuckle, “I mean, they’re so obvious…but I don’t see the point.”

Damn it, Marco can be so dumb. I let out a small breathy laugh, and begin making him a hot chocolate too, making a note to pay for these later. I add his Marshmallows and vanilla syrup too.

We move to sit on the sofa together, opposite each other, with the non-glass wall beside us for a little more privacy. Not that we need any though. Marco is glaring at me and I realize he wants an explanation.

“Marco,” I say flat and straight, “They think we’re together.”

He goes wide-eyed, his cheeks turning pink. It’s laughable. We’ve been together on countless occasions, and literally made-out against the front door of my apartment yesterday, yet he still blushes. What a butt.

“I’ll tell them to stop if you don’t like it.” My voice says in a tone specifically used to make him feel a bit guilty. What? I can’t help it – teasing Marco is highly enjoyable.

“N-No!” He hisses in a non-harsh way, “Y-You don’t have to…I didn’t mean I dislike it!!”

“So,” I smirk, “You like it?”
“W-Well, I don’t dislike it…I’m a…chill guy, Jean. I’m open to new ideas and stuff.”

“So, what you mean is,” I pause to grin, “Under these circumstances of Hanji thinking we’re a couple, you’ve had your mind changed on…a few things, and you don’t mind the idea of us being a couple? That makes you a bit tractable doesn’t it?”

He draws out a long sigh, “Tractable…yes. I guess I am. But this isn’t like that. I haven’t been influenced, I’ve been awakened – I’ve realized something that was already there but hidden away.”

“What is it that Hanji made you realize then?” I ask, but I already know.

“Hanji didn’t make me realize it, you did. Hanji just made me sure of it.”

“Sure of what?”

“Sure that I have feelings.” He pauses and hesitates, biting his lip a little. He does it gently which means he is nervous rather than pained, “feelings for you.”

Not many ideas process in my head of what I can reply to this. It always makes me dumbfounded when he confesses, even though he’s done it many times before. Instead of words, I decide to stand up and walk round to his side of the table. Though, I choose to stand behind the sofa he is sat on, and lean over.
I wrap my arms around him from behind, tight but gentle, he will know from this that I feel the same about him.

“It’s ridiculous isn’t it,” He mutters as I bury my face into his neck, “that I can say I have feelings for you when we’ve so recently met.”

“I don’t think so.” I whisper in response.

“I think that I believe in alternate universes after all,” His voice is sweet now. I unwrap my arms from him and slide beside him instead, lying down with my head on his lap, legs dangling over the arm of the sofa. From here I can look up and see his face above mine, so close and beautiful.

“I think we met in an alternative universe, Jean.” He begins again, “I think we were in love. But you’ll have to help me figure this out for sure.”

“How can I help?”

“Tell me,” He hesitates, “Tell me how you feel about me.”

It’s hard to put my feelings into words.

It’s like this: someone asks you to describe the world in one word. Some would say cruel, others would say beautiful. You just cannot describe it in one word. There’s so much more to the world
than that, so much.

There’s the science, the history, the geography, the maths, the religion, and the language. Pasts, futures, presents. Structure, order, regularity. Myths and legends. Time and space. There is day and there is night, there is tide and there is movement. There are senses, touch, feel, smell, sight, taste and hearing. There are the minds of every human being. There is intelligence and there is emotion.

From an atom that the human eye can’t even see, to Mt. Everest that the human can barely climb, a singular word cannot do justice in portraying all that.

If you are asked the meaning of life, you will either say ‘to die’, or you’ll think about it a bit longer. The truth is that some things have no meaning or explanation. I’ve tried to put this into consideration the past 246 lifetimes I’ve lived. Each time I am reborn, I think that maybe this has no meaning.

What if it’s a dream? What if every single person is the same as me, but is too afraid to say? What if it’s just a fault in the system that I happened to be a part of?

It could have no reasoning, no explanation. There are theories, just like with God, but unless physical proof exists then it’s always going to be questionable.

My feelings for Marco aren’t an object, they are something made from nothing. Emotions, chemicals, an idea in my mind that has built up over time. It’s too hard to explain everything I feel to Marco, and I fear what might happen if I told him I’ve met him countless times before.

There’s no equation or formula to how I feel, there’s no logic or reasoning, no order or regularity. It just happens, and I find that the only way I can answer him is to say the basic phrase that people will tell each other all the time:
“I’m in love with you, Marco.”

Maybe a week or so later, Marco invites be to his apartment for the first time, a fresh and recently bought bouquet of our favourite white peonies in his hand (he insisted I needed some real ones after decorating Kaffihús with fakes), and a nervous smile on his face.

It’s a bit bigger than mine but the layout seems generally similar. He has two bathrooms though, one for cleaning and one for…toiletry needs. The place is literally all purple coloured (classic Marco) and filled with little decorations. It honestly looks like he’s copied Monica’s apartment from Friends.

It feels more like a home though, perhaps that’s because I’m there with him, our fingers laced together.

There’s that familiar scent of vanilla filling the room too, but all of Marco’s houses he’s ever lived in have smelled like vanilla.

“What is it you want to watch?” I say while we’re sat on his white couch, cuddling and pressing kisses over each other.

He hums against my lips sending small shivers down my spine, electric shocks throughout my central nervous system.
“Dirty Dancing?” He smiles.

I let out an elongated groan against time, “God, I forget your love for cheesy romance films. I swear Marco, there is better out there than Titanic and Twilight. I’ll let you off considering Dirty Dancing is oka-”

“Jean,” He stops me and I realize that oh shit it is 1994 and I just mentioned Titanic and Twilight. I make the mistakes occasionally (It's worse in a modern lifetime and you ask for a 'pony and trap' instead of a car), “You’re blabbering about boats and horizons. Makes zero sense, just put the film on, okay?”

I laugh at this.

Walking over to his tapes, all stacked up on his shelf by the television, I make sure he isn’t watching as I skim over Dirty Dancing and pull out Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure instead. I know he’ll forgive me.

1) He loves the Bill and Ted franchise.
2) He loves time travel.
3) It’s his second favourite film.
4) He has a major crush on Ted (heaven knows why) but denies it.

When it begins playing after I’ve shoved the tape in the VHS thing that looks so lame in comparison to a blu-ray player but I can’t complain cause my boyfriend will think I’m crazy.

Halfway through the film, Marco seems a bit fidgety. I wonder if he’s bored or tired.
“Hey, you okay?” I ask him monotonously.

He looks at me and his face is a bit red, “Yeah, it’s just…”

“Just?”

“I was thinking if you, uh, wanted to…” He stops to chew at his lip, twirling his thumbs together.

I raise an eyebrow and look at him, shuffling his legs about, blushing all over, twirling his thumbs and acting all nervous. Then it hits me.

I burst out laughing, “Oh god, it’s Netflix and Chill! It’s been a while.”

I find myself wincing as he swats me, laughing nervously in the process, “Jean! You’re insane! Go to bedlam, love. I’m dating a mad man. What the hell is a Netflix? You absolute weirdo!”

“Nooo!” I cry jokingly, “I don’t wanna go back to an insane asylum!” (I mean, I say jokingly but it’d be a lie if I said I haven’t been put in one of those before. But hey, it’s only because they didn’t quite like gays in 1940. I’m not actually crazy.)

He clambers on top of me, still laughing, “You’re a massive weirdo,” He smiles, “But I’m still in love with you.”
“Okay, but assuming you’re a virgin,” He totally is but I still keep the idea that he’s taken it up the butt before available for him to admit to just in case, “do you have any of the… required products.”

He reaches back and sticks his hand into his back pocket, pulling out a condom afterwards, “Jean, they say ‘if you can’t say the word condom then you aren’t mature enough for sex’.”

“Screw maturity, I’ll never be mature even at age 50!” If I ever reach that age, “But seriously, do you have any, um, l-lu-“

“I have astroglide.” He interrupts, not even a speck of shame or hesitance in his voice.

I snort and throw my head back in laughter, earning another swat from Marco. During my laughter, I feel his soft lips at the base of my neck, kissing gently. My laughter dies, and a smile replaces it. My head tilts back further and I let him kiss me some more.

I’m glad that we’re doing this; it’s forever. There are many lifetimes that I don’t even get the chance to kiss him, never mind have sex with him.

It feels so good to be so close to him, to feel his lips on my body until I’m sent to heaven.

By the end of the night, we’re both out of breath and exhausted, but neither of us fall asleep. His head lies on my chest; his breaths against my bare skin feel warm and airy.
He’s smiling, but it looks solemn, he’s probably still confused about everything. Wondering why on earth I feel so familiar to him.

I’m smiling too, so glad to have him in my arms. Proud to have him in my arms. But even still I’m scared about loosing him. I’m scared of when I’ll have to change universes again, and everything up til now in this one will be forgotten. I’ll loose Hanji too, and Petra. It’s such a waste.

Sometimes you just have to live in the moment, I guess.

He’s just so precious, and I love him to pieces, seeing him – such a fragile and beautiful human being – fall to pieces in front of my eyes is so horrifying. I avoid all thoughts from then on.

We drift into sleep together, but as I switch off fully, I swear I hear him whisper something sad and harrowing before his eyes finally shut tight, and allow him to fall into his dreams.

"Welcome to Kaffihús, coffees and foreign desserts!" Marco says more enthusiastically than I ever will or have. He’s been saying that quite often, after all he does work in Kaffihús now.

It’s been just over month since Marco walked into Kaffihús to order a hot chocolate. Almost a month of dumb kisses and constant torture from Hanji and his cheesiness. Almost a month of drooling over Marco in uniform, or laughing as he spends his savings on buying Kaffihús some real peonies and not those gross fake ones. Almost a whole month.
I can say for sure that this is one of my favourite lifetimes with Marco, not even for any reason in specific.

I’ve been though so much with him before, sad and happy, wild and silent. This one, though, is nice. It’s peaceful and it’s sweet.

_Bittersweet._

It’s a Saturday, around 4pm, and Hanji has officially called it a day. He says we deserve some more time off after working hard the past few weeks. I’ve been revising for a ton of exams that are coming up at Uni.

For some reason, Hanji is in an extra good mood today. He’s probably got some event with Petra tonight. I can’t help feeling something in the pit of my gut. I order it to go away; wash it away with coffee and ibuprofen. I want to ignore it at all costs.

Marco wears the beige coat I gave him the day we met proudly as we wish Hanji and Petra goodnight, telling them to relax tomorrow for once. They could do with it after all the studying they’ve been doing recently.

All I do is smile at Hanji, but he pulls me into a rare hug anyway.

“Get some rest, Jean,” He says to me with a gentler smile than usual, “You and Marco have been working so much – you’ve got tired eyes!”
“I will, thanks Hanji.” I mutter, and Marco says something along the same lines.

“No problem, it's what friends are for, right?”

I laugh, and say goodbye once again. Before we exit the room I find Marco’s hand and intertwine his fingers with my own. He is warm, like a light in a dark world. He will always be the most beautiful thing to me.

The sky is lighter now, in mid May. Soon summer will come and I can just picture how fun it will be if I get to spend it with Marco.

“I’ll see you on Monday, right Jean?” Marco says as his hand leaves mine. He has to go visit his parents tonight, hence him leaving.

“Yeah, unless we have time tomorrow,” He nods in response to me and smiles, making a telephone notion in the most cheesy way as if to say *I’ll call you if I can*, so I decide to say something cheesy in response, “*Parting is such sweet sorrow.*”

“O-Oh my god Jean!” He says, embarrassed by my attempt at Shakespeare, and leans forward to give me a gentle kiss. No one sees, not that I’d care.

“I love you.” I tell him for the thousandth time.

“I love you too.” He replies.
He steps away from me with almost silent footsteps, smiling as he steps onto the road to cross it.

None of us are paying any attention to anything. And fucking hell, why wasn’t I paying attention?

In one ear, I hear Hanji cry out “MARCO!” in the most harrowing tone I’ve ever heard, loud and piercing like swords being forced together. In the other ear I hear the screech of car wheels against the road, it’s a noise that I know will haunt me forever.

It’s so sudden and so violent. The car makes a loud crash as it collides with Marco’s body. My eyes are wide and I’m frozen. I see it all.

The light blue car veers left and Marco is thrown in the other direction. The sound of his body hitting the concrete is louder than anything I’ve ever heard before. Louder than the bombs that killed him in 1943, louder than the canons that hit him in 1862.

His head smacks at the ground almost harder than the car hit him.

That horrid feeling in my gut roars and all I can hear my thoughts saying is I should have known I should have known I should have known!

I find myself running out into the road towards him. There’s no cuts or damaged skin. Just his left arm, which looks broken in so many places – folded back in a disgustingly abnormal position. Then two trails of blood come out from his nose, slowly.
I try to not think about how much he’s hurting, how scared he is, how fast the pain is shooting through his frail body.

His eyes are still open, and he’s looking directly at me in his very final moments.

“Marco, I—” I’m whimpering, my whole body shaking violently. I know I have to be strong…for him, “I’ll see you again, okay?” I assure him with the most sincere and honest voice I can muster, and he smiles. Such a beautiful smile.

Then he’s gone. He beating of his heart is no longer present. All his dreams, hopes, feelings and aspirations have turned black.

Hanji and Petra are running, people are crowding, big blocky phones are being dialled on. I hear the car engine shut off and the driver comes running out with a look of complete terror plastered at her face.

I have to ignore everything other than Marco.

It’s time, I think, and I grab his hand gently, and lean down to kiss him one last time. Nothing happens to me until my eyes close, and when they do I’m taken away from this universe.

When our lips meet - his cold, dead lips – I feel the ground beneath me shift and everything around me is erased. I forget nothing, but everything forgets me.

I am erased, and I’m being reborn somewhere else.
Somewhere new where I’ll meet Marco, make new temporary friends, and watch him die once again.

I can open my eyes now, because the world has already started evaporating.

“I’ll see you again.” I say for the last time. I squeeze his hands, but then his fingers disappear with everything else I’ve become used to.

My name is Jean Kirschtein. I was first born in 1670. I fell in love with Marco Bodt 20 years afterwards. And then I fell in love with him hundreds of times after that. I chase him far and wide over lifetimes because I love him until it hurts, even though he dies each time we meet, and it's all my fault.

You can feel sympathy, but I don't need it. This is my reality.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr
How soon is now?

Chapter Summary

I don’t want to lose you,
You linger by my side like my breath.
But I can’t touch you,
So I get more desperate.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is happier in one specific and rather obvious way, though there will be graphic violence.

I’d like to apologize if I’ve made historical errors, I tried to do research though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s no vortex when the world around me changes. There is no futuristic machine, or magic spell or anything. In order to trigger the shift in universes, simply put: Marco just has to die.

When Marco dies I close my eyes tightly, which I discovered is the cause of the shift. It’s not a process that lasts a millisecond. It takes a while, sometimes up to a minute. There’s not much to do in the time other than re-open my teary, reddened eyes and watch my world, Marco, fade away at my fingertips. All I can think is how everything that we’ve been through in this lifetime will now be forgotten.

By him, not by me. I remember everything…he forgets.

It feels like such a waste, and I wonder what I’m worth. Why do I get blessed with the memories, but Marco gets the loss? He deserves…so much. I don’t deserve anything like he does. In what disgusting mind would a person choose me over him? The worst thing is how selfish I am to say that the memories feel like incessant torture rather than happiness, maybe that’s just me being ungrateful. I’ll only know when I find an explanation.
Marco always has to be the very last thing I look at before closing my eyes. This, understandably can be a grueling task, what with him dying in many different ways, some of which I struggle to even find his body – like once when he jumped off a cliff, for example, I had to jump in after him. It’s that kind of *You jump, I jump* situation.

Other times I find it a hard task purely because it's so fucking murderous to look at his dead body, cold and final. It can be gruesome too, and those deaths are the worst as just looking at his body reminds me of how he suffered all this pain. I can barely look at him then. I just wish, wish, wish, and would do anything for the option, that I could die instead of him. He’d be able to move on, and marry someone he deserves, and find happiness where he never found it in me.

The truth is, I might make him happy in some ways, but he always dies in the end. And god, that’s not happiness. That’s despair.

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Trost, 24/11/1886

Everything surrounding me blurs into nothing and then I am ‘reborn’ somewhere else. A new age, a slightly different body…but I’m the same me, I’ve got the same looks, personality, and the same feelings and memories.

Right now, the world is shifting again. I see Marco’s body looking so lifeless and cold after that car hit him, but the image is soon gone. It takes a blink and everything is new.

There’s a vile scent that I’ve smelled before, of sewage and smog, mixed together like chemicals. Each breath I inhale tastes like poison against my tongue. The sky is pitch black, and there are no fast cars or tall buildings, no nice café’s or friendly faces. It’s 100% Victorian Trost. And let me tell you, the Victorian era is awful.
I look at my hands, becoming covered in the ice-cold rain that falls hard from the sky, biting at my skin with unexpected force. My hands are smaller, rounder…youthful.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror of a butchers shop, I’d say I’m about 14, but I’m unsure. I’ll go with that.

I notice that my clothes are dirty and there is a stench coming from every fibre within them. I’m covered in mud or whatever the brown stuff is all over me. Fucking hell, I could have at least been born into a first-class life! I mean, any life in the Victorian era is horrid, but a poor person’s life is even worse.

There are a few questions I need to find the answers too before I do a single thing, and it’s going to take effort. My legs feel weak as I lift myself from the ground, pushing myself into the crowd that surrounds me. People walk as far away as they can, not willing to walk within a single meter’s distance beside me.

I walk through the gloomy streets until my legs go no further; stopping only at the violent growls my stomach is making. What if I just lay here, writhing in starvation but never dying? What am I supposed to do?

The light, the noise, the everything…it’s sickening. Feeling helpless is not something I enjoy, at all. Not much later, I find myself sinking into a deep sleep, in the corner of a street, lying among the grimy stone floor and the rats and the mud.

God, how I’d die to be in Kaffihús right now. Under the warmth of Hanji’s enthusiasm, the joy of Petra’s presence, the perfection of Marco’s hand in mine.
“Hello,” A gentle voice of a man says, his hands tapping gently at my aching shoulders, “Hello? Are you okay? You must be so cold…poor thing.”

I tear my eyes open to an older man in his early thirties, in an expensive looking coat. His eyes are a deep blue, and his hair is slicked back, however short and cut in a way that seems similar to mine. He is very handsome, strong features and broad shoulders, very tall too. He holds a peaceful smile on his face and I can’t help but smile back.

My stomach growls again in an instant, but this time it feels painful. My body is numb.

“I feel…sick.” Is all I can say to him.

“God, your skin is blue, it’s been throwing hailstones the size of bricks all night and you’re in nothing but a shirt,” I process his words the best I can, “You must be hungry, come back with me son, to the manor, I’ll get you something to eat.”

I want to reply, but my lips aren’t moving. With a mental smile I wonder if I’m dying finally, god that would be good. I’m not sure though, I have no idea what death feels like. Since I can’t die and all.
Suddenly my body moves, I’m floating up into the air as if I’m flying. I swear I’m seeing the light, though it’s probably just the hope that surrounds me, hope that this really is death I’m experiencing. I ignore that there are two hands under my back, holding me as I’m lifted into a carriage, a beautiful black Landau carriage with golden details delicately painted on. I guess I’m not dying after all…shame really, however unsurprising.

The man pats my shoulder gently, proceeding to wrap his expensive looking coat over my shivering body. I warm up in an instant. Awakening a little, I dare to part my lips and speak.

“Where are we going?” I ask him quietly.

“To a manor, though it isn’t my actual home. I shall discuss some more over dinner. I’m sure you must be clueless, but you’re too weak as of now to take in so much information. Not to worry, we will be there soon.”

Usually, the rich stick to the rich and the poor to the poor. I have no idea what’s going on, and why this man – who obviously owns a lot of money – is driving me in a fucking Landau carriage that looks around £200 when I look like a scrawny piece of litter from the side of the road.

“Dinner?” Is all I can say, my throat being dry and all.

He chuckles softly, “Of course, I couldn’t let anyone go without dinner.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, “Thank you so much, sir.”
“No need for such names, son,” He pats my shoulder again, comfortingly, “My name is Erwin, Erwin Smith.”

Erwin takes us far away from the town. The sky is much clearer in the countryside, the evening fog accompanied by the occasional shower of light wispy snowflakes. The horses seem reluctant to trudge through the snow, but Erwin’s kind persuasions seem to get them to carry on.

The manor (which, by the way, is sometimes known as Trost Castle), unsurprisingly, is one I know too well. Once, in my very first lifetime, it was my manor. I was born, raised, and taught here. I could have guessed honestly, considering there are very few manors in and surrounding Trost. Mitras was the city where most noblemen lived in the 1600s when I was born, and that's dead centre of the chunk of England where the walls once surrounded. Its strange, though, to be back here, it brings back unwanted memories, but a sense of familiarity that I honestly don't mind too much.

When we finally get inside, the big wooden doors are closed behind us and he begins lighting all of the candles in the hallway. It’s significantly warmer inside though the anemic colours and vast corridors don’t change how cold it felt when I was outside.

“I will cook us some dinner now, I’m sorry this house isn’t the friendliest of places, but like I said it isn’t my actual home. Would you like to help me make dinner?”

I nod too many times. It's not everyday you find a Victorian rich man with cooking abilities. Perhaps he isn’t married, or maybe his maid is ill. I am unsure, and I don’t question it. Curiosity still clings to me. It just seems so strange that he’d be a bachelor with such looks and politeness.
“How do omelets sound?” He asks me as we enter the big kitchen.

“G-Good! Really good.” I reply in a hushed tone.

We settle to the task of whisking up eggs, I’m on duty of chopping up the other two ingredients, onions and mushrooms with an over-sized knife. We cook them on the toxic stove, watching the eggs harden. He apologizes for being low on food. They still taste surprisingly good however considering that 1) he is a man in the 1800s and 2) we used three ingredients.

“My wife was such a good cook,” He laughs after I compliment his food, “I’ve inherited her talent, I suppose.”

“Did your wife…uhm,” How can it be so hard to say Jean?

“Yes.” He speaks in that soft voice again, like velvet or melted chocolate, “Complications during childbirth, nothing unusual."

“I see,” I reply, “Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Loosing a loved one is hard, but it was so long ago now…”

There’s something I can relate to: loosing a loved one. I know it’s fucking hard, and it was technically only a day ago that I lost mine. For the 247th time. God, it’s getting up to 250 now…
“I can imagine,” I sympathize, “You said this isn’t your home…where do you live?”

Honestly, despite it’s darkness and depressing tones of colour, I bet that the manor would look stunning with some work done here and there. Make the walls meadow green or passionate reds. Add some furniture, family photos... In 100 years, I bet this place could be modernized internally and sold for millions. It has potential, but not enough love.

“Not far, the south of Cornwall actually. It’s a little manor...just a meadow away from the sea, notably smaller and less castle-like than this, but a lovely home anyhow. I have three children, you know.” He says with a smile.

I have no idea why he is telling me about his kids, so I assume he is the kind of guy that makes small talk.

“Children?” I raise my eyebrow, “It must be hard looking after them alone...unless you re-married...”

That’s most likely, actually.

“Oh no, not at all, and I’m not married or engaged.” He pushes, “I chose to look after them on my own accord, even alone, I couldn’t bare walking past them when they didn’t have homes.”

I almost choke.
“You…found them, in the streets, like *me*?”

He smiles solemnly, “I did, Jean, I did. I’m a man with a kind heart, and I refuse to let a poor child starve alone in the street. Everyone needs family, my family died. I have a dear friend, but I want family too, and my family is as much a family as anyone else’s. Do you have family too?”

I twirl my thumbs together and he seems to watch and smile as if the notion is familiar to him. Sadly, it’s familiar to me too. Marco twirls his thumbs almost constantly.

“I don’t,” I say quietly, “I’m alone.”

He doesn’t see to have any intention of questioning where my parents are. He just smiles and places a gentle, soothing hand on my skinny shoulder.

“Come and live at my house, I will be returning tomorrow and you can come along. Come, Jean, you can have a family if you come with me.”

What would happen if I carried on living in the streets?

Maybe I’d find some other children who roam the streets too, some outcasts, poverty-stricken children; the streets are full of them. Parents throw out a child if it’s disabled too. It’s such an intolerant society…it’s disgusting.

And here this man is offering me a *life*. How can I say *no* to that?!
But then I’m bottled up with sass, sarcasm and smart-ass comments, aren’t I.

“Good God,” I spit exasperatedly, “I may as well be Heathcliff.”

His eyes widen, “You…You know Wuthering Heights? Can you read!?”

“Uh,” I mutter. There’s no excuses bottling in my brain this time. How am I supposed to play this one of? “T-The man, the priest…at the church, used to teach me…”

“And he read Wuthering Heights with you?” Erwin raised a thick eyebrow with a bewildered expression, a grin somewhat lingering on his lips.

I laugh, “Y-Yeah…strange isn’t it.”

“Much so,” He chuckles, “I’ve actually been trying to teach my son to read for a very long time, so perhaps, if you came along with me that is, you could teach him…”

The smell of my clothes fill my nostrils like bleach; even my fingernails are filled with dirt from somewhere. My hair is a greasy mess, each strand knotted with another as if there is a war upon my scalp. I can’t imagine how horrific my breath might smell, how much I could do with a thorough clean.
I think of how lonely I’ll become if I stayed in the streets. How short I’d survive. How I’d meet Marco. I don’t want to picture that…not a single bit of it.

“I will,” I murmur, loud enough that he will hear but quiet enough that it’s almost a whisper, “I will come, and I will be a part of your family, and I will help you cook, and I will be your son, and I will teach my…b-brother to read. I can do that. If you’ll…have me.”

Erwin’s eyes glass over like the mist that hovers above the waves of the sea. For now, even if it be today, or in ten years when I meet Marco, I might as well have a home to pass time. I might as well spend some of the lifetime in humane condition.

*But Jean, it’s so selfish of you to think that you deserve anything like that…*

But then…*Marco.* What would he tell me? No doubt about it he would tell me I deserve more happiness that anyone on the planet. I know I don’t, of course I don’t. But we’re thinking *logic* here not *worth.*

“Of course,” Erwin smiles, looking so unimaginably happy, “*Of course,* Jean, of course.”

We set off in carriage to Penzance, at the far south of Cornwall. The journey is long and tiring. The whole while I take in the fresh, clean air of the desolate moors and countryside paths, so wonderfully contrasting to the thick smoggy air of Victorian Trost.
I feel much cleaner after bathing back at Trost Castle, or the so called 'manor'. My stomach is pleased at the food it has eaten, filled with Erwin’s good cooking. I feel better, much better, lightweight in the air of the moors. The breeze feels cool against my skin though I feel warm inside.

I’m a bottle of anticipation. A firework about to set off. Something inside me feels so different and I know, deep down, that it’s to do with Marco. I can’t tell, but I hope to god that it’s good.

Erwin spends the journey talking mindlessly about his work as a solicitor, about how the manor in Trost belonged to some old acquaintances named Farlan and Isobel, but they not long ago passed away. He had to go through their old documents.

He had been there for nearly a month, and so is thankful that he finally can return home to his… children and house. He tells me that the children will love me, and that we’ll make a wonderful family. He tells me he’ll raise me well.

It’s almost exactly on the hour of 7 when we arrive in Penzance, the horse trotting calmly down the stony path leading up to Erwin’s ivy ridden house. It's much more beautiful than Trost Castle, much more scenic, much more pleasant. I wonder how on earth Erwin can afford this when he is only a solicitor. Inheritance? He had said his parents died after all.

The windows glow with a warm orange, lighting the floors and the gravel below them. There is a glorious smell emitting every gap in the houses’ structure of fresh tomato soup, almost identical to the soup Marco likes a lot. I miss him already; it’s usually weeks, months, even years after I’m reborn that we finally meet.

We take the horses and the carriage to the barn just to the side of the house, stroking the horses gently on the face as if they can understand our gratitude towards them for bringing us on a long journey.
When we finally make it to the houses entrance, the door is wide open and two people, around my age, are stood waiting with grins on their faces.

One of them, the man, is fairly tall (though shorter than me), light brown hair covering his head – unruly but trimmed short and smart. He is wearing a simple dress shirt with a bow tie and braces, long grey trousers on his legs. He smiles effortlessly, hugging his father before the girl beside him can.

“Welcome back, Father.” He says enthusiastically, “We have missed you very much.”

Ah, this must be Erwin’s ‘son’.

The boy clings onto Erwin for a rather long while, like he’s trying to prove a point to someone.

“Thomas, dear,” Erwin replies with a soft smile, “It’s good to see you again too, but let me see Mina too.”

With a nod and a hiss, Thomas steps away from in front of the girl, Mina, whose hair is in two simple braids and dressed in a washed out red coloured dress, buttoned up to the collar. She is very beautiful.

“Father!” She squeals, earning a pissed look from Thomas - which she doesn’t see, neither does Erwin. Maybe they don’t like each other? “How was your trip? I bet you’re tired. Oh and hungry! Don’t worry, Levi and I have been cooking some wonderful soup—”
“Mina,” Thomas snaps, “Hush now, Father probably wants to come inside from the cold.”

Victorian guys suck, seriously. Mina looks a bit frightened, and backs off with a small nod.

“Now now, Thomas. Mina, I would love to hear more about dinner in just a moment,” Erwin smiles (again), “However, I have someone else I’d like to introduce.”

I realize now that I’ve pretty much been hiding in Erwin’s shadow. I step to the right so they can see me properly, attempting a smile in the process.

Mina’s lips shape into a sweet grin, her eyes widening as if she is very happy to see me. She looks as if she is about to say something however, with a glance at Thomas, she resists – perhaps in fear of him. His face looks appalled.

“Father, you took another one in.”

“Thomas for Christ’s sake, Jean is a person, I can’t stand you talking like that about your brothers and sisters,” Erwin’s voice is almost scary, “Stand to the side now, I would like to bring Jean in.”

I awkwardly walk past Thomas, avoiding being close to him by all means. He does not look happy. What doesn’t make sense is how he acts as if I’m any different from him; maybe he hasn’t been taken off the streets.

“His Mother was my sister,” He whispers to me, “She and her husband both died from
Tuberculosis. I have raised him since he was born, he tends to get upset about me ‘adopting’ other children.”

There is a hell of a lot of death in this world.

“I see…” I mutter in response, “He must have a very close connection to you, I imagine he gets jealous sometimes.”

“It’s all ignorance, Jean, I’ve raised him to not care where a person comes from, and accept them for who they are, but I don’t think he caught on. Ignore it, you’re just as much my son now as he is.”

We hang our coats on hooks by the kitchen door, adjusting to the warmth of the air inside. It’s much nicer in here.

“Thank you, Erwin, for bringing me in. I’m very grateful.” I mutter to him, earning a small smile.

A fragile hand finds my shoulder, petite and warm, it belongs to Mina who stands behind me with her lips and eyes beaming, “Hello there, Jean is it?”

She doesn’t give me a chance to answer, “I’m so happy to have another brother, goodness I hope we get along. It’s lovely to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you t-too,” I almost whisper, “M-Mina, was it?”
“Indeed!” She beams again, “How old are you brother, you must tell me everything, where do you come from? Where did you get such an unusual name? Oh, and hair too.”

Erwin’s loud laughter booms from in front of us as he brings his hand up to his mouth in a fist, “Mina, ever so curious, isn’t she Jean?” I nod along and give her a look as if to say we can talk some other time.

She smiles, pleased with this, wandering into another room.

Erwin places his hand on my upper back and guides me into the kitchen, the scent of that soup engulfing me completely.

A short man stands by the stove, wooden spoon in hand as he stirs the large metal pot of soup around in perfect circles. Erwin says nothing much to him other than unfathomable murmurs, and places his hand on the shorter man’s shoulder in a very gentle manner.

“You know,” The short man says in a fierce tone, picking up a giant kitchen knife and chopping up some basil a little bit to hard, “Looking after these children has been hell. Thomas needs training as if he is a dog sometimes, he needs discipline. And your Mina too, such a church-bell, constant nattering, it’s a pain in the arse-”

“Levi, enough,” Erwin somehow says while chuckling, his hand still gently placed on ‘Levi’s’ shoulder, “We have another member of the family now. Jean, meet Levi, he’s been at my side since my wife passed, he is a dear friend.”

“Dear friend,” Levi snorts for some reason, though turns around afterwards and glares at me with sharp eyes, “Jean, are you French?”
Erwin sighs and lets me answer, “Uh…my parents were?” I say, not really knowing, in a way that sounds as if it’s a question rather than an answer.

“Est-ce que tu parles français?” He asks, his voice as sharp as his features. *Can you speak French?* I flinch a bit at this in surprise.

I nod, “*Oui, un peu.*” *Yes, a little.*

There’s a long silence after this. It’s so silent that even the hum of the gas stove can be heard. (Those things are bloody dangerous, might I add. Pretty sure the gas causes hallucinations or something, hence why everyone in the 1800s thinks they see ghosts. And in the 1960s that writer from America killed herself by sticking her head in the oven and inhaling the carbon monoxide…or something like that.)

Erwin finally breaks both the silence and my train of thoughts about deadly ovens with somewhat of an order, “Jean, would you like to go and see your room? It’s the room to the left at the top of the staircase. You’ll be sharing it, I’m afraid, but you’ll fit in fine I’m sure.”

I nod, thanking him once again before heading up the staircase. There aren’t any family pictures on the wall or anything, just paintings of flowers pinned up against the white walls. I feel warm as I head up the stairs, some kind of heat…a flow of energy seemingly clinging around my heart. Maybe it’s Erwin’s kindness. He lights up this dark time, almost as much as Marco would.

I assume I’ll have to share with Thomas, but maybe it won’t be so bad. Maybe I’ll grow on him, or be the good in him, you know, teach him some discipline just as Levi said he needed.
I knock politely against the hard wood of the door, in case Thomas is changing or something along those lines. I wouldn’t want to walk in on that. However, upon knocking I receive no reply. Not even an ‘enter’ or a single movement heard from behind the door.

Shrugging, I walk inside.

It’s a massive room, literally huge. One of the biggest bedrooms I’ve ever lived in…seriously. The walls are a blue colour, light and sweet. There’s this melancholy aura that floats about like a boat in the air, contradicting the wonderfully sweet smell of…vanilla.

_Fucking vanilla._

“Hello?” A quiet and ever so saccharine sweet voice whispers from the very far left corner of the room, “Who is it?”

I find myself storming through the door at high speed, walking over to him as fast as possible.

There he sits, those freckles forming a starry, starry night against his smooth cheeks. He is younger, much younger than when I last saw him. Perhaps 15? Around my age. His hair is a lot longer, almost long enough to tie up. He looks weak and delicate; he is a snowdrop that could wither at a touch. I want to hold him tightly.

Never before have I met him this fast, it usually takes so long…it didn’t even cross my mind that he’d be here. God, how could I have not known? Usually I sense it. Was it the warmth? The smell of tomato soup? The feeling of fresh air as we drove nearer to each other?
It’s all confusing, but he’s here, near me, and I’m glad. He died pretty much three days ago to me, and I get to see him again so quickly. I can’t help but smile and wipe away the tears that try to fall from my eyes.

“D-Do I know you from somewhere?” He asks, pushing the books he is holding to the side to look at me properly.

“No…I, uh, I don’t think so,” I lie, “I’m sorry for intruding, I’m new, here. Erwin…he said I’d be sharing this room with you.”

In an instant he stands up and walks fast over to the neatly made bed and taps it gently, making sure to tuck in any corners of the duvet until it looks neat as possible. He looks panicked almost, twitchy and frightened. I wonder if he is scared of me for some reason.

“H- Hey…” I murmur.

“Hay?” He raises his eyebrow, looks to the left and speaks quietly.

“No, uh, I mean, you don’t need to worry… I won’t, shout or anything if the bed is a little untidy.” I laugh gently to reassure him.

“O- oh, sorry.” He mutters.
“You don’t need to…apologize.” I smile at him with all the effort I have, all the emotions I feel for Marco, and send him the smile in hope he won’t fear me. I want him to know I’m here for him. There’s no other reason for my existence.

His upper teeth begin biting hard at his lower lip, hard and harsh.

I walk over to him slowly, placing my hand on his shoulder just as Erwin had done to Levi. This is different, though, I’m showing him I love him – even if he won’t get the message yet.

“Don’t be afraid.” I hum, “Marco, right? Let’s be…f-friends.”

His shoulder, which is tense under my hand, softens and he slumps down a little. He feels a bit more comfortable, knowing I won’t hurt him. I resist hugging him.

There are a sudden couple of knocks at the door and Mina pops her head through with another grin, “Brothers! Come down for dinner, it’s tomato soup…you’re favourite, Marco! Jean, I’d like to talk to you some more over dinner! Quick quick!”

She disappears and her footsteps begin down the stairs. Her energy makes me chuckle. I send another smile to Marco, lifting my hand off his shoulder finally.

I begin towards the door and as I exit through, I swear I hear Marco’s voice mutter quietly, as if he’s reciting lines for a show, or running over memories.

“Jean.”
“So Jean,” Mina grins after a mouthful of Levi’s tomato soup, “How old are you?”

I gulp a spoon of my own, trying to look as though I’m not constantly staring at Marco over the dinner table. He looks very isolated from the rest of us, I can’t fathom why, “I’m 14, probably.”

Erwin and Mina both chuckle, thinking I’m joking about the ‘probably’. I actually do have no idea; I have to guess, you see.

“Well you’re the youngest then!” She grins, “Marco is fifteen, Thomas is nearly 17, and you won’t believe it but I’ll be turning 18 very soon.”

I almost choke on my soup, “You’re nearly eighteen.”

“She’s quite small, isn’t she?” Erwin smiles softly, “Delicate as a snowflake, I can’t bare the thought that she might be married off soon.”

“She doesn’t have to get married, Erwin.” Levi butts in with a face as if he’s swallowed cow-pat.
“I know I know, but there are many men who have fallen for her already...and she and Samuel are so very close.” He replies.

“Do you love any of them?” I ask Mina between a mouthful of bread – delicious bread might I add.

“Only one, Samuel, but he is just a dear friend, and I-”

“I’m finished.” Thomas interrupts, his tone harsh and his pitch low with a scowling face and pushes himself from the table; his feet can still be heard as they storm up the stairs like thunder.

“A damned thank you would suffice, a rabid donkey would have better manners.” Levi hisses. I can’t help but laugh, though it’s a small chuckle.

Mina looks at me with wide eyes and ends up laughing too – and I find my giggles getting louder. Erwin stops holding his laughter in and it bellowed through the room. Even Levi smiles!

Marco...well, he looks like he wants to laugh, but is stopping himself forcefully. I try not to place a hand on his shoulder to help him loosen up a bit.

From the corner of my eye I spot a newspaper next to Erwin. I find myself leaning forward to get it, he lets me take in and bring it over to where I’m sat.

My eyes search frantically over the boring black ink printed against the paper until I spot what I’m looking for, a date!
“November 26th, 1886!” I grin as if I have been blessed, “1886, good god.”

“That would be the date, son,” Erwin is still laughing a little, “Not been keeping track of time?”

I shake my head frantically at him, “No, I had no idea.”

“Well, now you know,” He smiles as if to reassure me of something, “You can keep the paper, if you’d like to read it. There are many books in the room next to the living room too, it’s our library. I’m sure there are some in your room too, Marco likes to read them.”

I turn to Marco, though he averts his eyes, his cheeks turning a light pink. Eventually, I look back at Erwin, “Thank you, again, thank you so much.” I don’t usually thank people and mean it, but I can’t help being grateful to Erwin, he’s such a good man in such a harsh world. Just like Marco. They’re both too special.

I end up thanking Levi too before leaving the table; he’s the last person I want to hate me. He seems happy at my gratitude, even if my inference comes from the small nod he offers me in response. It was sincere enough.

Mina helps Levi clear away the dishes while Erwin heads of into his office. They seem rather close, actually. I scope the dining room for Marco, however somehow he has just disappeared. I don’t bother finding him; he was acting off a little anyway.

Once I return to my room, I search around for a book to read. Eventually I realize there is a small pile of books in the corner. He’s got Frankenstein neatly placed and I just sigh at how he possibly can read such boring pieces of literature. Seriously, I’d rather read The Tempest, and that’s like…
my least favourite of Shakespeare’s plays. Like, no joke, I might understand the language from personal experience, but it’s dreadful. Just, ew.

*Frankenstein* is just long and tiring, they get you hooked for a while and then it feels like your brain has just given up even trying. I’d spontaneously combust if I were to read them once again.

The book that does catch my eye is the one with a bookmark inside, on page 65. It’s *A Christmas Carol*. I’m a *slut* for Dickens. Wait, no – forget I said that. Let’s just say its pretty fantastic.

I’m interrupted by fast footsteps behind me.

“What *are* you doing?” Marco snaps regretfully, attempting to hoover his words back up after spewing them, “I- I mean…”

“This book, *A Christmas Carol*, it’s a favourite of mine.” I mutter. I desperately stop myself from blushing, “The way Dicken’s writes is so warming…a-and the message is nice too, don’t you think. You should finish it before Christmas.”

“I-I wish I knew…but I can’t read.”

Then it snaps. I think back to Erwin telling me about his son who can’t read. Why had I assumed it was Thomas? He’s the older one.

My eyes meet Marco’s, his face coated with shame. Questions fly through my head because I know for sure something is up with him. He bits at his lip like he wants to tear it off. God, he looks so
vulnerable.

“I like to look at the words, the bookmark is useless…I guess.”

“I will teach you to read, Marco.” He flinches as I say his name, “I’m not a good teacher…but I’ll try very hard, for you.”

There’s a loud silence that follows. He twists a necklace around his fingers, made of individual wooden beads attached together with a thin string.

“Can you write your name, Marco?” He shakes his head.

“No.”

I jump up and nod at him, knowing he’ll get the message that I will be back in just a minute. I thunder down the stairs, grinning at Mina who finds herself chatting gently to Levi. I know he was lying about hating her company.

I head to Erwin’s office and move my hand to knock on the door, but stop when I hear talking. My ear presses against the wood of the door.

“-first and I don’t want this cycle to keep going on. Don’t you understand how I feel?” It’s Thomas’ voice. I could slap the hell out of those dull vocal cords, I swear.
“I doubt I’ll do this again, but you have to understand that you never will be favored over the others, Thomas,” It’s Erwin talking to him. No shit, Jean, It’s his office, “I know you’ve been raised by me your whole life but I’m sick and tired of this behavior. Nothing good comes from ignorance and want. Nor jealously, nor hate. I understand what you’re feeling of course; you want to be loved the most. But I will love you all equally, do you understand Thomas? This hatred must end.”

Thomas does not reply after that. The next noise I hear is a series of footsteps. My body jolts backwards away from the door as Thomas storms out. He ignores my existence and walks straight past me and up the stairs in a huff.

Hesitantly, I enter the office earning a very obvious forced smile from Erwin, “Jean?” He murmurs.

“Do you have anything I can write with?” I ask before adding, “I’m going to t-teach Marco to read.”

His smile then turns genuine, seriously there may as well have been happy tears flowing like rivers from his tear ducts. His hands clap together overwhelmingly loud, “That’s…wonderful Jean. Honestly, I am incredibly thankful for this. Of course you can borrow something to write with. In that drawer over there-” He points, “-are some fountain pens I purchased not long ago. There should be plenty of ink inside. There is paper in the drawer below it too. Thank you so much, Jean.”

I nod instead of replying because sometimes I cannot find words that I want to say. He understands well enough.

I reach the bedroom just as an unexpected Thomas is leaving it. He glares at me and makes his way back to his own room. In panic I rush to Marco.
“Marco! Marco, I have a pen,” He is frozen in place, staring at nothing as if it’s haunting him, “Marco? Are you listening?”

When he still doesn’t move, I sit quietly beside him, and wrap my arm around his shoulders, gently stroking my fingers in circles in his upper arm. It shows him I am there.

His trance ends and he gasps in air like he has forgotten how to breathe. He his in pain and all I can do is hold him tighter as he tearlessly whimpers into my shoulder.

“Do you want to talk to me…about what is wrong?”

He shakes his head and his lips refuse to part.

“When I teach you to read and write,” I whisper, “You can let your emotions out in a diary. Many people do that…it makes you less upset.”

There is still no response from him. He’s trapped in fear and it won’t let him escape. My biggest suspicion is that Thomas is tormenting him.

“I’m going to help you. I want you to write your name, can you do that? M-A-R-C-O?” My voice is the softest I can make it. God, I want to hug him.

He shakes his head again.
“I know you can Marco. You have to trust me. I’m here for you, okay?”

Loosening his shoulders, he reaches for the pen in my hand. I let go of the grip and he takes it, along with the paper. He presses the tip on the off-white page and shakes before moving.

My eyes don’t look at his hands, but his face instead. His dark eyes and puffy cheeks. His galaxies and his soft peach lips.

I know he is done when he looks at me, our eyes meeting once again. I feel like we are going to kiss but we don’t. He whimpers again, and stops when I circle his skin once more.

I turn my head down to his lap where the paper sits.

There aren’t five letters of his name in ink.

There are four letters.

Only one letter is in his name.

It reads: Jean.
The next morning I awake to an empty bedroom. It’s the bedroom that Marco and I sleep in, however there is no Marco. I run out of the room at fast pace with bare feet and nothing on but a nightgown. I would have run straight into Thomas’ room if not for the movement I see from the corner of my eye.

At the end of the corridor is a huge window with crisp winter sun glowing through each element in the glass. There is a meadow behind the house and in the centre is a horse, galloping across the frosty grass at intense speed. Riding it is Marco, not wearing a helmet of a saddle, just riding the horse as if it was natural to him. He looked…free.

There wasn’t a cage of fear surrounding him. Just wind and cold air, biting at his skin and making his unruly locks of hair fly in many directions.

At that moment, Mina stalks up beside me and smiles, “It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

I nod without breathing.

“He looks so wonderful. He loves riding. I wish he would always be that happy.”

“Why…is he not?” My words are so silent I’m surprised she hears.
“He feels very out of place in this home. He and Thomas don’t get along…well; no one gets along with Thomas. But Marco believes all the…foul things Thomas says. He believes he is a worthless, gypsy bastard who should have been left to die on the streets. I think you’ll be good for him, Jean. You have to make him understand that he is worth something.”

I glare out the window once again and watch as the horse slows into a canter, then to a trot. He eventually halts and slides off the horse, whistling as he leads it out of sight.

“Jean,” Mina says, snapping me back to earth, “Please, I beg, be his friend.”

“I-I met a travel…no…traveller from an antic…antique l-land, who s-said.” Marco is interrupted by Erwin’s enthusiastic boom of a voice.

“Jean! Marco! We’re going to visit the market today.”

We call back to him saying we’ll get ready.

It’s been three weeks since I arrived at this household. Three weeks of spending my time with Marco. Watching him learn the alphabet slowly, learn his phonetics and how to structure his words. I taught him all the basics before moving onto verbs, adjectives and nouns. He picked it all up so fast and so easily. I can’t help being proud of him for that.
I know he only learned it easily because he can, in fact, read, in certain lifetimes, and so the memories are embedded within him without him knowing them.

I searched around the library for poems and sonnets and whatnot, and eventually found a favourite, *Ozymandias*, and so asked him to read it out.

Even if Erwin had interrupted, we could easily just finish it later.

“Come on, Marco, make sure to put something warm on before we go. I’m not watching you turn blue again.”

He laughs, yes he *laughs*, and pulls on a dark jacket and leather gloves, along with a pair of black boots.

All 6 of us, including Levi and Thomas, leave the house together and decide we will walk to the biggest village nearby.

The market is a bunch of wooden stalls with people chatting idly, and some other people selling products like fresh milk, or meats and breads. Erwin makes Levi get some steak and potatoes for our meal tonight. It seems weird that there would be a market on the 18th of December…isn’t it a bit cold? Perhaps I’m just a wuss.

While Mina is distracted, talking to her friend Samuel, and Thomas is god knows where, Erwin and Levi take Marco and I to some horses by the side of a field.
I blond haired man stands holding them by some reins, he does not look pleased to see us.

“‘as yer gypsy boy come for anoth’r one ‘f my ‘orses?’” The man hisses with an unfathomable Cornish accent, literal farmer voice, I hold in my laughter.

Erwin sighs, wrapping an arm around Marco’s shoulders. Only now do I realize he means Marco by ‘gypsy boy’. I assume this is the guy that Marco’s horse, named Jinae might I add, was bought from.

“Why don’tcha get you ‘n yer street-rats a wife ‘n I’ll sell you’s an ‘orse.” I seriously could punch this brat.

“Not my children nor I will be getting married anytime soon. I’m here to buy a horse like everyone else who has come here to buy one, so sell me the damned horse like you would to all the other people here today.”

The guy spits on the grass by his feet, looking as pissed as ever, “Fine. ‘ave yer way.”

One of the horses beside him is super duper tall, scarily so, even taller than Marco’s big ass horse. But the one next to it is just a tiny bit shorter than Jinae – my ideal size, a beautiful dark-chocolate colour. I have no idea what kind of horse it is, look I’m no expert, but I know it’s not a Shetland pony at least. Well, it was a pretty fucking beautiful horse.

“She’s a girl, though she hasn’t been named,” The voice belongs to Marco, “She’s a Thoroughbred…she is good for racing. She’s been here for sale since I bought Jinae…she’s so beautiful but not very good for pulling wagons. That’s why she isn’t sold yet.”
I stare at him intently. He looks so passionate when talking about horses. Weirdo. Dumb, beautiful weirdo.

“We’d like to try her out.” Erwin then says loudly to the old Cornish guy. He looks like he is about to say no, but Marco is already pulling the chocolate thoroughbred towards the field with this intense fire burning in his soul.

“You have to climb on.” Marco says, “Can you do that?”

Since when was Marco this talkative?

I gulp, “I don’t think so…”

Marco then places his foot in the foot thing (a stirrup, just so you know I know), and swings his right leg over the back of her until it flops down on her other side. He grins as he looks at me.

His hand moves forward, and I grab it. It’s wonderful. There’s that electric in our veins again and I know he feels it. I know that’s why he shudders.

And then I’m being pulled, up up up and away. I get seated in front of him for some reason. Apparently he wants me to use the stirrups, and he’s sit behind for moral support or something.
“Heels down, toes up!” He shouts.

“Wha-” And then we’re off. It’s not fast at first but she is damned eager to move. We trot for a mere 2 seconds and then she’s already in a canter. I’m shitting myself but I can feel Marco’s smile. It’s a huge smile - almost as big as Hanji’s was. (God, I bet Hanji would have loved horses. He was that kind of guy, the one to randomly show up to his shift in Kaffihús riding a mustang named Sonny or Bean.)

Marco leans on my back closer, wrapping his arms around my waist so that I’m forced to hold the reins.

We gallop then, faster than the wind. Clearer than the skies of Penzance. There isn’t fog here, it’s perfect. Marco’s grip around me feels warm and I feel like I’m at home in bed snuggling up tight with him rather than riding a horse.

I don’t want it to end, even if it is scary.

When we return to the old Cornish guy, Erwin is already handing him the money. I thank him about 8000 times before we set off to find Mina and Thomas. Levi seems somewhat impressed by the horse, though it’s still hard to tell what on earth he is feeling.

Marco can’t stop himself from stroking her mane and smiling.

As soon as we find Thomas, who turns out to have been chatting with some young women, Marco’s smiles end and he finds himself at my hip. Our fingers brush together a lot though neither of us dares to hold hands.
Homosexuality isn’t punished by death anymore, but it’s punishable by 2-4 years in prison, and I’m not going back there. Good god.

Mina returns with Samuel, who is unsurprisingly invited to enjoy Sunday dinner with us. It’s more than obvious that he is madly in love with her. She probably loves him too, but is too ditzy to see it.

When we arrive home, Thomas buggers off to wherever Thomas goes. Mina again helps Levi cook the meal. And Erwin goes with Samuel to his office for a discussion. Suspicious, much.

Marco and I decide to stay inside and finish doing some practicing of his reading rather than going out into the blistering cold for four hours riding horses. But first, I want to pick my horse a name.

“An old friend once taught me that a man must always have Shakespeare at hand.” I grin as I bring a copy of A Midsummer Night’s Dream to the bed. I hold all the pages, but then begin releasing them slowly so that the pages fall down. I slam my finger randomly on a page with my eyes shut.

It lands where Lysander says, “Ay me, for aught that I could ever read, Could ever hear by tale or history, The course of true love never did run smooth.” I can’t call my horse Lysander, that’s a dude’s name, but I’m happy to have landed on that part because those words are pretty damn relatable.

I hand the book to Marco so he can have a go. He grabs all pages but the back cover like I did, and begins releasing the pages one by one.
His finger lands on a word gently. It’s the line spoken by Titania saying, “I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again: Mine ear is much enamour'd of thy note;”

I realize that I’ve read those words out in habit. It’s not like it’s a particularly beautiful line or anything, but Marco picked it which makes it special. He smiles.

“Titania,” I mutter, “It’s a beautiful name. Thank you, Marco.” I resist kissing him on the forehead – I’d rather not freak him out quite yet.

We snuggle up under the blanket on his bed with a book of poems and A Christmas Carol in hand. My foot brushes against his for warmth; he doesn’t mind the intrusion at all.

“Am I just reading Ozymandias?” He asks me with a satin soft voice.

I nod enthusiastically, “If you do,” I pause to look at him closely, “If you do, we can read A Christmas Carol together before Christmas, and when you finish that, you’ll probably be good enough to read harder books like Wuthering Heights or The Woman in White. If you do, I’ll be so proud of you.”

I hear his gulp, loud in the silence of the bedroom. I place my hand flat on the small of his back earning a shudder on his half. I offer him a supportive smile. I know he can do it, I have faith.

He opens the book of sonnets on the page with Ozymandias on it, gulping a second time before skimming his eyes over the words before saying them.
“If you do.” I tell him

The rain begins pattering against the window, though the sky is light enough to keep the room bright. I hear my heartbeat, even over the sound of the rain. I want to be able to lay down with my head on Marco’s chest so I can hear his heart beating to. Each beat would become addictive, and I’d overdose on the thought that god, he is alive and he is here.

“I-I met a traveller from an antique land…” He pauses, “W-Who said: Two v-vast and trunk…less legs of stone stand in the desert. N-Near them on t-the sand-”

His eyes widen when he realizes he’s lost where the fuck he was on the page. His eyebrows furrow and he bites his lip. I grab his finger gently and place it by the line he was on, and circle once on the back of his wrist before letting him carry on.

“Half sunk, a s-shattered v-visage lies, whose frown…and wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command tell that its sculptor well those passions read-”

He stops to look at me, incase he got something wrong, I shake my head, “You’re reading beautifully Marco. All you need is confidence. You can be comfortable around me.”

He nods frantically, “-Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed. And on the pedestal these words appear:”

Marco takes a deep breath. He looks stressed out. I bite my lip habitually, mostly because of Marco doing it 24/7. I stroke up his spine with my fingers, he’s so close to the end of the sonnet, he can do it, he can.
His peach lips part once more, "M-My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: L-Look on my works, ye Mighty...and despair!"

When he finishes that line, he can’t carry on any longer. I pat his back with the touch of a feather, “You don’t need to carry on anymore.”

There are tears forming in his eyes, he looks so ashamed and it’s an unbearable sight, “Y-You said…’If you do,’ I j-just…” I curve the corners of my lips upwards into what could be seen as a smile.

“You did Marco, you’ve done enough, I’m very proud of you, very proud!”

*He is overwhelmed with the sense of familiarity.*

There isn’t any resistance now, he flops sideways, his body becoming loose and weak against my sharp and bony frame, his head lands on my shoulder. I don’t know how he finds it comfortable, but he does. He lets some tears fall finally. It’s not crying though, just tears. Marco doesn’t ever cry properly.

“Read the rest, please…” He whispers.

I pick up the book, his finger still pointing at the line in which he’d had enough, and read as quietly as possible.
“Nothing beside remains: round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands,” I exhale, “stretch far away.”

I look down at him softly, his head on my shoulder. I think what will become of us, and what will happen to us. This lifetime is less predictable that most others that I have lived in. All I know is that I want to do something for him.

He wants to be able to read so badly. But I cannot think of a single book that will suit his tastes, and all the ones that suit him haven’t yet been written. He likes time travel, right?

I could do that for him – write him something that will suit his tastes. Something that won’t be too think in language and literature devices for him to properly process. Something he’ll love and treasure until the very end.

I decide then that I am going to write him a story.

It’s a February, a cold February, the coldest one I’ve experienced in an awfully long time.

Honestly, the cold air of Penzance has been warming up to me for a while, but I’m not quite used to it yet. It’s the atmosphere mostly; it’s like one solitary fire in a field of snow stretching out for infinite miles. There is warmth here, but it solely resides within Erwin, Mina, Levi and Marco. Everything else is dark and depressing.
I hate Thomas, I really do, but it’s without a genuine reason.

Everyday I find myself searching for more and more reasons to hate him, but I find none and it frustrates me.

Although I’ve had inklings and suspicions, nothing really twinges within me until the 8th day of this cold, cold February.

I sit in my room; reading over some notes without a care, and then Marco enters.

He doesn’t even turn to look at me.

“Marco?” I question, “Are you okay?”

He turns towards me with winced eyes, hands clutching at the left side of his stomach, “I’m just fine.”

“You don’t sound too sure,” I half-joke, the worry in my voice becoming more obvious, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I fell of Jinae is all.” He almost spits, “He’s too damned jumpy.”
I walk over to him and glare him in the eye, “Jinae has never been jumpy,” Gently, I remove his hand from his stomach and press mine slightly against it, he screeches in pain, “What the hell happened to you?!”

“I fell.” He furrows his eyebrows.

I begin to unbutton his shirt, eying the freckles on his soft skin. I count each button that I slide through the holes to release them, and once I reach the 6th, his skin turns a hideous purple-green. Like the colour of the river Thames after a storm.

It’s a big bruise, extremely large, stretching at least 10cm. I’m not denying that he fell from Jinae, I’m just simply saying that if a person were to do this:

1) They’d have had to stomp on him hard and harsh and,

2) My first suspect would be Thomas.

“Who?” I ask him the final time.

“I fell.” He turns away from me, “It’s my fault, I fell. The end.”

In the end, I give up asking, and carry on searching.
By April, Marco has finished not only *A Christmas Carol*, but *Wuthering Heights*, *The Woman In White* and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Sometimes he gets tired out from reading, and so I read to him instead. I notice that, despite his desperate attempts to keep his eyes on the words as I read them, he keeps looking at me.

Despite it being about 4 months after deciding, I still haven’t written the book, in fact I am still planning it. It’s the story of my life, my life with Marco, about travelling across universes and lifetimes in search of him. I swapped his name for Angel, and mine for Ellis. Therefore, the genders can’t really be determined…but they *are* both guys.

I’m disappointed in myself of course for not writing it, but Marco is still joined at my hip whether I’ve written him a book or not. I don’t mean that it would be a waste or pointless to write one. I just mean that I don’t need to give him any gifts to earn his love.

Mina and I get along really well too; she’s a wonderful older sister to me, sweet and caring yet wild and brimming to the top with energy. Samuel spends even more time at our household; he may as well be part of the family.

Thomas…is Thomas. There have been countless occasions where if caught him after, always *after*, saying something to Marco. I’ve spoken to Thomas about it a ton of times but neither he nor Marco will say a word. It worries me to the point where my stomach feels twisted in a thousand knots. He’s such a horrid person.

It turns out Levi is a big softie. He looks terrifying, and sounds it too, but around Erwin he’s like that kind of sweet and caring Mother. He’s very protective of Mina and Marco, which seems strange as he often complains about how he hates the weak. I know he means Marco and Mina, but I know he’s lying. Anyone with a brain can see that they are both strong people who have to deal with a brother like Thomas and the villages hatred to them being street-rats raised my a bachelor.

You all know my story already. I’m here as usual, in a lifetime slap bang in some random spot on
the timeline of the world after chasing Marco for 246 lifetimes. I still don’t know why I chase him… I just can’t leave him. I’m unconditionally, irrevocably and murderously in love with him – it’s such a blissful sin.

And you should also know that Marco loves me just as much. But this is the year 1887, and it’s not a year where I can walk around with Marco, hand in hand and lips on lips. I’m having 90s withdrawal symptoms already.

I miss Hanji, I miss all the friends I've made over 247 lifetimes...I miss freedom. That's if I ever had freedom...

Although Marco loves me, he probably thinks there is something wrong with him, that he is ill or some kind of devil spawn. He probably hates every part of himself as he lives on loving me. I wouldn’t be able to just tell him because he might be too scared to accept it.

I don’t want to loose him because of love. That would be worse than death.

I just wish I had a strong enough grip on time to stop it from going so fast.

June appears faster than I hoped for, each second that time flies past I feel like I’m trying to control a riot. It’s anarchy in my head and my heart, my mental state is going into that chaotic mode because it’s been so long that I have more than enough reason to panic about Marco dying - every breath that I take is every breath of his that might end. I just…never know.
I forget about it all the best I can in June due to the 16th being Marco’s birthday. I might get bored of my own, but I’ll never get bored of Marco’s. I want to treat him to everything he’d ever dreamed of having.

I can’t do that, of course but my story will suffice.

I know he’ll be eternally grateful for his gift. Eternally…well that’s not the best word to describe this. No one is immortal like I am, everyone is just mortal, but Marco is horrifyingly more mortal than them. And even if you say he is immortal, just reborn, all those memories are lost every time he is born again. That’s not immortality, that’s…the most disgusting, cruel and cursed immortality to ever exist.

I shake of those damned thoughts of death again, it’s not worth thinking, and write the last full-stop in the first chapter of my story.

What is the story triggers some deep memories inside him to come back? What then? What’s my explanation?

Maybe he won’t know at all.

I don’t know how the story ends yet, I’ll decide as it progresses, but I’m pretty pleased with the first chapter, and I hope Marco will be too.

I skip downstairs to Erwin’s office to ask him where Marco is. He tells me that he doesn’t know, but he’ll probably be outside somewhere. I smile and thank him before leaving.
Mina and Levi are cooking that familiar tomato soup recipe for Marco’s birthday, their gift to him I guess, I smile at them too as I head for the front door.

For mid-June, it’s a surprisingly gloomy day outside. The salty sea air fills my lungs, but it doesn’t taste as fresh as usual. The sky is foggy, I can’t see past the grey, but today’s positivity surrounds me as I practically gallop to the stables as if I’m a horse myself.

(Hey, I know what you’re thinking – stop it. Now!)

There’s voices coming from the shed next to the stable, but I can’t quite tell who the voices belong to just yet. It becomes clear when one of them shouts.

“Don’t you dare think you will ever be worth his affection!” It’s Thomas, that voice belongs to Thomas. I freeze.

“I p-promise I am not trying to make him pre-” That’s a whimper, Marco’s whimper. Why aren’t I doing something? Why am I just stood listening?

“Won’t you just stop talking for a second, Marco. For Christ’s sake, I won’t believe whatever you say. You’re a sick boy with sick intentions, you’re about as important as the floor I stamp on. If you keep making up these lies, I shall-”
Marco is crying now, I hear him shudder, hear it, “I’m not….I’m not l-lying!”

“You should have died where Erwin found you.” Thomas sounds livid.

“Sorry…” Marco mutters through cries.

“You’re weak, you deserve to be beaten to the ground.” He says, earing no reply from Marco, “Did you not just hear me? Beaten – I say! Trampled on by a thousand men like dirt.”

“I-”

“You’re dirt, say it Marco, you’re dirt.”

Marco says nothing, the only noise I hear after that is a bone crunching punch.

It sends shivers down my spine. The impact against Marco is as loud as thunder. I hear him shriek in pain afterwards. I can’t see it, but I can picture it vividly. I throw my story onto the ground and
run towards the shed door.

*It won’t open! Fucking hell! It’s locked.*

A second punch happens and Marco sobs soundlessly in pain. I imagine is poor face in the dirt… he’ll feel like he deserves this, he’ll feel like Thomas was telling the truth.

My hands bang against the door of the fence louder than bombs, it just won’t fucking open.

“THOMAS!” I’m yelling, “THOMAS YOU BASTARD!”

There are more punches, more cries, and even I’m sobbing as I slam my fists against the hard wood. Hurried footsteps are behind me, I turn in an instant. It’s Mina. She picks up on the situation faster than a click of my fingers, and runs back inside to get Levi or Erwin or just someone goddamn it.

This time I hear a kick as Marco’s body slams against the wall, does he *want* to fucking kill Marco?! Sick bastard!

I step back, *one, two, three, four*. I feel my muscles build up as much strength as they can. I make my self armored. It writhes throughout my body and then I pounce.

It’s the fastest and hardest I’ve ever ran in my life, my long long *long* life. The shed wall kills me when I slam against it, but I manage to knock the door out of its hinges easily.
I don’t hesitate even for a second to leap over Marco. I don’t have the strength within me to hit Thomas, but I crawl over Marco’s body with the little strength I have left, and take the punches Marco doesn’t deserve.

I surround him easily, holding him tight. He sobs more than I’ve ever seen him do before.

“Jean, he will-” Marco’s words are stopped by the kick I receive in my upper back. It feels like my spine has snapped in half, though I refuse to move if it means I can protect Marco. I take more punches and then-

Thomas goes flying, his body is thrown against the back of the shed with intense strength, he lands against the tools – the garden forks and the shovels, I hope to god the pierce him in every organ. When I look at him, there isn’t blood and I curse under my breath.

Levi turns out to be the person that threw him. The look on his face is genuinely terrifying. I don’t want to watch anymore, it’s too much violence.

Carefully, I pick Marco up and he weighs as much as a feather. I walk past Erwin and Mina, she looks shaken and Erwin looks ashamed – none of that matters. Jinae whistles and huffs at Marco from the stable - clearly worried as fuck. Not as worried as me though.

I carry him inside the house, and up the stairs until I reach our bedroom. I lay him gently on the bed and instantly begin removing his blood-soaked shirt and trousers. He’s so in pain and my heart could honestly stop beating at that moment. It’s unbearable.
I look at him closely. His face is swollen all over, his nose looks broken and there is black blood gushing from his lip. His neck is purple – oh god, did Thomas strangle him?! He has a series of huge green bruises on his chest and lower stomach from…being trampled on. He looks worse than he did when he was hit by that car. I’ve seen him in many different states of pain, but this one must be worst.

“I’m sorry,” Marco whispers, “Thomas has been doing this since the day I arrived. I’m sorry I’ve cause a commotion…I-”

Marco thinks it’s his fault.

Marco has put up with this for years on end.

Marco believes Thomas.

Marco has just suffered in silence.

“You didn’t deserve this.” I tell him in a whimper, “You didn’t deserve this!”

Three small knocks occur against the door making my jump, Marco doesn’t flinch…I bet it would hurt if he moved.

I walk to the door hesitantly and when I open it, Mina is stood with tears in her eyes, shoulders shaking, but she is composed. It’s the first time I’ve seen her genuinely looking mature.
“You dropped…these.” She hands me the stack of paper that is my story for Marco, I take it and smile a thank you to her, stepping outside of the room and shutting the door behind me, “I will get Marco cleaned up and comfortable. I will be gentle. You should talk to Thomas…and then you can come and see Marco again later. I’m sorry about everything.”

I laugh, but it’s a sad laugh, more like a breathy sob. I wrap my arms around her small body and hold her tight, “Thank you Mina, show him…that he is loved. You don’t have to apologize for any of this…it’s not your fault. Please look after Marco while I’m gone.”

She nods frantically and enters the room, and I walk away, down the stairs until I reach the dining room table, where Thomas sits opposite Erwin and Levi.

“Jean.” Erwin says quietly, “Thank you.”

It’s ridiculous that a man like Erwin could be thankful for my actions when he’s the one everybody is always thanking.

Erwin turns his head calmly to Thomas, “You will be leaving to a boarding school in Kent.” He says, “And when…if you ever earn permission to return to this household, I want you to be a proper man.”

He pauses to take a breath, “If you think I’m forgiving you for this, I am not. I have raised you to be a good man and you have put my teachings to waste. Thomas, I am ashamed of you.”

A long silence appears after that.
Thomas doesn’t dare move, it’s as if his soul is chained to the earth. It makes me sick to look at him. He could have killed Marco; he could have been the person that ended this lifetime. I won’t even forgive him for that. I am going to think of him when I look at the ground I’m walking on.

“Thomas,” I find myself seething, my teeth gritting together, “Don’t you dare ever touch Marco again.”

He flinches, “I-”

“Don’t speak. You’ve treated him like dirt without even realizing that the dirt is in fact you. You disgust me. If you ever decide to trample on a poor human being like Marco again, I’ll kill-”

“Jean.” This time it’s Levi, “He understands. Thomas, you are granted one more night here, *without* leaving your room, and we want you out by six in the morning.”

Thomas nods, and leaves the table, not a single word is spoken as he meanders up the stairs and enters his bedroom with the slam of a heavy wooden door behind him.

Levi stands and begins re-heating Marco’s soup again. *It’s his birthday*, I remember, he went through this…on his *birthday*.

(Perhaps all of his birthday’s have been like this…)
I can’t even imagine how Erwin must feel. He looks as if it’s all his fault. I find myself wrapping my thin arms around him and hugging him like I hugged Mina, “You did nothing wrong.”

He squeezes my hand softly before I let go and head back upstairs.

When I re-enter my bedroom, Mina is sat at the end of Marco’s bed, looking down at him in such a motherly manner. Marco is sat up a little, holding none other than my story in his hand.

He reads, “I-It all began with fire. I re…member the fire very well, so well that I even feel the heat against my skin, so well that the smoke still clogs my lungs and takes away my breath, so well that I can still smell the stench of Angel’s burning corpse, and hear his cries of suffering flood my ear drums.”

It brings a tear to my eye that he reads it so easily; it makes me want to cry when I see tears forming in his own eyes too. He’s reading his own death. He’s reading his very first death from my perspective…and it’s bringing tears to his eyes.

“And a-as I saw the final shrieks of pain and his attempts at pulling away from the rope that bound him end, I knew that he had died. The village stared with eyes of confusion, they knew they should have been feeling hatred, but all they felt was grief. Men, women, children and I included ran forth with buckets of water from the river. We poured it over my love until the fire was completely out. The fire…was gone, a-and so was he.

“His eyes were open, eyelids singed. There was not a single hair on his head left, or distinguishable feature on his face. I thought, ‘how dare they damage something so beautiful’. My mother’s delicate words crossed the path of my mind and told me, ‘only the most beautiful flowers get picked’. I couldn’t bear to look at him any longer. I could only touch his damp, bloody and raw skin and hold him at my fingertips.
"The world beneath shifted unexpectedly. I thought at that moment I was dying. I wasn’t dying. I blinked again and again, and each blink caused the world to fade, and a new picture was drawn around me. There were these futuristic vehicles thrumming down what looked like a road made entirely out of stone. Women, they were walking down the street in trousers and some items that looked to short to even be considered clothing. It was alien, the world was alien. I knew then that I was chained to the earth, and this was a different time, a long way in the future. I knew I was lonely—"

Marco only then spots me. He looks distraught, tears flowing out of his bruised eyes and dripping down swollen cheeks, "Jean… I feel… like I’ve read this before, I—"

Mina stands up with a solemn smile on her face. She practically tiptoes out of the room, leaving me stood staring at Marco as he weeps.

"It feels like I’ve felt those flames before…and that shifting world…I feel—"

"Marco," I murmur, "You must just be sensitive to sad stories."

_This_ is the sad story. Me.

He holds his hand out to me and I grab it. Then he pulls lightly, but it’s enough to make my weak and sore body fall limp down next to him. He shuffles closer to the wall so I can fit, though I open my arms so he can come closer. He does, there is no way he can resist.

When he crawls into my arms he begins crying hard, sobbing violently against my chest. I stroke circles on his back and he shudders.
“Happy Birthday Marco,” I whisper in his ear, “You were so brave today.”

“I was weak!” He cries, “I’ve been such a burden!”

I bite my lip hard, I can’t just end this with a kiss, I can’t! “You’re not a burden.”

“My Mother couldn’t afford to look after me…she killed herself because of me. I came here before Mina and you…Thomas hated me ever since. I took away his life as a treasured only-child. Erwin spent so much money on buying me clothes and food, I don’t deserve that. You came here and…y-you taught me to read, b-because I’m not smart. T-today should have been good but I r-ruined it. Why are you looking after me? Why?”

I press my nose against him, wiping my thumb under his delicate eyes to try and stop the tears. Our bodies are pressed together for warmth. I have to treasure him; it’s moments like this that I realize he is so worth traveling 248 lifetimes for. I will travel a million more if it’s for him. For eternity.

“Marco, I care about you so much, so very much, You’re dear to me, do you understand? I’m so happy to have you here right now!”

“Why?” He tries to shout but his sobbing takes over. He is speaking whimpers, and each one makes his body shake in despair.

“You’re alive,” I tell him, “You’re alive.”
Chapter End Notes

This lifetime carries on into next chapter. Be glad he isn't dead (yet).

My tumblr

Also, here is the playlist for this fic, however it is entirely KPOP, but if you're open minded enough, I'm sure you'll still like it.
Song of the Stars

Chapter Summary

I think of each memory that I should forget.
Season after season,
I want you back in my arms.

Chapter Notes

Bittersweet. That's the word. It describes this chapter in a nutshell. This is the chapter where everything really gets going.

NOTE: Marco's opinions on Christians and on God aren't my own. He is just angry. No one should disrespect a religion, but I just had to make his anger realistic.

Enjoy, and make sure to leave a comment below :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s an evening in early November, it’s inching closer to being a full year since I’ve lived in this household. Marco is in our room writing his diary. He doesn’t always let me read it, and I’m only granted permission if he is stuck on how to write something. Even then, I can only see a word or two.

I ran out of pencil lead a couple days ago and I’m itching to draw some more, so I venture down the stairs to grab some lead and paper. Mina is probably asleep and thus I walk as quietly as possible.

God, I’m in such a daydream that I don’t even knock when I walk into Erwin’s office.

Now, this shouldn’t be a problem. I mean, it’s Erwin. The gentleman that I call my Father. What could be wrong with his office?
Well, there is nothing wrong with it, per say, it’s just that upon opening the door, I do not expect to find Erwin pressing Levi against the cupboards as he kisses him. And holy shit, they’re practically devouring each other’s lips. They are kissing and biting at each other as if it’s their last chance to kiss ever again. Damn, they are on fire.

I want to walk back out and act as if I saw nothing, but it’d be un-realistic if they didn’t spot me considering it’s not hard to notice when someone storms in your little office. They do, by the way, and they leap about 100 meters apart, playing it cool afterwards. It’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever witnessed.

Levi pulls a face of utter fury. He is livid. And yet still he tries to act relaxed as he leans against the cupboard with disheveled hair and a half-open shirt. Erwin on the other hand screams shame, it’s written all over him. His hand is tight against his mouth and his eyes are watery. He is completely and utterly speechless.

The sight of them is too much, too hilarious. I doubt they expect me to end up crouching on the floor in hysterics, but the laughter keeps coming and I can’t hold it in.

“Good god,” I giggle, “I didn’t expect that my Father and his best friend were fucki- I mean ‘lovers’…”

Erwin goes wide eyed so I decide to carry on to make sure he understands that dude, I’m chill with it, OK? (I can’t say that though, because it’s the 1800s and no one says that, and also I’m English and thus I should speak language that isn’t overly Americanized…if you get what I mean…)

“Look, look, if you love each other and you are happy loving each other then I’m happy for you,” I say, “I won’t say a thing to anyone, I swear on my life, if it makes you feel better: I am in love with Marco.”
“Jean…you, I, we can explain, I-” Erwin blabbers. I don’t want to hear it.

“No need to explain! It’s not some sin that you two are doing this, just so you know. It’s okay; it’s fine with me. I’m just going to grab a pencil and some paper,” I grab the items as I planned and head back towards the door, “I won’t be back for a while, especially with what you two might get up to.” Levi laughs at this though Erwin looks nervous, “Just keep it down a bit as you’ll wake Mina up, I don’t think she’ll hate you for it but she’ll be rather…confused.” I chuckle, “Okay, I’m gone!” I say as I shut the office door behind me.

All I hear afterwards is distant shuffling. Ew. Nope, I’m not picturing that.

This house is a lot warmer than when I first arrived. With Thomas gone, it all feels like a home to me now. Like a settled stomach after it’s been aching, or the calm after a storm.

That’s the perfect word for this household as of now: calm.

There’s no fear, no arguing, no sadness…not anymore. It’s the very first time I’ve truly enjoyed the 1800s, and with that I know it will break my heart to loose this family I have made.

The room is empty when I get there. Assuming Marco is on the toilet, I just lie back onto the bed and face the wall. However, my nose touches something…paper.

It’s a little envelope, an off-white one, not sealed but tucked in. The writing on the outside reads those four letters that Marco writes best: J-E-A-N.
I open the envelope in a state of panic and confusion, all that crosses my mind is the worst possibility of why on earth Marco has left me a note. Honestly, my heart is beating so fast I feel like it’s about to tear through my chest.

I pull the sheet of paper out from within, my fingers fumbling until they get a good grip, and releasing it from it’s folded position until it’s in it’s original A4 size.

With a gulp, I read all 6 words written in Marco’s familiar scrawl with enough patience to believe them:

*I love you,*

*I am sorry.*

I’m running.

I have no idea where I’m running, but I’m running with one destination and that is right in front of Marco, close enough that I can hold him tight enough to tell him he doesn’t have to be sorry, and that I love him too. I must look insane as I run towards the stable, flailing my arms to see if Jinae is there or not. He isn’t, and that at least gives me a clue as to where Marco is.

I mount Titania rapidly, she huffs as I do, and then we canter out of the stables to find Marco.

The cryptic moon is vast and silver-white, making the field look like water. In this darkness, the presence of something would feel like a hallucination. It’s eerie, but spectacular. I think how fantastic my silhouette must look right now.
Then I spot Marco. He looks like a shadow. He’s not riding Jinae, but stood beside him and holding his reins, in the middle of this blue-glowing sea of grass. As I near closer to him, he lights up in the moon’s shine. He is beautiful.

However, at sudden sight of me, he mounts Jinae and pulls into gallop before I can even reach him. *So we’re playing a game now, are we?*

“Marco! Marco, *wait!*” I can’t help laugh at this feeling, it’s ecstatic, “Come on Marco! Let’s talk about this!”

I chase him around the field for nearly 3 minutes. Eventually he smiles, I can tell he is smiling from the back of his head. My laughter loosened him up enough to know that I’m not chasing him in anger, but acceptance. I always have chased him. I always have accepted him.

All of a sudden, a rabbit hops out of one of the bushes and Titania literally shits herself – see this is why I’ll never trust horses. I let out a loud ‘fuck!’ as she stands on her hind legs and shrieks, and the unlucky me finds myself sliding off her back and onto the ground. My arse hits the floor first, and I just feel glad it’s not my neck or something like that.

“Ow, fuck.” I groan as the pain of the impact kicks in. I don’t *think* anything is broken…

It’s not serious, I’m pretty much invisible – and my butt has plenty of cushioning…even if Marco’s is much softer and curvier and rounder in comparison (Jean, *stop*) but it must *look* serious considering Marco is running at me with a pace faster than his horse seems to have ever ran.
“Jean!” I hold in my laughter and flop back onto the grass with a big, exasperated breath. He runs until he can kneel by my side and his hands place at my shoulders as he shakes me gently.

I sit up so that our faces are near each other, a fraction of a millimeter apart. So close yet so far. He’s a world apart, but we’re on the same planet. Two sides of the same coin. It feels as if magic surrounds us in the pearly light.

“My story,” I whisper between breaths before he gets a chance to speak, “Will *never* be as amazing as that letter.”

He kisses me angrily. It’s not gentle like it usually is – its harsh and feisty and I’m pressed against the grass with strength I didn’t realize Marco had in him. He doesn’t wait on my lips for long at all, planting those hard kisses over my jaw on my neck, on my ear and on every piece of skin that isn’t covered by clothing. It’s like he is trying to punish me…though it doesn’t feel anything like torture.

His hands meet my hips, clutching them as if I’ll fall. His thumbs fit perfectly around the curves of my frame. His lips are the most wonderful fit against mine. Like God designed us with impeccable detail, from each particle that builds us to the way our fingers lock exactly. No, It’s like we were designed for each other, so that when together like this we have no imperfections. Together, faultless. To be the perfect match, a match made in heaven.

If only that were the case.

“You cannot-” He says between kisses, “-scare me like that and-” he returns to my lips, tugging my lower one gently between his teeth, “-then say something…so…so-”

“I never follow the rules,” I grin.
“You don’t say!” His eyes are wide and I know he wants to laugh with me, “Look at us, look at us right now! God must be choking on his wine, I’m a man, and I-”

I press my finger to his mouth, “You’re a human being, and you are in love with another human being…and that human being just happens to be me.” He relaxes and lies on me, his head just beside mine, a little lower in spite of his height, “God, you smell like vanilla.”

He gulps away his smile; “I thought you’d hate me forever.”

“No,” I hum against his mouth, savoring the delicious taste of his peach-flushed lips, “I’ll love you forever.”

He swats me, “Don’t be so romantic!”

After our eyes catch again, we find ourselves laughing. The laughter comes from the pit of our stomachs. It’s bittersweet and wonderful, and the tingle of Marco’s touch against my cheek tells me that he is in fact a hypocrite.

We kiss again, and cheesiness be damned, it’s so fucking romantic.
It’s May in the next year, a Sunday to be exact. I don’t quite know the exact date because I’m not fond of time right now. But it’s a Sunday, so we are all sat around the table about to have a Roast Dinner. English traditions considered and all.

Every 5 minutes I squeeze Marco’s hand under the table, he always blushes. It’s cute as fuck. Those pink, freckled cheeks of his lighting up like individual rose-tinted sunshines.

Samuel and Mina are sat together, and he looks a bit nervous, so does she.

(I can already predict why….)

(I mean, as Marco figured back in Kaffihús, I am pretty epic at predictions.)

Suddenly, he picks up his glass and politely taps the metal of his fork against it. It makes a sharp clanging noise (and Marco shivers – the sound of metal against glass gives him heebiejeebies. In my case its ice that goes through me).

We all turn to look at him.

“I apologize for interrupting this m-meal,” Samuel stutters, “I would just like to make an announcement. Forgive me as I am not so good at making speeches.”

Erwin nods him on. Erwin is a smart guy; he most likely knows what’s coming. Not that it takes a genius.
“Erwin Smith, I would like your blessings.” He pauses, “I want to take Mina as my wife. I have loved her for a long enough time to know that I will love her in even a thousand years from now.”

No body replies, in fact it's a very uncomfortable silence. Marco is shuffling in his seat and so I reach my hand under the table to grab his, but end up misjudging and squeezing his highly sensitive upper thighs. His eyes wince:

The noise he makes sounds like that of a dying cow.

Mina bursts into hysterics, and Erwin and I follow. Marco looks slathered in shame, like 80 tablespoons of full fat butter on a single piece of toast…actually that was a bad simile.

Levi breaks the silence, “Erwin is laughing, but what he means is – ‘My dearest daughter Mina, we all saw this coming, you’ve had blessings for this since the day I saw you and Samuel make friends’.” He pauses, “And Marco, don’t think you’re getting away without explaining what on earth that was.”

I snort and look at Marco again.

We’re both thinking the same thing.
The sound of church bells fills the air, mixing with the hum of the small group of people surrounding the small building and the buzz of the July summer.

The wedding was supposed to wait a year after it was decided, though Mina was never one to follow the morals that Victorian Women were supposed to follow. Instead it’s held now, mid-July, as the surprising heat makes sweat build up under the material of my suit.

The wedding ceremony goes so fast, Mina is desperate to get the hell out of the church she hates so damned much. She was never christened, and the priest still probably thinks of her as some immoral spawn of the devil. It’s quite a small ceremony, just Erwin and us, and then Samuel’s parents and his one sister Lucinda. No one else would come.

I have to admit that she looks stunning, even if all she is dressed in is a simple lightweight dress, maybe slightly off-white, but radiating anyhow. She decided to keep everything simple. From the lack of décor in the church, to the flowers intertwined in her loose dark hair.

I link arms with her the whole way home afterwards; after all, the after party is to be held in the fields behind our house. It’s so lovely and heartwarming, it really fits Mina as a person, and I’m glad that’s what we went for considering she smiles the entire time. She’s genuinely happy.

Levi cooks a buffet for our meal, extravagant and delicious.

Sometime in the evening, as the summer sun refuses to go down while it has its months to shine, I sit beside Mina and offer her some wine.

“I’d love a glass of champagne,” She speaks softly, “Is there any left?”
I shrug in confusion, I swear there had been some, “Perhaps not, I shall go and ask Erw-”

An arm stretches over Mina’s shoulder, in the small gap between us. I grin thinking its Erwin’s. The hand holds the missing glass of champagne. The clear and golden liquid falls gracefully into the glass - with a smile, Mina turns to thank Erwin.

I watch her eyes grow completely wide.

“Gee,” Thomas Wagner says with a smirk, “It would have been nice to receive an invite.”

The sky seems to have turned a darker colour now. There are grey clouds where blue gleamed radiantly just minutes ago. I hear silence around the table like someone has just died, and a familiar twinge in my stomach tells me that this is a situation that should not be happening.

“Tho-”

“Mina, my dear sister, I left a boy, I return a man.”

_Bullshit, I think, absolute utter bullshit._
His hair has grown a lot; long enough to be tied back in a ponytail, even if it wouldn’t be a very long one. I hate that his hair is almost Marco’s length as if he is copying it, or mocking it by wearing it so poorly. He seems to have inched taller in height, however he remains shorter than both Marco and I. He has tired eyes and the bags beneath them make me angry every second that I realize they aren’t bruises.

I want him to leave; I want him to never return. I want him to stay away from my sister’s happiness. I want him to get out of Marco’s life. I want him to suffer.

Instead of handing the glass of champagne to Mina, he holds it and takes a sip for himself and I beg it has been poisoned. Slowly, he walks to my left while he eyes me. To my left, where Marco sits.

“Brother,” Again, that patronizing voice…is he trying to say he ever thought of Marco of a brother? Yes, and what sweet affection he showed him, such brotherly love – he makes me sick, “I would like to earn your trust, I don’t expect forgiveness, but I do hope you can understand I no longer mean to hate or to hurt you.”

He holds out his spare hand so he can receive a shake. His skin is harsh and ungentle. Nothing unexpected.

Marco trembles where he is sat, shivers giving his body aftershocks from an earthquake. Yet still, the complete idiot, he holds up his sweet little hand to grab Thomas’.

“Don’t touch him.” I seethe towards Thomas, “Don’t you dare lay a hand on his skin.”

Wagner turns towards me in surprise, thick eyebrows shooting up towards his hairline. What an act, as if he is actually surprised that I fucking hate him.
“Jean, I merely came to receive the place I once had in this family, and to earn some trust back. I understand you and Marco are very close brothers, and I promise I’m not going to try and stop that—”

“You were never a part of the fami—”

“Jean.” It’s Erwin this time, “Let Thomas join us, I will keep close eyes on him. If he has really changed like he claims to have done, you must let him prove it.”

My eyes pierce Erwin’s. I hope the dreadful amber burns my feelings into him. His tone and face are unfathomable; all I know is that he seems to have lost his logic.

I exhale in disbelief, “Oh, so it seems no one cares anymore? It seems that we can all just forget that Thomas nearly killed my…b-brother…we can just forget that he is a murderer, because ‘people change’, so it’s okay? Is that right?” I’m shouting now, the volume drowning out the patronizing tone I’m forcing.

I don’t care that he never did murder Marco, because he would have killed him. He would have carried on beating Marco until—

“We are not that blind.” Erwin frowns, the lines of his face etched with disappointment, even though I don’t know if he’s speaking to me or Marco. But there’s a note of truth in his voice, a hint of something I can’t place. I shake my head, still disbelief on my face.

“Please, Jean. This is a time for happiness.” Erwin furrows his eyebrows so that he looks serious, that lack of so called happiness showing anywhere in his expression.
“Listen up everybody!” I laugh, standing up, “Here’s a toast, to Mina Carolina: my wonderful sister who, today, married the one and only Samuel Linke-Jackson. Cheers to her becoming a fine woman!” Then I can’t help but put on the most sarcastic voice I possibly can, I want to get the message out, “Oh, and while I’m up: cheers to my old friend and brother Thomas, but there’s no need to worry that he beat Marco to the point where one more punch meant one last breath. Even if every single area of skin on his poor body was bruised purple. No need to worry! It’s in the past! Let’s drink to that, I say!”

I sit back down with a final hiss. Thomas walks hesitantly to an empty space on the table, sitting down with an incomprehensible expression next to Levi – who looks up at him with the same face he pulls when he finds dirt on the living room floor.

“Jean, what should do.” Mina whispers to me, “I…”

I place my hand on her small shoulder and face the rest of the table once again.

“You might be able to forget, and you might be able to move on. But guess what, the past is a shadow, it’s always there. You can look away, or block it out, but it stays there and follows you wherever you go. Some of you might be able to forget what happened in this very household – but I simply cannot forget. Everytime I look at you I will remember what you did, Thomas Wagner. I want that to haunt you like it haunts me. Unless you feel regret, I won’t feel forgiveness.”

The table is silent.

“Do you regret what you did?”

Silence…
“I shall go to my room for the night, I must unpack. Enjoy the meal everybody.”

He stands up, ruffling his hair without emotion, and walks back to the house.

*How disgusting.*

“You know, I’m a little nervous about tonight…can I talk to you about it?”

Marco and I look at each other, then at Mina, with soft smiles on our faces. I imagine mine looks sharper than Marco’s though.

It’s honeymoon night, and that means partaking in the act of intercourse, for Victorian ladies. I’m making this sound so serious, sorry. Mina looks rather worried, and I know it’s partially about Thomas, but I’m sure she is still nervous about having sex for the first time. As if she has to *actually* do it…like Queen Victoria is going to show up on her doorstep just to check how it went.

“Samuel won’t push you to do anything if you don’t want to,” Marco says with a soft smile, “We have already established that no one raised in Erwin’s household is very…traditional.”
I grin at Marco and he grins at me back, all I can think of how these two would react if they knew Erwin was screwing Levi over his desk.

She purses her lips in habit, like when Marco bites his, “I want to…but I’m just scared of loosing that part of myself.”

“Loosing what exactly? Last time I heard, you don’t loose a thing, Mina. Don’t think you’ll loose your innocence or your ‘womanliness’…or anything people might say. You will be the same person as you are now.”

She smiles, wrapping her arms around the both of us, neither arm reaching very far with their short length, “I am going to miss you boys awfully. I will think about you everyday!”

I look into the corner where Mina’s few possessions are stacked all ready to be moved into Samuel’s household. It’s in Penzance, but the other side to where our Manor is. She’ll be so close it won’t really make a difference.

“Oh, enough of this, we’ll see you so often there’s no need to miss us.” Marco laughs.

I feel her little hands pat our backs like feathers, “I just don’t know what I’ll do without your wise words.”
The clip-clop noises of Titania’s hooves against the stony path come to an end when we reach the sand dunes. She’s a little fatter now that nearly 3 years have passed since buying her. To think that I’m 17 already, and Marco will be 18 next month. How long is this lifetime going on for?

Marco has started cantering already, Jinae huffing as he runs over the sand. The tide is far out, but the beautiful glare of the evening sun can be seen easily over the distant body of water.

I slide off Titania and walk to somewhere dead centre on the beach, lying down in the soft sand. Marco appears next to me not long after, lying down, neck resting over the arm I left lying 90 degrees from the side of my body.

I turn my head to the side so I can look at him deeper, and explore his face once again.

As the evening sun fades, and the glow of the angelic moon appears as if replicating the time we first kissed, the stars shine above us creating the most glorious painting I have ever witnessed. Marco stares in awe at each one, grinning more than ever.

We lay there for a long while in comfortable silence. Marco is the one to break it.

“Jean?”

“Hmm?”
“Do you think,” he breathes, “In the future, people like us will be allowed to love?”

I nod, “I do.”

“And kiss and hold hands?”

Again, I reply, “I do.”

“Do you think that…we will be able to Marry? Every single man that loves another man? In all countries, England…Canada…the whole of America?”

I smile at him, “I do.”

“And what would you say if I said, ‘Do you, Jean Kirschtein, take me, Marco Bodt, to have and to hold…from this day forward;’” He holds his hand way up high in the sky like he is reaching for the stars, a moon-coloured tear falling gently from his eye, “-for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health…to love and to cherish from this day forward…until death do us part?”

…

“I do.”
We return home later that night, with the feeling that the planets have once again aligned. Such a familiar and nostalgic feeling, always old and always new even when I feel it for the 248th time.

Without, the downstairs is completely quiet. In fact, our surroundings mean so little that we don’t even dare look at them.

Marco pulls me into the kitchen, his gentle hand reaching my cheek with such delicacy. Our lips press together once again…it’s like he is a rose petal and I am a thorn, but despite their strong difference, they make up something so beautiful.

I am pushed against the kitchen surfaces, and Marco places his hands under my thighs, lifting me up. I wrap my legs around his waist as he pulls me onto the side. We deepen the kiss, Marco’s tongue inching my lips apart and-

“Good lord, Levi would you just look at this!”

“Oh my good God, they’re going to dirty the surfaces! Pull them apart this instant!”

“No, let them have their moment. Isn’t it sweet?”
Marco freezes, eyes of panic on his face as if he is going to grab that big ass knife from the surface and plunge it into his shameful soul.

I burst out laughing, and Erwin does too. We have a habit of this. Isn’t it strange how habits can be mutual?

“Marco, love, it’s okay.” I assure him, “They don’t mind.”

Levi’s gasp can be heard, “Jean Kirschtein I bloody well do mind, I do, I take my hygiene seriously and I suggest you move this somewhere else or I will boil you in my soup.”

We snort together in unison.

Removing myself from the kitchen countertop, I walk over to Erwin and Levi, placing both of my hands on each of their shoulders, “You two are such good men, and for that I am thankful.”

Then I head up the stairs with a gob-smacked Marco behind me.

“My God!” I squeal, “Mina! It’s moving! It’s like someone is dancing in your stomach!”
Mina bursts into a fit of laughter, stroking her miniscule lump of a stomach and holding onto her Husband’s hand, “It’s not moving, you can’t feel it move until I’m about 20 weeks pregnant.”

Marco grins, “Pft, maybe Jean can feel the huge cake you just scoffed.”

Mina pouts, swatting him childishly. How she made it three months into pregnancy without telling us is incomprehensible. Well, there’s barely any difference at three months…anyone would assume she maybe put a little bit of weight on. Personally, I haven’t noticed at all.

She still looks the same as ever, other than the small eye bags from lacking slumber, but her youthful personality hasn’t altered in the slightest.

“The child is causing havoc in that womb,” Samuel chuckles, “Mina has been vomiting every morning, waking in the nights from discomfort, complaining about back aches and stomach aches…but what can I blame her for? There’s a bloody child growing inside of her, it just feels miraculous to me.”

“I’m not surprised, you’re going to be a Father.” I smile.

He licks his upper lip and exhales dramatically, cracking his knuckles, “You will be too…one day,”

Marco looks at me as if he’s choking, I elbow him in return. The entire room raises their eyebrows at us…other than Erwin and Levi. They just grin.
Mina wraps her arms around my waist in fear of falling.

Titania seems to walk calmly with Mina riding; maybe it’s some kind of weird horse sense. Despite the gentleness of Titania’s walk, Mina still looks frightened. The last time Mina rode Titania with me, she was 19 and didn’t have a child in her stomach. I can imagine she feels strongly about keeping her child safe.

She’s almost 5 months pregnant now, it’s much more obvious that she is with child, however she is surprisingly small after what feels like such a long time. The eye bags are a lot bigger now, purple against her pale skin. Marco is riding Jinae, and is practically a millimeter away as he rides, chatting idly to Mina until we reach the beach. She holds onto her bonnet in the wind, sliding down of the horse and onto the soft sands.

The three of us walk towards the sea together, Marco and I standing either side Mina like we are her bodyguards or something. We spend hours eating the small picnic she packed for us, and we chat about everything. She tells us how wonderful living with Samuel is, how she would love to have a son over a daughter because of how cruelly her daughter would be treated in this day and age. She tells us that Samuel makes delicious soup, unlike her own, and we beg to differ.

I miss seeing Mina before she matured like this. It feels…unnatural, like the baby inside her is forcing her to grow but when in reality she is still so young. She no longer looks very healthy, as if her immune system is being drastically weakened as the pregnancy progresses. All we can do is hope for the best, really.

“Obviously, I’m aware about the risks of pregnancy,” She smiles, “and by that I do mean…death,”
“But?” Marco asks her with furrowed eyebrows.

“But that’s not what matters. Can you make a promise to me?”

Marco torturously bites his lip, proceeding to be swatted by Mina for doing so. She said once that biting your lips makes them fall off.

“I won’t promise anything before knowing what I’m promising.”

“I have to deliver a healthy baby…that will live on into old age. I trust you two to look after my child.”

Marco whimpers, picking up shells between his fingers and crushing them to small pieces, “You say that as if you won’t be there to see them grow up yourself.”

“It’s…” She pauses, “…hypothetical.”

I sigh, “Mina, don’t say things like this when the baby can hear.”

She laughs, that youth radiating through the cage that imprisons her and stops her from shining to her full potential. Her laugh is a sad one.
“In all seriousness, however,” I mutter my words, forcing them out, “I promise I will treasure your baby as much as I have treasured you.”

A month later, Samuel and Mina decide to stay overnight for no reason whatsoever other than Mina missing the feel of this home for a long time. Thomas hides away like a hermit crab the whole while; he doesn’t even speak to Samuel, I don’t think he ever has spoken to him. He has given up abusing new members of the family, and resorted to acting as if they don’t exist. Well, it’s more like he doesn’t exist.

Well, yeah, anyway. Mina spends the night and chats happily to us in our bedroom. She reads a few of the chapters of my book with us, raising an eyebrow when Marco looks as if he is about to burst into tears.


We chuckle as she mumbles some more to herself. Marco goes back to reading a new book called Tess of the D’urbervilles, and I go back to finishing up on another chapter of my story for Marco.

Mina squeals when she finds A Christmas Carol. Neither of us notice the envelope that falls out when she opens it. Neither of us notice her read over and over again the words saying:

I love you,
“I…I…” We hear her whisper, “I…d-don’t understand.”

“What is it?” I smile, and look over to her. When I realize, I jump up at electric speed, snatching the envelope from her small fingers, “Mina, please forget you ever read that letter.”

“Love? Love…as in family love?” She asks with a frown, “No, why should you say sorry for such a thing?”

Marco buries his face in his hands, expecting the worst possible situations to occur.

“Marco, do you fall in love with men, and not women?” She asks.

“No Mina, it is not Marco, it is me. Don’t blame this on him.” I beg defensively.

“Do not tell such a blatantly obvious lie, Jean,” Mina says, “Do you two love each other in the way that you would want to marry each other?”

I shout, “No-”
“We do.” Marco interrupts.

Mina shudders, reading over the letter again and again with worried eyes. Her hair falls gracefully over her cheek, adding shadows to her intricately curved features that I have never noticed before.

Her breaths become steady once again. Marco and I look at each other as if it’s the goddamned last time we’ll be together.

“My dear brothers,” She sighs, “What should I do if you are exiled? What am I to do without you by my side?”

“No one is going to find out,” Marco says, “hopefully.”

“It’s not that hard to figure out!” She pushes, shaking the letter about in her hand, “You could be hanged! Like James Pratt and John Smith!”

I snort, “They stopped hanging homosexuals in 1861, Mina, hence why I was so happy to learn it was the 1880s.”

A long silence follows after this. A loud, ear-piercing silence. Slathered and dipped in discomfort.

“You know, I won’t think of you any differently to how I thought of you 10 minutes ago. I have never followed anything the Bible or society has told me anyway,” She explains with a sweet
smile, her hands placed on her stomach as if she is cradling the child within, “But it’s not like I hear about this situation on a daily basis…not that I am afraid of the idea…or that I’m unfamiliar with the situation, I just never suspected that you two would be lovers.”

“That’s understandable,” I tell her, “Thank you, for still loving us. Even after this.”

She giggles, “Of course I do. I still love Levi and Erwin.”

“Yeah, that’s tru-” I pause and process what she last said, “Wait, what?!”

Carefully, she pulls her hair back into a pin to stop it from falling on her face any longer, “Oh please, my bedroom is directly above their study.”

Marco has a huge coughing fit, “Dear God, I hope the baby hasn’t heard anything you have!”

Mina’s health really starts deteriorating within the final month of pregnancy. The once youthful, sparking, erratic sister of mine has aged what looked like years in these last 9 months.

Samuel, God bless Samuel, stays by her side every moment she remains breathing. We’ve prayed…we’ve woken up, eaten, gone about our day…but all the while we’ve prayed. The heartbreak it would bring us if she died. It’s all we’ve thought of these last months.
Thomas would say, "My dear family, but there is nothing unusual about a woman’s death as she gives birth, we have all heard this same story before."

I would scream at him, try to hurt him, and Marco would stop me every time.

What right did Thomas have to say she was just another loss out of billions? What right had Marco to stop me from killing him for that?

Mina was bringing out our sadness, our anger, our hope and our despair. In all truth, she made us stronger as she became weak. I hate that, it sounds as if we’ve just been using her.

Sometime in late May, a life is given, and a life is taken.

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“Come on, Mina, push! Push!” I shout, “You can do it, you’ve always been brave! Keep going!”

Mina screams with all the effort she beholds, it’s not much at all however. She can barely push at all, her body shuddering in agony when she tries.
She’s lost too much weight, her skin is a deathly grey and her eyes seem inattentive.

Mina perseveres, pushing little by little, gaining all the strength she can muster. The labour takes 4 and a half hours altogether.

“Holy…is that?” Marco pauses, “That’s the baby’s head! Good god, the…hmm eugh okay, it’s not that pleasing to look at.”

Mina even laughs a little at this.

Banging is heard against the door, and I run to open it quick. In run Erwin and Samuel after rushing home from a work trip. Their foreheads are sweaty and creased in worry, eyes skimming the room for Mina like she is that hard to spot, Jesus.

“You took your time!” Levi hisses, “Even the baby was getting impatient!”

I sigh, “Come on everyone, she needs our encouragement…this isn’t a joke.”

Marco’s hand finds the pool of my back, he whispers, “My love, we’re trying to keep it lighthearted.” I can’t help but sigh. Where is the light in this?

Samuel walks over to his wife, sitting beside her and kissing her red cheek in a space where her hair isn’t matted to her wet face. He squeezes her hand and whispers small praises to her about how well she is doing.
With another inhale, she yells out again.

“He’s almost there!” Marco shouts, “Your baby is almost out!”

The moment after feels hallucinogenic; we’re lulled by the buzz of silence and the beating of our hearts. The next sound to arrive, a most beautiful sound, is the crying of a baby.

I grab the towel beside me and wrap it around the small child with ease. It’s a bit big, but it will do. Marco uses a cloth to wipe away the mess on the baby’s skin.

I lift the little boy into my arms and before I know it there are tears streaming down my face. I have a nephew, I have a fucking nephew!

The baby is crying and I’m so damned thankful that he is healthy. There is not a single flaw I find on him, he’s the most beautiful creation I have ever seen. God isn’t involved, neither is magic, the only thing that created a child as wonderful as this is the unconditional love of Mina.

Marco walks up beside me and lets the baby boy squeeze his little finger. He is crying too.

“Mina is sleeping,” He whispers, “Let’s give him to Samuel and go get some food for his Mother.”

I nod, walking over to Samuel and handing him the little angel with a grin. Erwin and Levi soon crowd over to look.
I hold Marco’s hand as we leave, it’s been an emotional day and I feel like being sappy, okay?

“Just heat up some soup, my love,” Marco tells me, “She’ll want something easy to eat.”

I stir the leftover soup a bit before turning on the hob, allowing the flames to burn at the base of the pot.

Marco presses his body against my back and places both his hands on each of my shoulders; massaging the stiffness away. It’s as if he can sense when I’m stressed or tense, like we have some kind of ethereal connection. I relax and let him hold me gently.

“We’ve all been through a lot, haven’t we?” He mutters, kissing the crook of my neck. I feel lightening shoot through me in such a short amount of time. It’s surreal.

I sigh, “Yes, but I’m grateful for being able to spend all this time with you. I’m so happy…that we’ve made it this far.”

I turn around in his hold to face him, brushing my lips against his without making full contact.
“You sound like it is going to end.” Marco laughs, but a solemn feeling within him twinges and he realizes something he doesn’t quite understand.

“I love you.” I reassure him, and before I know it I am crying for the first time in a long time, though it’s all tears and no noise, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, deeply Jean,” We kiss again, “I am in love with you, and despite what this could risk, and despite how cruel the world is…there is nothing I regret about loving you.”

We stand beside each other in the kitchen, remembering every moment spent together since I arrived in this household. It’s a rollercoaster of events, but I can count more good ones than bad.

I kiss him until my lips feel sore, until the soup hits boiling point, until we have to turn off the hob and take it back upstairs to Mina.

Before we begin entering the living room, I kiss him once again, reassuring myself that he's really there.

Mina lies holding her baby with a smile on her face, a beautiful smile.

Erwin stands with Levi in the corner, Marco and I sit on the end of her bed, and Samuel has her small fingers intertwined with his. We feel strongly like a family as we circle the breaths of a newly born child. The bruised eye bags under her eyes tell us she is exhausted, but we are so proud she made it through the birth.
She was always strong, and was determined to live to see her baby.

Her skin is grey, perhaps blue or green....maybe even purple in certain areas. No one mentions it; we've accepted her fate. So has she.

The clueless and most innocent baby hums in her arms, healthy and young. He is unnamed, Mina explains she would like us to name him.

"He's awfully beautiful, isn't he?" She smiles weakly.

"Yes, of course he is," I whisper, "He has your smile."

Marco adds, "He'll grow up to be a loving man...like his father, and he'll warm the hearts of everyone around him."

"Like Mina does?" Erwin asks.

"She's got one of the warmest hearts I've ever seen, in all my life." I say, holding back the rivers in my eyes.

"I agree," Levi bites his lip, he always did have a strong connection to Mina, "What would I have done without her helping me all the time?"

"Everyone, look after my baby." She whimpered, "Look after each other, I won't be able to care for you any longer. P-Please don't grieve me...please don't mourn me...live, j-just remember me, and smile for me. I'll watch over you, but take care. I beg."

I place my hand on hers as Samuel takes the baby out of her arms, it's so tender, frail fingers and soft skin...it could fall apart at a touch.

"You will still be able to look after us."

"Jean, don't." She pushes, "Please understand, I'm going to di-"
"Your fire will never be put out, the warmth you give us will carry on warming us to the very end. Don't think any of us will forget you. You will live on, you will live on."

Mina is still under my touch now, she is still warm and still soft, but there is no movement.

Marco realizes, Levi too, Samuel...Erwin.

"T-That was beautiful, Jean," Erwin's voice is tremulous, "Don't you think so, Mina?"

He trembles even more when silence follows.

"Mina?" Its Marco this time, "C-come on now, your baby wants food, he's crying. Mina...M-Mina can you hear me? Can you hear your baby?"

They are both in a state of disbelief. The moment of utter denial when a loved one dies. I would know more than anyone else.

"Stop it." I tell them, "This isn't the way to go about death. You'll only regret it."

Marco cries, the only one brave enough to cry out loud and honest. Tears fall out of Erwin's eyes, even Levi is crying - but neither make any noise. Samuel doesn't want to believe any of it, I can see it in his eyes.

I don't cry.

I loved Mina. I treasured her. I prayed for her. I was there for her and she was there for me. I was her best friend, her brother, her family.

But I'm not crying. I'm filled with despair, but drained of tears. Maybe it's that wall I built for Marco, a wall that would take titanic force to destroy.

'Don't grieve me'

'Don't mourn me'
'Just remember me'

Mina wouldn’t want me to cry over her anyway.

I let the mist of the sea bite my skin as the wind slams it against me. The sky above rains feathers of lead, swaying with grace, though landing with force. It's strange; the bittersweet feeling of life after death isn't what I'm used to. I'm used to fresh starts, and I cure this longing by inhaling all the fresh sea air I can.

The baby is at home, in the bedroom - held tightly in Samuel’s arms as he stays with Mina for a while longer.

I left not long after her heart stopped, for space mostly. I have to keep her wishes.

I won't mourn or grieve her.

There is a smattering of stars in the sky, across the whole infinity of it. One particular larger star watches me closely, a warm glow about it. It’s the prettiest star, not one I've noticed before, however it feels as if I recognize it. It isn't too near the other stars, but I'm sure it will align with the others soon. It will watch over them, watch over the world, shine for the universe.

A familiar sound of footsteps against sand nears me. My body turns in an instant.

"H-how dare you not cry!" Marco snaps, tears strolling, "How dare you not feel!"

"Marco, don't you even think about saying such a thing. Don't you dare," My words sound harsher than expected, "Look up for a minute, at that star over there. Do you see it? Do you see how beautiful it is? Remember Mina, don't cry over her, smile when you think of her. She's up there with that star and she would not want to see you down here like…like this."

"How can I not cry? She shouldn't have died...that baby, he murde-"
"Shut up, shut up right now," I hiss, "That baby shouldn't have to grow up thinking he killed his mother. She is dead, gone, but she was not murdered. Learn the difference Marco. But don't cry out of sadness when you think of her once being alive, remember that life and smile because it was so...breathtaking. What will your grief do to resolve it? Moving on doesn’t mean forgetting her. If you don't move on, you'll become depressed, empty like a shell. Fuck, you won’t even be human anymore."

I move over to him where he stands alone, wrapping my arms around his stiff body.

"Jean, don't you understand? Death is such a horrid thing."

I slap my hands gently onto his cheeks, forcing my face into the most sincere expression possible, "If there is one person in this entire universe that understands death as if they are death itself, that person is me."

"You sound like Ellis," he whispers, "Ellis from your book, you two are alike. His life...must cause him such despair...and the way you talk about death, it's exactly how he does."

I regret shouting at him, but at the same time I know he will only understand me if I shout it out.

"If I was given a middle name to represent my life perfectly," I hug him close, "It would be despair."

Marco cries out into the hum of the waves. I hope the world can hear his cries, I hope they know what he has to go through, "Cry Marco, let it all out and I'll listen, but don't cry sad tears. Celebrate her life, don't mourn her death."

He chokes on the tears, muffling his cries into my shoulder. I press my lips against his head, kissing the soft locks of hair.

"I'm here, my love, I'm here."

"I'd like to have my sister buried," I tell the priest, "Erwin Smith's daughter."
The church bell glares at me from above with eyes of disapproval. Marco backs away a little like he is trying to prove ourselves innocent.

The priest doesn't like the name Erwin Smith, I 100% doubt he knows that Levi and Erwin are an item, though the fact that Erwin is a 39 year old bachelor is something in itself.

"I don't remember christening a single child of Erwin Smith’s, and I know as a fact the one daughter he has is un-christened."

I sigh, I know where this is going.

"Excuse me, sir, we're asking for a funeral, not a christening." Marco mutters cluelessly, twiddling his beaded necklace between his fingers

"And it is against the rules of this church to bury an un-christened person."

"Don't be so fucking ridiculous!" I spit, "Do you think she is some sort of sinner? Hasn’t had the devil cleansed out of her yet? It would put too much shame on your little church here, wouldn't it!?"

The priest gives a sympathetic look to us, "Look, son, I am deeply sorry for your sister's death so young, and I wish I could bury her but it is against the rules."

I bite my lip at him and get on my knees, "Please, I beg, let us bury our sister in a safe place, she was more innocent than anyone buried in this church yard. Please!"

His devout attitude pisses me off in ways it shouldn’t, it should be respectable, not so damn disgusting that I want to rip my hairs out.

The priest sighs, “I’m just following the rules. Your sister is still tainted."

"T-That's sick!" Marco replies to him a bit too loudly - a look of utter indignation sewn against his face, "Sick, do you here me? I hate your rules, I hate your religion and I hate you!"
I grab Marco’s wrist and drag him out of the church. I trip over the stones cemented in the path multiple times under the mocking glares of the graves around us.

I look up for that star, but it’s too cloudy to see it.

The grave is nothing special. It’s not even a grave, really. Its a deep grey, clean and roundish shaped rock Marco and I found by the river, reading:

*Mina Linke-Jackson,*
Beloved sister, daughter, mother and wife,
Died 1889, remembered eternally.

It was Marco who wrote the last part.

The grave lies on the land composed of a mixture of forest and sand dunes that link our fields to the beach of Penzance. Erwin says that is where he and Levi will be buried. Marco and I say we will be buried there too (how ironic), and even Samuel says he and his son will be buried there also.

Samuel has taken Mina's death the worst of us all. Sometimes he talks to himself thinking she is there, and will drink away his sadness when he remembers that she is not. He still hasn't picked a name for his own child. But, I can't blame him. He's acting the way I did when I first lost Marco.

It's a sad little funeral, so lonely and so small. Thomas unsurprisingly isn't there, just like he wasn't when she died. He keeps his distance.

*She deserved more than this.* Her possessions, her favourite necklaces and clothing, the few letters she and Marco once wrote to each other as practice, her shoes and hair accessories...everything she owned is placed in a box and floated out to sea.

Mina is in our hearts, in the land, in the ocean and in the sky. She is part of the world now.
"My daughter-" Erwin says as if he is making a speech, it probably is but he can’t help looking out into the distance as he speaks, "-was adored by all who knew her, even if she refused to acculturate with the traditions of this day and age. She was a perfect daughter nevertheless. I miss her, but don't we all? May your spirit guide us to the end of time."

Marco claps for him, biting back his sobs.

The white lily in my hand falls on to the sand above her coffin. The hunger of the ground will consume it eventually, it will become one with the soul of the earth we stand on. Mina will become the flowers that grow and die in a constant heartbeat of nature. And after the insects have made their claim, after the savage teeth of the forest have eaten, the lily will bloom again.

"How many chapters have you left to write?" Marco smiles against my lips, "I'm desperate to know why Ellis can't die, and why Ellis chases Angel through so many lifetimes, and why Angel keeps dying when he and Ellis fall in love again."

Even now, years into my 248th lifetime, I still have no idea why Marco keeps dying. And why I cannot die. I know why I chase him though.

I love Marco Bodt with incomprehensible power. I love him so much that it hurts, so much that it tastes bitter. So much that when I kiss him my skin raises temperature and my illnesses can be cured. My feelings are within the marrow of my bones, on the pale surface of my skin, on my lips where his fit best. I love him like a terminal disease, but it’s not something I want to get rid of. Loving Marco is the best thing in the universe.

I would never regret loving Marco. I just wish…I just wish he didn’t di-
After a few kisses in attempt at distraction, I tell Marco all I know:

"In the very first lifetime, in the late 1600s, ‘Ellis’ and ‘Angel’ were caught kissing, by the Princess, Historia, who was betrothed to Ellis. Historia…she was fine with it, and promised to keep it secret for him. After all, she loved women and not men."

I catch his mouth again with mine, feeling that fire. Every kiss is dangerous, and that's why it feels so electric. Being able to see him there, alive, after kissing him feels like the most heavenly of blessings.

“Well, that’s obviously nice of Historia, but none of that answers anything. I mean, did Historia actually keep it secret?”

I let out a little groan at the questions. It was so long ago that it gives me a headache. The lifetime is vivid, but equally blurry in my head. When I kiss him, it’s like I’m using him to help awaken my memories faster.

“Historia’s mother was Queen Alma; she despised Historia, and despised Ellis even more. She probably knew Historia liked women, which caused her hatred. Alma was said to be blessed by God with...supernatural abilities, people never thought of her as a witch, she was the Queen and so her magic supposedly wasn’t dark. Whether her magic was good magic or not is up to interpretation.”

Marco, who listens intently as he leaves small and almost invisible kisses at the base of my neck, pauses. He looks at me for a moment as if he’s realized something.

“Interpretation?” His voice is slightly high pitched, “What did she use it for?”

Ignoring the flashing images of fire, the almost picture-perfect memory of Marco within them, accepting his fate as he finally stops moving, I try my best to answer him some more.

“Historia and Ellis eventually became closer friends, and that angered Alma. She didn’t like seeing Ellis happy. After all, they were betrothed by Alma with the intention that they’d be unhappy together – you know, because Historia didn’t love men.”

Marco frowns solemnly, “Poor girl, her Mother sounds awful.” I draw a few circles on his thigh to
“Awful doesn’t cover it.” I tell him and beg myself not to cry, “She learned that Historia was hiding something, whether it was a special sense or she had overheard something… I’m unsure. She knew there was no way Historia would find romance with Ellis. One day, she forced the truth out of Historia. She had threatened to hang 6 innocent people a day until Historia told her. Ellis, willing to let himself be punished to save the lives of those people, allowed Historia to say everything.”

"Punished?” Marco shudders, “W-what did Alma do to Ellis?”

"The thing is, she didn’t punish E-Ellis,” I explain in a whimper, my shoulders becoming tense and my eyes becoming watery, everything hurts, “She told everyone that Angel was a woman - a covetous, sinful witch disguised in the body of a male, and Angel was able to seduce Ellis because of this disguise, and that it was all some evil plot.”

Marco eyes me patiently, and I carry on. Everything I'm saying...its true, and its the first time I've ever said it, it feels like I’m drowning, "Well, there were pitchforks and there were torches...the Kingdom voted that Angel be burned rather than hanged, so they tied him up and set him alight. Ellis was made to drink this purple vile, which he hoped was poison. Alma told him it was to remove his sin, but it seemingly did nothing at all to him. He loved Angel the same even after drinking it.

"He was forced to watch his lover burn to death...I wrote that part in chapter one. And that’s when the world shifted, and he was send to a place in the future and the ‘cycle’ began."

Marco nuzzles himself in the crook of my neck, sounding small whimpers, "Was Angel...actually a woman? A witch? A covetous sinner?"

"No!” I shout, "Angel and Ellis are men, every part of them is male. But they love each other; their souls are connected unlike anyone else’s. Their love could destroy the universe...it’s so powerful. Angel wasn't dealing with dark magic, Angel was a lover. But sodomy was a sin and therefore Angel was a sinner. He wasn't covetous either, you can't help who you fall for...there was no envy or bad intention. It was pure, harmless love."

We kiss again, the mattress on the bed itching where my gown has risen high and left some of my skin showing, "I don't want our love to make us sinners, Jean."

Marco knows. He knows that I am Ellis, and that he is Angel. Even if it hasn’t yet dawned on him, it’s there within him. In his soul, his memory, his love.
The mood, feeling darker and gloomier, has to be lightened as much as I can do so. I smile, sighing away my tears as I hug him tight.

"There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin," I sing jokingly in a whisper to his ear. It doesn’t appear much like a song, more like the lines of a poem.

"I-I feel like I've heard that before..." He furrows his brows and pouts like a child, "You...your story...the feeling of fire...those words you just said...they all give me an unsettling feeling of déjà vu."

With hidden sadness I tell him, "Maybe our souls are as connected as Ellis and Angel's."

"God," He sighs exasperatedly, "I would not say no to that!"

I can't help but laugh, kissing at the sweet taste of his lips once again before falling asleep under the eyes of the stars that glow through our frosted window.

"Marcoooo, help me! What do I do when it cries!?!"

"He is a 'he', not an 'it'," Marco says with a raised eyebrow and a stance alike Mina's.

"Samuel never named him so he can be an 'it' for now."

When the baby cries again, Marco replies, "See, he hates being called 'it'."

I hold Mina's baby in an awkward grasp and shake it lightly to see if it stops crying. Marco laughs at my failure of soothing a child. However, upon Marco's laughing, the baby stops crying. Then when I laugh in happiness, the baby giggles too. I shake it - him - more and his giggles turn into hysterics, his smile is identical to Mina's.

"Now that we're looking after him, and seeing as Samuel never named him before leaving, we can name him ourselves. Why...don't you do it?"
I think for a moment, looking at the 6-month-old child whose face consists of an overly large grin, chubby cheeks and unruly hair. He is a high-spirited baby. He often has melodramatic fits of laughter, or annoying moments of crying. He loves milk, drinks it by the gallon, and he has a tendency to throw things and intentionally break them. Overall, among many other reasons, he is a massive weirdo. Its just hidden behind an angelic smile, though occasionally this mad grin of his shows. His mannerisms remind me a lot of someone I knew in another lifetime.

"How about the name 'Hanji'?" I ask, "It's an unusual name, but I think it suits him."

Marco pouts and nods in approval, "I like it, I think I've heard it before...isn't it a girls name though?"

"Hanji will get offended if you say that to him, Marco! He is perfectly masculine!" I blow a huge raspberry on Hanji's little chipmunk cheek, earning a very attractive snort in return.

"Oh, ok," Marco smiles and walks closer to me, pressing his lips at mine and ruffling Hanji's growing locks of hair, "We'll raise him well, right?"

I kiss him back, "We will."

"We'll watch him grow big and strong?"

I nod and kiss him again, avoiding an overwhelming sadness in my heart. I go to kiss him a second time, but the loud snap of the door opening makes us jump from our skins.

"P-Put the damned baby down...now!" A shout from the doorway says, "Put the baby down and repent!"

"Thomas!" Marco screeches, Hanji begins to wail, I shake him again but he doesn’t stop.

Thomas is stood in the doorway, he is holding a basket of food, presumably from the markets, and his hair is down and matted wet against his face from the snow. He looks almost out of breath; weak even, though there is that familiar expression of utter hatred that I've only seen the day he tried to kill Marco.
"You're disgusting!" Thomas says sincerely, throwing the basket of food onto the floor, "Put the baby down now! You pigs!"

Neither of us talk for a minute, we just stare at each other in panic, having no idea what the hell we’re going to do.

Eventually, Thomas grows impatient and slams his fist sideways against the doorframe.

Marco jumps, and chokes out dumbfounded laughter, “Pigs? Tell that you yourself-”

Thomas grabs Marco and pulls him away from me in an instant, dragging him by the collar out of the living room, across the corridor and into the kitchen. Marco’s face is incomprehensible as he is dragged away from me, as if he has given up fighting back or frozen in fear knowing what Thomas could do.

I panic with Hanji in my grasp, I need to protect them both and I resolutely refuse to let Hanji see anything when he is so young and beautiful. One sight of Thomas in this state make Hanji become a beast. I won't allow it. Not under this roof.

"ERWIN!" I scream, a terrifying and ear piercing scream, "GET TO THE LIVING ROOM NOW!"

I sit Hanji on the floor; he proceeds to lie back with a hopefully gentle slam and cry where he lies. The poor thing.

I run to the kitchen faster than I've ever ran before.

It’s too late.
Thomas pulls the knife from the right side of Marco's stomach with a tearing sound, and winces as he does so. There is blood, crimson red and coating the knife like snow on the field outside.

"Repent MYSELF?!" I scream again, "You worthless bastard, scum of the fucking earth!" I kick him to the floor multiple times and stop myself from continuing, "Repent yourself." The final word comes out of my mouth as if I have no breath left, I give up speaking, he isn’t worth my time.

Somehow, his face still looks filled with regret. Empty and frozen, as if all of this was just magic controlling him. I find that idea hard to believe.

I turn to Marco. He lies half sat, half lying against the kitchen cupboards. There is blood, but a smile lies on his face, a sad smile.

I sit beside him and clean the knife with shaking fingers.

"I-I never got to find out how the story ended," He trembles, "But I t-think Ellis was cursed...b-by Alma."

The knife glints with a mocking grin, "How was Ellis cursed? Logically it would be Angel..."

Marco holds my hand, "No, not at all. Ellis is the one suffering the most."

I whimper, "How?! What about all the times Angel died?!?"

"But he is reborn, and he is clueless! Ellis has lived such a lonely life, chasing A-Angel all those lifetimes...he has to keep watching him die...he never finds a happy end."

"Angel never has a happy end," I cry, however when Marco shakes his head I ask him, "Marco, are you...happy?"

He grasps both my hands in his, they feel much smaller than his at this moment, "Of course I am happy, I have you don't I? You've been with me for so long."
"Very long," I agree, tearing my vision from his bleeding wound to his bloodshot eyes, "I'm going to follow you for even longer."

"I'm Angel," He bites his lip and smiles, "Aren't I."

It's rhetorical. It's wonderful. It's frightening.

I grab the knife that so recently stabbed him, and plunge it with great force into the exact place that my heart sits. I scream in the pain, and pull it out of my bruising chest, then plunge it back in two, three, four times. I try to relish the taste, I want it to be the last sensation I feel in this life, I want to empathize with Marco on another level. When the pain is overwhelming, I try to carry on, but Marco’s sweet hand on mine stops me. The knife is thrown somewhere else.

I glare at Marco "You are Angel! I am Ellis, see? I can't die!" I sob into his hands then press them at my magically beating heart as the wound heals almost instantly, "I've chased you for 247 lifetimes! How can I stop it Marco?"

"I'm dying," He smiles and licks his peachy upper lip, "Offer me that deathless death, let me give you my life."

"Marco, I-"

"That’s a song, from the future isn’t it? The one you sang earlier this year?"

I nod and stroke his cheek softly, “Yes. It’s a beautiful song. It fits us nicely, I think.”

I only manage to brush my lips against his, “Let’s dance to it sometime.”
"G-god," A thick film fills my lungs as if I’m drowning, “You’re beautiful, Marco.”

"Enough now, my love," he kisses my shaking knuckles, "The pain is numbing. Find me again, Jean, chase me some more and we'll figure it all out together, okay? Our souls are made for each other, they always were. I wish I could remember everything we've been through, I'm sorry I can't. But I know at least that I've loved you before."

"I will always love you. Always. I'm going to keep chasing you, forever!" I smile through tears.

"If there were a middle name that fit you perfectly, it would be despair, because you are the man who understands death more than anyone else who has lived and anyone who does and ever will live..."

"Yes!" I shout, "Yes, you will die, but you will live too. There is hope, isn't there?"

"P-People find hope in God, we find it in each other." He bleeds.

"I'll see you soon, yes?"

"I'll wait for you." He says with final breaths, "Kiss me."

I kiss him til his heart beats no more. I don't dare to look at Thomas, though my eyes skim to the door where Erwin grasps a crying Hanji, Levi stood beside him.

"Don't grieve me, remember me," I order them, "Remember my gratitude and let it burn until the very end."

With a touch of Marco's dead hand, the worlds begins to shift and I let the hazy light of this cold Victorian winter fade away into the last memory of my 248th lifetime.

This time, however, it’s not a sad ending. We’re making a start, at least.

Somehow, the obstacles ahead seem smaller and less haunting with Marco beside me.

Chapter End Notes
My tumblr

Also, here is the playlist for this fic, however it is entirely KPOP, but if you're open minded enough, I'm sure you'll still like it.

Next Chapter, we fly much further into the future.

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Leave a comment, I beg!

If you don't know what to write, here are things you could answer:

Did you like it? Did you hate it? How could it improve? Did you cry? Am I being too harsh? Has anyone read Fallen, the book series this is based on? Out of Jean and Marco, who do you think has it worse? What are your feelings on Thomas? Mina? Erwin?

Heck, feel free to just rant about your relationship dramas or tell me what you got for Christmas off that Uncle you never see. I just love comments...
Chapter Summary

'I don't understand,,'
'I don't remember,'
Words that will always just be words,
I don't expect them.

Chapter Notes

(I reposed this because I edited a few scenes heavily to fit in with the next chapter much better, sorry if you thought there was another update!)

I was on BTS feels while writing this. No apologies given.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unknown, 25/6/14.

The hazy purple light clears away easily, the same way that grey clouds part and open a window of blue sky as a gift to the observers below. It’s such a disgusting purple, I only now realize, as I am thankful that it cleared away. It’s the exact same shade of purple as the vile Queen Alma handed me to drink while I watched Marco become ashes. What was that drink?

“A curse.”

That was Marco’s guess. I mean, he did tend to be correct with his guesses but…isn’t that a bit overly supernatural?

(God, says the man whose lover is being reincarnated as of this current moment. Hypocrite.)
It’s insane…my life is insane. It’s not like I can just chat idly to someone about my story, or update my Tumblr bio to: ‘currently in my 249th lifetime on a search for my reincarnated boyfriend’.

There’s so much to process mentally, it’s as if an ocean sways around in my brain, gluing my eyelids together as I think about everything. It’s never been easy to tear them open. In all honesty, I just hate to face my reality.

"I'll wait for you."

They were some of his final words in lifetime 248. No! Not final, Marco isn’t final. That’s exactly what his words meant. He’s waiting unconsciously for me, and I have to find him. With this extra knowledge that he indeed can remember some minor details about our pasts and futures, I remind myself that I am in fact on a mission.

My eyes tear open a little easier this time.

There are peach clouds everywhere beneath me, forming an ocean. Some are more orange in colour, some pale vermillion, and all saccharine sweet as if mimicking candyfloss. It’s so beautiful that I find it hard to believe it exists. The sun glows powerfully over the sea of clouds, shining in my newly opened eyes but too delicate to even hurt them.

“Breathtaking.” I mutter mindlessly, I haven’t processed much yet. I will, in time.

“Isn’t it?” A voice from behind…no, beside me replies.
Now: Imagine the impact of a lightening-speed bullet train hitting the side of another going 90 degrees from the first train. That’s about as hard as my heart twists in its place.

I snap my neck towards the voice in utter shock and turn wide eyed as mine meet Marco’s. Those chocolate-gold galaxies, those universes, those freckles and those cloud tinted lips.

“Woah, careful there and don’t panic,” He chuckles, “You fell asleep the minute you sat down so take a second to adjust to your surroundings.”

I gulp. Seeing Marco three days after landing in the last lifetime was weird enough, but this…this is ridiculous. I’ve shaken away the thoughts on countless occasions, but I hereby state my suspicions loud and clear without regret: something is changing.

“Where are we?” I mutter.

“On the plane, silly,” He giggles and I bite my lip so that I don’t giggle with him – especially at the use of the word ‘silly’, “We took off from Trost a couple hours ago, so there is a fair way to go before arriving in Byeol-Nanseo.”

I nod slowly. Byeol-Nanseo is a fairly large sized island considering it’s not it’s own country; it’s almost the size of Taiwan. It’s below Okinawa, to the right of the said Taiwan, but it belongs to South Korea. That’s about as much information I can give you. Oh, and it’s super hot too.

“D-Do you mind telling me the date too? And the time?” I almost beg.
“Just turned noon.” He says, “25th.”

“25th of?”

“May, good god.”

“And the year?”

“Christ!” He laughs and startles a few people around us, “2014, duh. Come on, Marty McFly, at least get a monitor to tell you where the hell you’re travelling to.”

With a sigh, I inhale the scent of vanilla and stare back out at the sky and its overwhelming pink colour, identical to Marco’s lips.

I could spend hours philosophizing, but I’d rather try and push through the foundations of our relationship and bloom it into something more than friendship before it’s all over.

Live in the moment, I advise you, whether you’re hanging out at some Ancient Roman wine house with Hadrian and his boyfriend in 100 AD, or slap bang in the middle of World War Two – what does it matter? Time is a concept, not life. It doesn’t imprison me, it guides me.
I’d rather surrender myself to Marco than the laws of physics.

“So,” Marco mutters, “You look familiar, do I know you from somewhere?”

Marco seems to glare into my eyes like they’re worlds to discover. He doesn’t look anywhere else. He looks lost.

“Don’t you remember me?” I’m unsure of what I’m trying to accomplish, but if it’s digging up his memories then I want to speed up the process in every way I can. One step at a time.

“S-Should I remember you?”

The plane veers left a little, banking to the side and shaking. Turbulence doesn’t bother Marco, it’s pretty thrilling to him. I hate planes, being so far from the ground and glaring down at the world below. Where I came from, planes were far ahead in the future.

As the plane shakes I shudder and close my eyes. I grip the armrests of the seat. I notice I still have my belt on, despite most passengers on the plane having theirs undone – including Marco.

The turbulence lasts over a minute. Daringly, he grasps my shaking hand and gives it a familiar squeeze. My shoulders notably become less tense.

“Should you remember me? Well, n-not specifically. There isn’t a law stating you should.” He opens his eyes and flutters them down to look at our hands, “But can you remember me? I’m sure of it.”
“Well, are you going to tell me *where* we have met before?”

The turbulence ends and I sigh in relief, leaning back into his seat.

“No, I won’t tell you. Let’s make it a challenge…how long are you in Byeol-Nanseo for?”

“Until September 1st, I’m just there for Summer.” He explains.

A flight attendant strolls with her food trolley and stops beside us. Her dark hair is all neatly pulled into some kind of bun, and she wears a small cap with the Trost Continental Air symbol. It’s a shield-ish shape with a familiar design of two wings inside. It’s a symbol I’ve seen many times throughout history, though each time for something different. Maybe it has some significance…I’d rather not know.

The woman smiles and says, “Hello, would either of you gentlemen like anything?”

Marco shakes his head, “I left my wallet in my suitcase, it’s in the hold, sorry.”

She raises an eyebrow at him, perhaps because he apologized needlessly.

When she turns to me, I ask, “Please could I get a coffee, black is fine.”
“O-k. Anything else?”

“Um,” I pause, “A hot chocolate with vanilla syrup please. Oh, and a chocolate chip cookie. And… do you have any marshmallows?”

The flight attendant nods and begins making the drinks. Trost Continental is one of the best companies to fly with, I’m glad I landed on this plane after switching lifetimes. Hanji and I once flew to Iceland together with Trost Continental, however that lifetime was so long ago. Like, over 70 lifetimes.

My point is that not every plane sells Hot Chocolate with novelty Vanilla syrup…

After she finishes, she hands me the food and says, “That’ll be just £10, or ₩17,000.”

I feel around in my pockets and grin when I find that I do indeed have a wallet. I seem to have a large amount of notes in there; I decide to count them later. She leaves immediately after I hand her the money.

Taking a sip of my coffee, I begin to remove all the little pink marshmallows from the small snack-bag, eating them as I go. I tip all the white ones into the hot chocolate, close the lid, and hand it to Marco along with the cookie.

“What’s this for?” He asks, grasping the drink with strangely shaking hands, “And more importantly, how do you know the exact way I drink hot chocolate?”
I sip at my coffee a little more, letting the liquid burn my tongue with its dark bitter taste, “Maybe it’s not me who forgets everything, but you who forgets instead.”

Marco takes a long gulp at his drink and frowns, “Suddenly this tastes nostalgic.”

“You have until September 1st,” I say, “To remember who I am.”

“What happens if…when I remember you?” He asks.

Memories flutter through my brain of all the times we’ve kissed, touched, loved. They taste bittersweet. Like drinking his sugary hot chocolate after burning myself with the bitter flavour of coffee. It’s a combination of us: I am bitter and he is sweet. It’s always been that way. The word describes everything about who we are as a couple.

“Trust me, you’ll know what you want by then.” My words are supposed to be loud, though they come out solemn. I hope the confidence within them shows enough for him to see.

He’ll want me…if he remembers who I am. He wants me now. He always has and he always will. It’s just the path that gets laid out for us every lifetime, and it’s wonderful until we reach the end.

“And if I don’t remember you?”
“I’ll tell you.” I assure him, “I’ll tell you everything about me. About why I’m familiar to you. I’ll tell you every single detail about me whether we’ll regret it or not. I promise.”

“How can I start?” He widens his eyes in excitement, “Give me a place to begin digging.”

“Well, can you remember my name?” I hope the amber of my eyes, the sharpness of my features, and the snowy complexion of my skin give him something. I hope they are so familiar to him it’s as if I am something he has painted. A picture he is proud of.

“Sadly, no.” He frowns, “Sorry.”

I lift my hand and touch his cheek, brushing at his skin so gently. Wonderful sparks of electricity flow in a direct current through our bodies. Despite the urge, I refuse to kiss him this soon, I must seem like a huge creep as it is. He lifts his hand and places it on my cheek too, closing his eyes all the while. After his breathing slows, he opens his eyes again.

“Your name…” He whispers, “Is it Jean?”

Okay, so here is everything I currently know so far about Marco Bodt in this lifetime:

Marco is 20 years old, turning 21 next year. He has a bit of a limp and struggles to pick things up, which he says is just his lack of coordination. He studies British History and Philosophy in
University, and has always gotten straight A’s in every assignment he has ever done. He finds history fascinating and strangely familiar, as if he’s been there himself (Which he has, surprise surprise), and because of this he chose to do Philosophy to find some answers from a range of perspectives.

Marco has visited Byeol-Nanseo alone every single summer since he was 16, because he works part time in one of the European-and-Korean-mixed-style family hotel resorts by the beach, you know, performing and doing team activities with the kids. This is the last year he’ll be able too, presumably because he’ll be going over the age limit.

His eyesight is getting poor, so he wears glasses, mostly because of how much he hates the feeling of contacts. He says that having an eyelash in his eye is bad enough.

It’s not much, but as the plane lands I at least have a small idea of what he’s like in this lifetime. Though, he’s the same as he is in every lifetime minus a few details…maybe topped with a few extra. It’s refreshing really. You can never get bored – not that any sane human could get bored of Marco…whether he remained the exact same for eternity or not.

We make it easily to the luggage collection point; luckily my only bag was in the storage above our seats so I awkwardly end up lingering near Marco while he retrieves his own from the conveyer belt. There’s not really much I can do, I have no clue what I’m supposed to do here.

After picking up his big purple suitcase, he waddles over to me with a huge grin.

“It’s pretty hot here isn’t it.” He exhales, stretches, and somehow doesn’t have any visible sweat patches on his dumb green Byeol-Nanseo Beachside Hotel! T-shirt, “How the hell are you wearing a jacket?!” I shrug effortlessly, undoing my tight denim jacket afterwards, “Guess I didn’t think it’d be so hot.” I end up pulling my jacket entirely off. Admittedly, the heat seems to become a little less harsh and I sigh in relief. Marco’s never been one to get affected by hot weather. All he does is get a beautiful tan, not even sunburn.
“Jean.” Marco pouts, “Why didn’t you tell me you were working in the hotel resort too?”

In confusion and the hustling crowd of people around us, I stand and raise my eyebrow at him. It takes me a moment to figure it out. I glare down and find myself wearing an identical T-shirt to his. Well, it’s at least a starting place, right?

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” I mumble, “I guess I forgot to mention it. Just didn’t really have a moment where it felt right to say anything.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Marco replies, “All I did was talk to you about me. I didn’t even give you a chance to mention it. Apologies if I bored you.” The breathy laugh that follows is melancholy and unbearable for me to hear.

“No!” I interrupt, “You weren’t boring at all! Actually, I’m really glad we’ll be able to work together until September. I’d like to talk to you even more.”

He bites his lip and visibly grips the handle of his suitcase tighter with an emotion I don’t quite understand yet, “L-Lets sign up as partners…when we get there.” He says.

“I don’t understand what you mean?”

“I-If we sign up as partners, we’ll get to be room mates, and our timetables will be the same. So if you…if you want to talk to me, we’ll have more chances, and plus, I want to remember you, so-”
“That sounds great!” I exclaim with all the enthusiasm I, Jean Kirschtein, can physically muster, “Lets sign up…as partners, Marco.”

I earn a worthy grin as radiant as the scorching sun outside.

The Hotel is a horrifying 2 hour taxi drive from the airport. All the buses were filled to the brim with sweaty tourists, and neither Marco nor I can afford to hire out a car (not that the taxi was much cheaper, you know what they say about Asian taxi’s being high priced).

*Byeol-Nanseo Beachside Hotel* is probably the most uncreative name in the history of names, however the hotel itself is amazing. It’s not just a hotel, it’s an entire damned country. Well, maybe that's just me using a poor hyperbole, but it seriously is breathtaking. No exaggeration there.

The main hotel building is huge; surely over 300 rooms are built within. It’s literally on the beach, with a side main entrance attached to the non-beach area of land, and another entrance/exit that walks you *straight* onto the beach. Huge rocky hills and cliffs lie within a metres distance, with rock climbing activities I just know I’m signed up for instructing.

There is a gigantic pool, practically part of the sea other than the small wall that somehow segregates them. According to Marco, it’s a saltwater ‘pond’, and it’s where the kids’ raft-building competitions and wind sailing practices are held. As well as that, there is a water park on the other side of the hotel building, *and* a woodland adventure course.

Not far away, but still belonging to the hotel, is a caravan and tent site and a bunch of smaller buildings including a restaurant, bars, clubs, kids disco’s and a performance stage.
“Holy shit.” Is all I can say.

“Woah, Jean, you need to get used to holding back your swearing – we’re going to be surrounded by kids for the next two-ish months.”

“I hate kids!”

“Well why on earth did you sign up for this?!”

In all honesty, this is the very last thing on earth I’d ever choose to partake in. This is the kind of thing Hanji signs up for, not me; Hanji is enthusiastic, hyper, positive and fun.

Me? I’m about as exciting as a rock.

“I have no idea…”

A grouchy man and a highly attractive person with a gender I just can’t fathom stand by the entrance of the Hotel’s meeting room. The man looks miserable, but the other person’s smile
seems to soothe our fear as we near them.

“Good evening,” The person grins with a genderless voice too, “My name is Nanaba, I’m the current Chief instructor here – you two gentlemen must be Marco Bodt and Jean Kirschtein, right?”

We both nod in sync.

“As you’re the last two to arrive, you’ll have to share a room involuntarily I’m afraid.”

Marco shrugs, “That's cool, we were planning to share anyway.”

“Fine,” Nanaba writes our names down on her clipboard under ‘Room 18’, “As you’re late, shove your things in the room and head straight down to the canteen for dinner. Unpack later. Table 1 will always be reserved for staff. After eating, please head straight to your rooms, unpack and read the rules. Get an early night too, training starts tomorrow.”

We nod awkwardly and walk past Nanaba and grumps as fast as lightening.

The dorm isn't much of what I'd call a dorm. It's just a hotel room with two double bedrooms, not particularly spacious however not at all small. Considering neither of us had to pay to be here, it's amazing. Well, we do have to work to earn it...but it can't be that bad. Surely.
There is a television in the main room, and a small double sofa with not much room for two people; I guess Marco and I would be squashed up sat there (not that I mind...). There is a fridge with a few free drinks, and a pot of basic tea and coffee sachets with a little kettle sat beside. All our meals will apparently be in the hotel's canteen, paid for by the hotel.

I'm aware the canteen won't be as nice as the hotel's actual restaurant seeing as it's purely for staff and school trips, but the food is free. We can go to the restaurant too, we'd just have to pay for that food ourselves.

Marco picks the left room; I pick the right, placing my suitcase at the foot of my soft white double bed that I hope I won't have to sleep alone in for long. Afterwards, I meet him in the living room and throw him a grin.

"Well, let's fetch some grub I guess."

Marco shivers, "Ew, more like let's get earning already so I can take us to the nicer restaurant."

I laugh as I walk to the door, twisting the lock to open it, "You want to take me on a date?"

"...I never said it was a date," he bites his lip, this time because I know he is hiding a cheesy smile, "but if that's what you want, I'll take you on a date."

Out of a habit, though I've never seen him do it before, he intertwines his fingers and pushes them forward along with his arms as if they ache and he is stretching them.
"A date? You're not usually that forward, Marco."

As we near the end of the corridor, approaching a two-way-exit, his hand, which suddenly seems much bigger than mine, finds the small of my back. The touch is wonderful, like heaven. It feels as if the angels above are smiling for us rather than hoping we go to hell.

"You act as if you've known me for years," He sighs, "Can I not ask a cute guy on a date?"

“You can, but you have to find a cute guy first.”

He sighs, “Don’t you make me say it, Jean.”

His hand applies pressure to direct me left, but leaves almost instantly when we turn.

I always feel so lonely when he isn't touching me. I want to feel his hands on my waist, lifting me like I am a feather. In this lifetime, I'm so small and thin in comparison to him. He is broader, taller and stronger looking. I feel inferior to him; lesser, low quality.

I guess the truth is that I am, in all the 249 lifetimes, and I will stay worthless in all the lifetimes to come. He doesn't deserve me, he deserves more.
I used to avoid him because of this, hoping he'd find someone better. No matter what I do, where I go, he finds me. He seeks me out. It's inevitable, so I gave up trying to hide. I know he'll find me, and I know he'll die.

The thing is, every time he finds me, he falls so desperately in love with me that I can't run away as he'll only chase me more. Why does he? Why does he fall in love with someone like me? It's my fault, isn't it, all my fault that he dies.

You know, the way I discovered that I can't die was all because of that: guilt.

I felt utterly guilty, I had only watched him die 18 times, but it was too much. I was nothing, yet he loved me as if I was something. As if I deserved him. I knew what would happen, and I had seen it enough.

I drove to a cliff's edge, in Dover - beautiful white cliffs, and threw myself off. Marco jumped after me, and I was happy to die with him for a second, knowing he'd be reborn and fall in love with someone human.

We landed hard on the pebble beach; it was spine crushing, blood curling, the most delicious pain ever. It took me so long to realise that I was still alive. He wasn't, he was stone cold and breathless. I should have been too…I should have died in an instant…

In the end, he's the one suffering, not me. If I could trade places with him, I would die, and relish the pain. I would be reborn and never let him meet me so that he would just live a normal life.

If he wasn't damned, if he wasn't cursed, he would get the life he deserves. For that, I would burn in the pits of hell for eternity.
"Wow, this is huge," I can't help gasping at the size of the canteen.

"Isn't it?" Marco replies rhetorically, "Let's suffer one crappy meal, and I'll take you on a date."

"Oh, we've eaten worse that this I'm sure." I grimace at my memories of us in disgusting lifetimes, like when we were homeless on the streets of Edwardian Britain.

I guess there are some positives to our non-mutual memories.

"Yoo-hoo!" A blond man calls from a long table to the left of the room, "Join us."

The man is wearing a matching shirt to ours in an overwhelming shade of yellow, he has tight black jeans, almost too tight for his insanely muscular build. Eyeing his face, I laugh because of how incredibly German he looks. I don't even know if that's possible, but he screams German almost in the way Colin Firth or Michael Caine scream English.

The man beside him is colossal, the blond man is tall but this guy towers him. His dark skin is a worrying shade of crimson as he sweats in the heat, gross but understandable patches under his armpits.
As Marco and I near their table, a tall girl with freckles sits in the seat I had planned to occupy, "Sorry, mate, you walked like a snail and I'm knackered and hungry as fuck." She has a thick, smooth Kiwi accent; in fact she looks like she might be of Māori origin. Her skin glows, like she is some heavenly being, although it is so very hard to describe, everything about her gleams with inexplainable power. She looks manipulative, yet as if there is some slither of kindness to her. I feel weaker talking to her, like my own strength is being sucked away, or mocked. It makes her not only breathtaking, but terrifying to be beside.

I raise my hand and pretend I’m not scared of her, though my whole body feels cowardly, "Uh, no problem, there are plenty of seats..."

Suddenly, the freckled girl slams the seat beside her. I decide she looks a little like a Greek Goddess...well, if a Māori Goddess exists then that might fit her better. Either way, she sure does look like a Goddess of sorts, or some mythical warrior. "This one is for milady, there are heaps of other seats here." She points over too the free seats as if I can’t see them, “Bite your bum!”

With no idea what she means; whether it is her overpowering voice, omnipotent aura or just her weird Kiwi slang that confused me, I turn to Marco.

He sighs loudly at her which is oddly brave of him, "We're going to get food first anyway. Introduce yourself when we're both back."

I walk left assuming direction, but Marco's hand reaches again for my lower back and moves me the other way, "Serving is to the right," he explains.

This time, he doesn't remove his hand until we reach the food.
It's all self-serve, so I grab two bowls and fill them each with tomato soup before Marco even gets a chance to speak,

"Tomato soup is your favourite, save being mind-blown for another time," I grin and hand him the bowl, trying not to giggle as he blushes and nods 8 times.

Marco takes my bowl too, heading back to the table while I go and get some drinks. There isn't much choice, but lemonade will do. Marco prefers lemonade to coke. Always has.

As I turn back to where the table is, another person has sat beside the freckled Māori Goddess, her hair a golden and painfully familiar blonde. She looks like an angel, and it's not because she is beside a possible Goddess, but because she really is an angel, in my eyes at least.

All of a sudden, it feels as if I'm having a cardiac arrest.

There is no one else in the food hall than the people at that table, so my groan of pain echoes throughout the room much louder than intended. I clutch my chest as my heart hammers in shock, waiting for her to turn. She does.

After turning, that warm blue colour of tropical skies soaks into my skin, almost attacking my bones and sending harsh pulses to my brain. I feel as if I've taken a bullet to the head.

Marco runs toward me, limping as he does, and asks me frantically if I'm okay. I ignore him.

My legs walk over to her like lightening, and I reach out in a grasp, "Historia!" I hear myself yell.
Historia jumps in surprise. It feels as if it was only yesterday when we mocked our betrothal. Only yesterday when we grinned at each other over Queen Alma’s dinner table. Only yesterday when she hugged me as I sobbed in self-hatred for loving Marco when I was supposed to love her.

Freckled Goddess throws her big hand outward to block me away, "Didn’t I tell you to bugger off? Know your boundaries. Think twice before you take even a step towards my girl." The way the freckled Goddess looks at Historia amazes me, she looks so in love with her that she is heartbroken because of it, even if she has Historia. It distracts me from the moment for a minute.

"Ymir-" Historia mutters, her voice angelic and so different to Queen Alma's harsh and devilish croak.

"What's going on Historia? W-What the hell is going on?" My voice is dry and painful.

"M-My name is Christa...I wish I could say what's going on, I don't really know, but I think you're mistaking me for someone else."

I gulp, the heart pain fading a little. I'm out of breath, panting almost heavily. My body feels limp and I just slide into the seat beside Histo- no, Christa.

It is her, I know it's her, but I don't know how, why, or what in heaven, earth or hell is happening.

"Crazy," the big blond man booms, "Intriguing, frantic, and perhaps psychotic. I like it, you've made a good entrance. Now, tell us your name."
I cough, "Jean."

"Ooh, nice. Unusual. Cryptic, right?"

"Unusual? Cryptic?" I find myself grinning, "No, it's just French."

"Well, they say the French are pretty obscure," His German accent is deep, but somewhat nice to listen to.

Still, I feel a little awkward in my seat. The German guy is scary enough, but that topped with the constant glowing glare from the possible Goddess beside me is spine-chilling. How can no one else feel her other-worldly aura? How can no one else see she is literally glowing? How can no one else feel so weak and small when she is on the table?

Marco's hand touches my thigh, he draws a circle soothingly and looks me in the eye, "Don't be nervous about Reiner and Ymir, their bark is worse than their bite."

"You know them?"

He nods, "I've worked here with them before, remember. If they make you unhappy they'll have to answer to the shame they'll feel when I share all their embarrassing stories."
"We're right here!" 'Ymir' raises her eyebrow, but soon sighs and reaches out her hand for me, though I dare take it, I feel like I'm about to fly up to heaven, "Kia ora, name's Ymir. Kiwi, *not* Aussie. You know, *Aotearoa* et cetera. I’m not from Auckland despite popular belief, and don’t look at my feet because *not everyone* wears jandals. I won't say 'nice' to meet you because the outcome of whether it's nice or not is currently unknown," We shake hands, my mouth gaping at her nonsensical however unfathomably beautiful speech, "Hey, I don't bite. Though I am willing to kill you if you touch my girl."

Christa sighs, "I'm not your treasure, Ymir."

"No," Ymir grins, "But I treasure you."

She earns a swat. I don't know whether to describe this as a possible apocalypse or so absolutely beautiful it can be up in the top list of unexplained religious miracles.

Marco grins at me and leans to mutter something, purposely within earshot to Ymir, “She’s pretending to be a smart talker and look cool by using weird uncommon Kiwi slang.”

Ymir flinches and glares, but remains quiet.

Across the table, the big blond pushes his hand out, "I don't know why you felt threatened by me, so just know that I'm a pile of mush. Hallo, I'm Reiner. I'm basically here as Marco's walking-talking gay matchmaking site--"

"Hey!" Marco pouts and would have elbowed him if he wasn't on the opposite side of the table.
The tall man beside Reiner coughs quietly and says, "Um, Hi, I'm Bertholdt Van Kilian Fubar...but just call me Bertl. And if it makes you feel better, I'm more nervous than you are...despite knowing all these people already."

I nod with a softer smile. I wish my features weren't so sharp, and my eyes weren't so burning...I seem so angry. Even with my whole body more relaxed and comfortable, I probably still look displeased or scowling.

I'm not exciting like Hanji, or pleasant like Erwin, or sweet like Marco. I'm like a blade, even after becoming blunt all I can do is cut. Cut, slice, chop, harm, kill...Marco.

The table lulls into a comfortable silence, and somehow, without anyone noticing, Christa leans towards me as if by magic, her thin lips at my ear. And in that gorgeous and tranquillising voice she whispers:

"Meet me on the beach at 10."

Unpacking is a strangely exciting task, despite being a man who hates housework I enjoy it. Especially with Marco as we set to unloading luggage as if we've moved in together.

He hums along to *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* as he puts some books in the living room shelves, although I know he hates Green Day. He's only playing it to look cool in front of me. God, and it's practically the softest Green Day song there is.
I don't mention anything; I just swerve in and switch it to a local radio station playing K-Pop, which I know he'll prefer. He says nothing, just smiles a little and hopes I don't see.

At 8.15, we sigh and flop down onto the small sofa together.

I reach for the remote, but his hand on mine stops me, "Uh-uh. Rules must be learnt."

I glare at the rule-book, suspiciously placed right beside the remote.

"No alcohol, no drugs, et cetera. Blah, blah, blah."

"Jean," he rolls his eyes, "We are allowed to drink, you know. And that's precisely my point. Read over the rules properly and I'll go make us some drinks."

He stands up and hands me the book in the process. It's small, I can handle it. I watch him struggle to move from where he's stood, but he limps away not long after. I decide not to question it yet.

There are only 12 rules:

1) Smoking is banned anywhere on site. You must set an example.
I shrug, I don't smoke anyway.

2) *Crude language is not allowed around the children.*

3) *You must complete all training before doing any tasks with the kids.*

4) *Put the Children's health and safety before yours.*

Well, that one is kind of rude. I am not dying for the sake of some random kid.

5) *Alcohol is permitted after 6:30pm.*

Oh, well I guess that's okay.

6) *Don't split up with your partner as your group of children need two adults at one time due to safety precautions.*

7) *No house parties in your dorms.*

8) *No arguing in front of children.*

9) *Say something if you are confused/do not know what to do in a situation involving the children, even if it's minor.*

10) *If you are upset or having a hard day, talk to one of the heads and you may be granted a day off.*

11) *Try and stay enthusiastic and excited. Engage the children.*

Oh, such fun. (Please say you read that sarcastically).
12) We do not care about your relationships, however we do care if you bring any relationship drama to the workplace as it is not allowed. There will be consequences. Consider this before you make any decisions.

"Ooh that last one is stingy," I joke, somehow knowing Marco is approaching me, "You might need to reconsider taking me on that date."

"Har-har," He replies sarcastically, handing me a can of beer, "Anyway, we're the only set of partners who aren't in a relationship."

I choke, "Really? Reiner and Bertl?"

He nods, "Mike and Nanaba too. Though no one knows how Nanaba likes such a stingy, hard, unfeeling man as Mike."

"Did you just quote A Christmas Carol?" It’s rhetorical, I know he has, I’m just in disbelief.

Our eyes meet, and his look sad, they seem darker than before, and he is tired. He never answers my question. I wish I could awaken the memory of us sat on his bed in that cold Victorian room as I watched him read that book aloud.

Only then does Marco sit down, cross-legged on the sofa and facing me. His body seems to shudder and grow weaker as if I'm a disease in his bloodstream.
"Can I touch you?" He whispers with words I can't really hear. I just absorb them. They aren't English, they might not be a language at all, but I know he is asking them. It's screamed out from every single particle that builds him into what he is.

Every morsel of his being, every scar, every freckle, every curve. No, he's not just that. He is my time, he is my reason and he is my world. I am just a rock in his orbit, and he is everything I spend eternity circling for.

It's moments like this that I feel it's worth chasing him.

We don't really kiss, we just pull into a grasp and his lips brush my neck, so gentle but so impacting. It feels like he has wings, like he is a fallen angel flying me over the oceans and mountains and candyfloss clouds. He's beautiful.

His wings would be silver-white, the most heavenly of angel's wings, and even though he would have fallen for days from heaven and landed on earth with force, his wings would still shine brighter than heaven itself.

My wings would be nothing, a figment of imagination in hope that I could be as wondrous and beauteous as he. All I would be is Mortal.

His fingers brush my skin so lightly; I am left wondering why this lifetime feels unsettling. The calm before a storm. The counts before thunder booms in the clouds.

The mere step from the lobby of the hotel and onto the beach where I will find ‘Christa’ waiting for me.
Marco went to bed at 9:45, and I promised him I'd go to bed too. It’s not really a lie. I never specified *when* I’d go to bed...it could be in a year for all he knows. Whatever, words are just words.

I slip out of the door at 9:55, walking soundlessly down the corridors to the beach exit. Most people are asleep, though some men remain at the bar chatting idly.

Christa's silhouette in the moonlight makes me feel safe. I walk towards her; even her scent is the same as when I knew her.

"Jean." She says when I am about 5 metres away.

"Historia." I reply,

She stands, nodding almost imperceptibly, "249. I can't believe it."

"I can." I laugh, sadly, "I'd like an explanation...you know, tell me why the woman whose mother killed Marco for the first time is stood before me 248 lifetimes later."

Her white sundress sways even though it's not windy. It's as if she's not there, or just an apparition.
Maybe she is part of the past, present and future, experiencing the winds that aren't here now, but were once, or will be.

She looks peaceful as she sits quietly in the sand.

"I'm here because despite suffering for 248 lifetimes, you still don't understand why."

I spit, "I'm not the one suffering, just so you know, it's Marco that has had to die all these times. And fuck, if there is an explanation I'd like to hear it right now, Historia, because I'm sick and tired of seeing him like he's been...cursed!"

"I'm so sorry, my Mother is sick, her magic is...disgusting, I..." Historia pauses to think about how she will phrase her words, "Alma set a curse for a reason, Jean, although it is not a justifiable reason in any way, shape or form...but I cannot tell you anything. You have to figure it out yourself. She's growing impatient...I don't know what she will do."

The sand seems to have reached my throat, drying it like a desert. It's warm outside, but I feel cold. I drop down beside her helplessly.

"Did she send you here to tell me that?"

"Listen," she sobs, "I don't want this, no one sane would. I can't stop my mother, Jean, I can't do a thing. I'm here to push your discovery. Things are changing, last lifetime was the first time Marco learned anything about himself all on his own."
"You need to keep trying. Keep pushing him. Don't release everything on him at once, it could kill him, just like it has done in the past. I will explain it all when it's over."

I lie back into the sand and look up at the stars. For Mina, for all the Marco’s I have lost for loving.

"If you told me, would I die?"

"Yes," she replies, "And if you died under Alma's magic, the entire universe would be put at risk. You can’t die until you understand Alma’s intentions. I’m sorry."

"I don't...I don't understand this at all!"

I feel tears well up in my eye, but I force them to stay. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't fucking cry. Don't be weak, stay strong, for him.* I've made it this far without crying, I can make it longer.

"Of course you don't, you poor thing," Historia has small incandescent tears of her own welling up at her tear ducts, "You don't deserve this."

"No, Marco doesn't dese-"

"You. *You* don't deserve this. It's all a cycle Jean. A curse made with magic in the word of God is almost criminal unless it has an outcome on the person cursed. Considering neither you nor Marco understand Alma's reason for the curse, it will end. At a certain point. I think that may be what you're nearing."
"T-two hundred and fifty?" I offer.

Whether or not she nods is left to interpretation.

“God knows what happens at that point, Jean. I think you might get a choice of what happens next, however the choices won’t be easy. If not, there will be destruction.”

“Tell me then!” I shout at her, “Tell me what I need to understand and I’ll try and figure it out!”

"There is one key thing you are supposed to realise, no, to feel. That thing ends this all. It won’t be hard Jean, it really is obvious, you just love Marco too much to see it," She leans forward and wraps her small arms around me, and I wrap mine around her, "I have to go now. I can't stay in this lifetime any longer. I have to go back."

I gulp and look at her again, her watery eyes and her silky hair. Her skin seems to fade, and I notice that she is becoming transparent.

"W-what about everyone? What about the job? Ymir?"

"Christa is just a vision Alma created to send me here. I have erased her from the memory of anyone that met her. As for Ymir…she was just a mortal…she’ll probably be erased too. Don't be surprised if another pair has replaced them."
"Poor girl..."

"I know," she whimpers, "Alma is sick. Christa and Ymir loved each other but now that's gone."

The gentle lapping of waves fills the silence. Historia is almost invisible.

"Goodbye Jean." She breathes.

"I love you," I tell her; she knows I love her, just not in the way I love Marco. She is my dearest friend, my first friend, ever. She is Mina, Hanji, Erwin, and every friend I have made added up to one. I love her so much, "I'll see you again."

"I love you also, I will always be here," she presses her small hand at my chest, so invisible it confuses my perception, "Good luck, Jean, I am here for you, eternally."

A shadow arises from the depths of the dark-shaded sand, reaching high like a wave from the ocean, engulfing Historia fully. She disappears in an instant. But I swear that, right before the shadow engulfed her, a pair of pearl-white wings burst out from her shoulder blades, and I like to imagine that she is some sort of guardian angel.
Training is hard. It's not as if the tasks are hard, I just have better things to think about. No one seems to notice but Marco. I shake off his worries and tell him everything is fine.

Ymir and Christa have been replaced as if by magic by a tiresome pair named Sasha and Connie. They aren't bad, they're actually great people. I wish I could make friends with them. I wish.

After Historia disappeared I’ve devoted 95% of my time to Marco and figuring the two of us out. I’ve learned that time should be handled with care; like a baby. It’s only in recent lives that I’ve even kept a track on dates or years or useless minutes – perhaps it’s a sixth sense, something Alma spurred out of her wicked fingers like a warning. Some beacon to warn me that the 250th lifetime is approaching.

It’s due to time that I’m not going to be able to talk much of friendships or work or the wonderful experiences in Byeol-Nanseo. For now it’s me, Marco and the curse. That’s all my life has come to.

I spend all seconds of my life with Marco until it's as if I inhale the sky and he exhales the stars. I listen to him. I talk to him about subtle things like the café named Kaffihús back in Trost, and whether or not he's been there. He always says that it gives him déja vu, and he hates the busy traffic outside. I even watch A Christmas Carol with him, and he complains that the book is better, and it was written in a time without television and should be respected as a book and nothing else because of that.

None of that is discovery though, none of that is new. He’s always felt close to past experiences - but what I need are questions.

All I get is nostalgia, sentimental memories wrapped in the curse, trapped from him. There has to be a way, a key, something. Maybe he just needs time.
“Here, Jean,” Marco laughs quietly so I don’t hear him, though I do, and holds his hand out to me, “Will it make you feel better if we go together?”

I exhale shakily, staring first at my harness, then the 40ft drop below, and the thin rope above and a duplicate below me, “I don’t think I’ll feel any safer, just flustered.”

Stood directly below us those 40 deathly feet down, Reiner whistles, “Quite a charmer, Jean, you’re supposed to keep being flustered a low-key element when flirting!”

I flip him off and push one foot onto the rope below me while averting me eyes to anywhere but the ground, and swing my hand forward to grasp Marco’s. It’s warm and soft but I don’t feel safer. Is there much safety to my life?

“See this, Reiner! If I fall I hope I land on you!” I wince my eyes.

Sasha bursts into distant giggles from beside him, “It’s Marco’s job to catch you, Jean!”

Connie then adds, “No, to jump with you!”

“You jump, I ju-”
“Would you all just shut the fuck up?!” I yell with my eyes tightly closed.

Exhaling loudly, and calming my beating heart, I open my eyes knowing Marco will be there when I do. He grins at me, eyes ushering me to put my other foot on the rope too. It’s the very last training activity, I have to do it. I can do it.

I step slowly but surely, putting my trust into it. It’s strange of me considering how I hate trust. It’s a careless pursuit at best. At worst, it’s a good way to get yourself killed.

Even still, the harness feels strong and expensive, bracing my hips in a tight hold. I imagine it’s Marco’s hands, and it becomes a little easier.

“Jean!” He whispers loudly, “You did it! You’re on the rope! I’m so proud of you-”

“Oh come on,” I sigh, “I’m a coward.”

“Yeah, right, I knew from the minute I met you that you were strong. You never showed it, but I could tell. Like...like I knew you already...almost. Like we’ve been on death-defying journeys together.”

A light wind brushes through the air, ruffling his hair looser, warm still but nothing compared to him. The salty scent of the lapping waves not so far away can be smelled up hear, it’s nice. It’s a smell that clears your airways, makes you feel clean and fresh, even after a long day of training.
The trees look braver standing so high and swaying, as if they aren’t at all scared of falling. They look big and mighty as I stand amongst them, no, they just make me feel small. Everything is starting to feel big to me. New things, new words, new concerns.

I look back at Marco who, despite the wonderful surroundings, seems content in only looking at me.

“We’ve been on journeys, Marco, but not death-defying ones.”

He grips my hand tighter and pulls me towards him, the disgusting sound of metal against the cable whining in my ears. When I get to him it’s like my senses were halted, and it takes me a second too long to notice he is holding me. One hand at the minuscule curve of my hip, and the other at my cheek.

“Look, right now, at everything,” He smiles, “Look around us and tell me this isn’t death-defying enough.”

I shrug, bored of the surroundings when he is so close, “Humans just have an indistinct need to defy gravity.”

Our noses brush so slightly, such a feather-like touch that may as well not have been classed as a touch. But that one sense of feel, even if it was utterly imperceptible, triggers everything within us to set fire.

One taste is too much and leaves you begging for more. It’s so good, so addictive, so intoxicating that you would give up everything for just one more taste. One more bite.
I feel his breath against my lips and I honestly feel like I’ve never kissed him before, this feels different, everything about me is desperate. I let him kiss me, maybe to remove at least a portion of the blame off of myself. But equally I push into it once he turns on the ignition.

His fingers dig into my hip hard, gripping at my cheek with a sharp contrast of gentleness. He makes me feel drunk when I’m dreadfully sober. He makes me feel high when I’m grounded. It’s impossible, but fuck, so are many things.

That’s what I love about it. Every dangerous kiss is electrifying to the marrow of our bones. I would give up so much for more. I would never lie or joke about that.

When we break apart he gasps for air after years without any, looking into my eyes for something, anything.

“Marco,” I say, “That was death-defying.”

There are two ways a kiss can end between us, and it’s always the best way when we part and I see his every pulse still beating, soul still blaring, blood still circulating.

Still holding his hand, I stand straight on the rope and feel braver than I think I ever have. We look down at the ground like it’s all a dream.

It becomes so suddenly easy as I grab the rope above and follow Marco to the other end.
Around halfway across the wire, he pauses as if out of breath and smiles back to me, “Just g-give me a second to pause, okay?”

I look at him, his hands tremble slightly, but his body looks fine. Though, my eyes skim down and notice his legs look limp like they have just shut off, like they won’t move when he needs them too.

He’s had obvious issues with his legs, and sometimes with holding things, for the last few days. It’s not hard to tell…but every time I have asked him he has covered it up with an excuse to change topics.

And it’s hard to push Marco to speak; he makes you feel guiltier the more you ask. Heck, it’s hard to ask. If it weren’t, I’d have known about Thomas much faster. He puts up this barrier that I can never break.

“H-Hey,” I stutter, “Let me…push you the rest of the way.”

“Jean, I-”

“No,” I tell him, “Firstly, I’ve made it this far without questioning, and I’ll wait longer until you’re ready. Just let me push you and think of it as a favour or something instead of my stupid habit of worrying about you.”

With a sigh, his lips move into a grateful smile. There isn’t need to apologize, certain things are easy to read about Marco. Mostly when he is happy, but also thankful.
“I still have to talk to you Jean,” He explains as I put my hands to his waist to move him along the zip wire, “Not about me, mostly about us.”

Subconsciously, my lips press at his neck like air, and I smile, “Have you figured something out?”

“Well, it’s something I already knew,” He answers, frowning, “But it clicked and despite how bizarre the idea is, it was strangely familiar to me. No, it seemed acceptable…real. I have to talk to you about that.”

“Okay, okay,” I tell him, “But lets get off this rusty wire in the 40 foot treetops of some South Korean Island first.”

He doesn’t reply, he just tuts, and I can hear the grin in it.

Upon returning to the apartment, Marco’s legs seem perfectly good and there’s not even a limp in them. Of course this confuses me, but I’ll find out eventually. We take a turn in the shower each, and dress in shirts and tight black jeans. He wears a simple thin black tie, un-tucking the shirt to seem more casual.

We head to the restaurant after a small argument in the corridor that went something like, “Hey Marco, we haven’t earned anything yet, so why are you taking me on a date?” And then, after sighing, he replied, “I thought you’d realize by now how much I just want to take you out, and that you’re worth cracking my piggy bank open for.” The wink after he said it was the best part.
The restaurant is fancy, seriously fancy, and looks straight out onto the beach. Not only that, the roof is glass and billions of stars scatter the sky like our own personal painting. Not many people are in the restaurant at 9pm, after all, it’s rather late to eat out. We sit in a much more vacant area beside a quirky rock and water feature and against the glass wall looking out to the sea.

The waitress that arrives is Sasha, causing both Marco and I to jump in confusion. She explains, “Kids activities from 7am to 5.30pm, restaurant from 7pm to 10pm. I need money, alright?”

We nod in sync.

“Ohay then, so what’ll you boys be having tonight?”

I shrug and look at Marco with a smirk, “Marco will know what I want.”

He blushes a little, shuffling his fingers to find the menu. He skims it for a while, carefully choosing what to order, somewhat knowing deep down what I will and won’t like. After a minute, he nods to himself.

“We’ll both just have water, and I’ll have the Jeonju Bibimbap, and Jean will have the Dolsot Bibimbap. Please.”

Sasha slides her pen from her upper ear, jotting down notes against her pad, “Hmm, nice, going for the Korean selection. Most people order the European stuff like pizza or pasta et cetera.”
“Yeah, nice!” I hiss, “So don’t you dare eat it.”

She sticks up two fingers making a ‘V’ subtly so the manager won’t catch her and walks away with a grin.

When she is completely gone, Marco eyes the room carefully, making sure not many people are looking, and slides a book onto the table from his backpack. It’s thick and non-fiction, a textbook. It looks boring.

“This is one of the books I had in my suitcase, I’ve been doing some reading over summer for next term in Uni.”

I nod slowly, not knowing where to really look. He places two hands on the long white book, hardback and a little worn out, and pushes it forward in my direction.

It reads: Philosophy, Religion and Ethics – Reincarnation and Rebirth.

“W-Why are you showing me this?” I ask him nervously.

“I considered maybe that we met, you know, at a club or something when I was drunk. I went to tons in the first year of Uni. I took an embarrassing number of guys home, but I never felt anything with them. Like, not even that – I felt repulsed at the idea of anything relationship-related with a person.” He explains, “Until I met you, that is. I knew you weren’t some guy I took home, fucked unenjoyably, and somehow feel a strong connection with now. It’s not that. There’s a magnetic pull between us and I’ve never in my life felt that before.”
A distant sound of shoes squeaking against hard-wood floor nears us, and we turn to see Sasha holding our water. Carelessly, she puts the glasses on our coasters and leaves in silence.

“Then,” He begins a second time, “I wondered if we went to Primary school together, or High School, or College. But I asked a few relatives and old friends…but none remember you. I googled you, and nothing really showed up, but then I found this website…”

“Website?”

He shakes his head, “Nothing crazy, just the Trost Library website, you know, the one built in that old castle?” I nod, of course I do, that ‘old castle’ belonged to my family, and he continues, “No one goes there much, heck, I didn’t even know it had a website. But on the site, I found a book called, ‘Walls Ancient Mythology.’ Myths and legends aren’t my thing, but when I read a couple pages from it – you know, the five preview-pages they offer - I found something.”

Marco leans back, shuffling in his seat. His cheeks are red from stress and confusion, and forehead ever so slightly damp from sweating. He moves his hand around in his bag until he finds something, and pulls out a small laptop.

He pulls up the screen and clicks around a few times, maybe signing into the Wi-Fi, and hands me it.

The screen is a bit unclear, it’s old and small and out-dated. But on the screen I see the website, just plain with a beige background, and a few pictures of preview pages in the centre to click on.
The first four are general myths with strange creatures from 16th and 17th century Trost, like Titans – these huge man-eating giants that supposedly destroyed the old walls when they were built. It’s bullshit, I’d know considering I was there, I click the next page.

This one makes me jump motionlessly, gasping in shock.

*The Cursed* –1694

*Around the time when the land surrounding Mitras - along with the old cities of Trost, Zhiganshina, Jinae, Chlorba, Yalkell, Hermina, Karanese, Stohess and Medlay – was a separate country to England and under the reign of a Queen we know only as The Queen of The Walls, a curse was said to be placed on two men for their sin.*

There is barely any information anywhere on the walls to this day. After Alma died, the walls broke into civil wars and riots, plague and fires, starvation and malnutrition. Most things were destroyed, and people dead, by the time anyone outside decided to get into the walls. The English throne, after knocking down the walls, took over all those cities inside and not many like to acknowledge the walls ever existed. Few buildings remain, all of which are rebuilds, built on the ruins of the old ones. Even my own castle back in Trost.

That’s why this textbook is rare. Not even professional historians or scientists can find much information on the walls. All that’s left is a bunch of rumours, myths, legends and…me, I guess. However I hardly thing anyone would believe me if I said the truth. Where’s my evidence?

This ‘legend’, the curse, it’s real, and whoever wrote this textbook has knowledge that a person should not have.
Underneath the stupid overly-large and spaced out text, is a scanned-in image of a sketch, presumably from the 1690s, with two people stood together.

The first person is a woman, with light hair reaching her upper shoulder blade, and a sickening, jagged crown upon her head. Beside her, in his best outfit, is a man with two-toned hair, a structured jawline, and the badge of Queen Alma’s betrothal on his breast.

Marco watches me carefully as I look at the image, blinking away my tears so desperately.

I read the only thing left on the page; after all it’s only a preview, which is a caption under the photograph.

The princess, the Queen’s only child, and her fiance at the public announcement ceremony of their betrothal held in Mitras.

“You can’t, you absolutely cannot,” He pauses and gulps, “tell me that that man doesn’t look like you, and that you don’t feel like that myth feels so familiar despite only being the first page about it. Because I feel it, and I know you do.”

At that moment, Sasha returns again with another cheesy grin, not paying any attention to the mess on the table as if it’s not even there, and hands us the Bibimbap saying, “Pots are hot, don’t touch em.”

After she walks away, we look at each other again, and I feel that fire he burned inside blazing against my skin, but not reaching me enough to burn.
“Is this why you have the book on past lives to show me, Marco?”

“Yes.” He replies poker-faced, “And we have to find this book when we get back to Trost.”

“Well,” I whisper, “You’ve at least figured out the first part. If I tell you what I know, purely with the evidence of this book – nothing more – will you please tell me your story?”

Carefully, with a spoon of his food as he blows it to remove the heat, he nods.

“The man in the picture is me,” I shake, “And we were the two men who were cursed, well, you were. I can’t tell you what the curse was, though I know, but I can tell you that that is how we met. I never loved the Princess, only you.”

“Fuck,” he says flinching, “Fuck, this is insane. I don’t understand why I believe you.”

“It is insane and you have every right to think that what I’m saying is nonsense, but that book – whoever wrote it – is evidence,” I tell him, “Our past is woven in your very fibres, it’s inextricable, but it’s buried. Any that’s why you need to figure it out yourself, because if I dig it up for you, you’ll die.

“In this life, I have known you for, what, 5 days? Five fucking days and you love me, don’t deny it, you do. You love me like we’ve known each other for an infinity, and you feel it. It’s the magnetic connection, the electricity, the fire.
“The Queen needs us to figure out the simple thing she wanted when she cursed us, because apparently we haven’t worked it out yet. So believe me Marco, believe in us.”

I look down at my food, it’s suddenly unappetizing despite the fact I’ve eaten it before and loved it. Most of my surroundings feel displeasing. Everything but him. I need him; I need every part of him. My water, my oxygen, my heartbeat.

“Jean, this is-”

“You have believed in us before, Marco.” I sob, “You believed in us, and you can do it again. I’ll give you time because this must be overwhelming, but tell me, Marco, what is your story? The real one.”

I haven’t touched my food, he’s eaten his, devoured it desperately. Nervous eating, perhaps. Still, he places the exact amount of money on the table with a slam and we leave just like that.

He grips my hands and limps as he pulls me out of the restaurant and onto the vacant beach, dark skies and stars as our roof, soft sand as our earth.

His mouth widens and he shudders, “Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis.” He laughs solemnly, “But don’t worry, it won’t kill me, it will just break me down until I can no longer see or walk.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

If I knew what that was, or how it worked, I could tell him everything will be alright. I hate myself
I have no idea what to say. No knowledge of this condition.

How can I trust he won't die from this if I have no understanding of it? I think I've heard of it, but I don't even know if it's a disability...a disease...or what?

I've met Marco once and he had cancer, there was a lifetime where he died from Motor Neurone Disease, another where he was bedridden after breaking his neck and asked for me to kill him - possibly my least favourite lifetime, I've met him where he had AIDS, another time with HIV. Once he had Polio, another time he had tuberculosis, and another time he had meningitis.

But I knew what all those things were...this, I have no idea.

“I walk around like a normal person, but on the inside my body is at war with itself.” He begins, “A healthy person’s immune system attacks bacteria in the body, but my immune system attacks nerve endings in the brain and spinal cord. It's not fatal or contagious, but there is no cure.”

I walk nearer to him, and drop down into the sand like I did with Historia days ago. He doesn’t join me just yet, he doesn’t even touch me.

“Most of the time I feel fine, except sometimes my legs get this tingling sensation. Or they stop working altogether.” He sighs, and finally drops down beside me, “I will lose my vision, muscle control, balance...and there’ll be a bunch of other problems on top of that.”

Slowly but surely, he rests his head on my shoulder.
It feels exactly the same. It’s Marco, just Marco with a few differences to last time, or the 247 before that. His hair is always the same softness, skin the same tender touch. He is just as beautiful. He has to know that, he can’t let this make him feel any different.

“It’s been six months since I first fell. My legs are already worse.”

“Is that why this is your last year working here?”

He nods slowly.

“You know,” I whisper to him, “This disease won’t make me care about you any less. You would have been just fine telling me. You’re still the man I fell in love with by the pond in 1691.”

I place my hands at his cheeks, bringing him to my lips just like earlier. This time, as he comes within a centimetre distance, he turns away.

It breaks my heart.

It feels like my soul is crushed, like I have made a mistake chasing him and using up all of my strength for him. I feel my bones shatter and my blood curl. This is everything I’ve always dreaded, one day there will come a time when he no longer loves m-

“I don’t want you to kiss me out of sympathy,” He cries, and I feel a small tear fall from his eye and drop onto my hand, “I don’t want pity, that’s why I didn’t tell you.”
“You think I’m kissing you…out of pity?”

“Well people have before,” He laughs so forcefully, “I wish people would quit treating me like I’ve been given a death sentence.”

I tremble with no strength left to hold him anymore.

“Marco, this isn’t a death sentence. Nothing is a death sentence for you because you always keep living. And fuck, if it feels like you’re suffering then let me be your shoulder to cry on, your motivator, the sole person you need to rely on. I am not doing that out of pity, Marco, I am doing it because I love you and my entire damn life depends on you. So if you did have a death sentence, then it would be mine too. And if that doesn’t make you believe in us then what the fuck will!”

The next thing I feel is the touch of his lips at mine. It’s not a touch, it’s a slap, every emotion relies on this kiss. It hurts but it feels so wonderful because it’s him.

I so desperately wish I could explain to you how much I honestly love Marco, I think it’s the most love a person could possibly feel. Not one single person has done what I have done, or died as many times as Marco has.

It’s this magnetic force that brings us close every time. That’s love; don’t tell me it isn’t because it fucking is.

“You really love me? Even now?” He breathes shakily.
“Always.”

His laugh starts out as a breath, but becomes two, three, and then I hear his laughter. He smiles and it lights up the night sky. How dare I think even for a second that any of this was a mistake?

“Okay, Mr. Romantic, enough with the ‘always’ and take me back to the hotel room already.”

“Christ, Marco!” I choke, “I didn’t know you had that in mind!”

“The only thing I had in mind was booking plane tickets for a flight to Trost tomorrow,” He raises an eyebrow, “But I’m now slightly curious as to what you thought I had in mind.”

All too quickly, I slide my hands beneath his arms and lift him up. I mean, I’d carry him bridal-style but even I am not that cheesy. He stays happy where he is, arms over my shoulder, and legs around my waist.

At the entrance to our hotel room, he begins sliding off his tie with ease and biting his lip as he watches me unlock the door. We practically fall inside, but keep standing as we kiss. I find his lips in a hurry, feeling my hands all the way down his spine with the damn restrictions of his shirt making me want to rip it off.

Every time my fingers trace his curves or his collarbones goose bumps appear on his arms like he’s been electric shocked. He shudders against me, letting out a small whimper, kissing at my neck and
jaw to hide the sounds.

*He is worth everything,* I remind myself, backing into the bedroom; *He is worth risking it all for.*

At the foot of my bed, I undo my shirt for him, getting bored and ripping open the last three buttons. I shake of my jeans and lie back into the bed and wait for him. The duvet beneath me is a little cold, I can’t help but shiver.

“I’m all yours.” I tell him quietly.

He watches me with gentle eyes, almost sobbing happy tears at the sight of my body. They trace over every intricate detail on my skin. He makes his way to the bed, crawling on top of me with his shirt now undone, pressing one small kiss to my lips and another to my heart.

“Screw rule number 12 of the hotel rule book,” He laughs, “I’m gonna make you feel really good, Jean.”

He does.

It feels so good. Every kiss burns me, makes me whimper and tremble beneath him. My breaths come out in short pants; my only noises are the moans and sighs he causes. And I swear, right then and there, with Marco high on top of me, I see wings, silver-white and pearly, coming out soft and angelic from his shoulder blades into a breath-taking carpet of feathers.
“Here,” I say, pointing towards the screen of his laptop.

He walks closer, hair still dripping wet after the second shower today, though he does have PJ bottoms on.

“A plane tomorrow, sets of here at 6:50. We’ll have to be at the airport two hours before. Then when we land, we can get a taxi to the library. Kay?”

He nods, sitting down beside me on the small sofa in the centre of the hotel living room. His shoulders are scattered with freckles – well, so is his whole body. His hair after showering is in wild curls, how he always has it in older lifetimes because there aren’t such things as decent hair products or straighteners. I like it curlier, it’s nice. It’s how it was when I first met him.

He leans his head onto my shoulder, pressing a small kiss onto my jaw, “Let’s set the alarm for 4am and get the hell out of here,” He looks up at me, catching my eyes in his gaze, “I hope the book is still there.”

“It will be, my love.” At my words, he purrs and goes happily back to just leaning against me, tracing more of our circles at my thigh.
Eventually I join him, stroking my finger with feather-like pressure at the denim of his jeans.

“Have you ever noticed that these circles,” He begins, wondering to himself why he feels as if we’ve done this thousands of times before, “they’re actually…infinity signs.”

Out of pure curiosity, I gaze down to watch our fingers spiral around and around and around in the shape of an 8, except on it’s side.

“I-I’ve never noticed that before. Even after all the time we’ve done this…I thought-”

“I only just noticed too.” He answers, catching my gaze again before moving his hands down my neck towards my shoulder and collarbone area, “You’re going to have so many marks tomorrow…do you have anything other than V-neck’s?”

I shake my head, “I don’t really mind if people see, it doesn’t matter.”

His mouth parts into a loud yawn, eyebrows furrowing and shoulders raising.

“Let’s sleep now,” I whisper to him, giving him one last goodnight kiss, and picking him up again, “I’ve wanted to stay in your bed since we got here.”

It feels cold at first in the bed, under the heavy white duvet that somehow doesn’t heat you up. However, after while, we end up getting closer until I’m lying against his chest, exhaling and inhaling at a calm pace. I feel at home more than ever, and the bed becomes warm all of a sudden.
I stay awake until he falls into sleep; after all I’m not too tired, and eventually shuffle out of his grasp so I can watch him.

He looks gentle; his lips are hidden beside his lightly fisted hand. His fringe flops effortlessly over his forehead. There is a sweet smell of vanilla filling the room, I’ll never know why Marco smells so vividly of it, but it’s not a bad thing. Vanilla is my favourite smell.

His heartbeat becomes slower and slower and breaths become spaced apart. After hours of watching him, I finally begin to feel tired. In a state of neither dreaming nor sober, my eyes close. I sleep.

I wake with a start.

The thing is, it’s not even 4am yet, and so no alarm has been set off. What wakes me is the sound of shuffling in the bed. Upon tearing my eyes open in worry, I find Marco, just Marco.

But he’s stirring in his sleep, furrowed eyebrows and sweat-matted hair. He looks afraid in his dreams, letting out small groans of fear as he stirs. I pull his body into my arms, hugging him close and tighter than usual.

He only calms a little, still muttering nonsensical gibberish in his nightmare. The only thing I hear after that is the distraught and broken whisper of his voice.
“I-It hurts...”

When I next open my eyes, it’s to an alarm blaring some of the KPOP stuff Marco is only finally admitting he likes. He is still in my arms, and only buries himself deeper after hearing it. It sucks getting up this early, but we have to get to Trost no matter what it takes. Marco is fully aware of that. (Well, perhaps not at this hour of day…)

I smell Marco’s hair to inhale the sweet vanilla before leaning over him to switch of the alarm. Afterwards, my eardrums still tingle from the sensation of sound.

Carefully, I shake his shoulders and hope he stirs at least.

“Well, perhaps not at this hour of day…”

“I smell Marco’s hair to inhale the sweet vanilla before leaning over him to switch of the alarm. Afterwards, my eardrums still tingle from the sensation of sound.

Carefully, I shake his shoulders and hope he stirs at least.

“Well, perhaps not at this hour of day…”

“He frowns, “Can I sleep again when we’re on the plane?”

“Come on, Marco, wake-y wakey now,” He seems to smile a little at this, “We have a plane to catch in just over two hours. Marco, come on love.”
“The entire journey,” I tell him, “If you want.”

With a sigh, he finally stretches, a few loud bones cracking in the joints of his arms and his back.

It’s sad to leave Byeol-Nanseo.

Not that I had long to be there at all and fully experience it, I never got to taste it’s Korean and European mixed culture, it’s happy people or it’s delicious foods. The skies were always nice there, and it barely rained. I could always see the stars, not even light pollution could block how bright they shone.

I would have loved to make friends with Reiner and Bertholdt or Connie and Sasha. They’re going to worry like hell about us when we’re finally noted down as missing. Perhaps they’ll hate us…for not saying goodbye.

Still, we make it to the duty-free area of the near-vacant airport after the long queues to check-in and the dreary security. In the little spare time we have, I grab Marco a hot chocolate and I a coffee, and meet him by the small bookshop.

By the time the speaker notifies our flight’s passengers to get to the gate, we have already finished our drinks, and stand hand in hand, slightly tired and only awaked by our nerves as we wait to get on bored.
Our seats are right by the wing, somehow this is comforting to me, being so close to an exit. That’s not foreshadowing, by the way, just my irrational fear of flying. Take-off goes smoothly, though most people are sleeping and don’t acknowledge that at all.

Marco’s gentle breaths of slumber comfort me for nearly half the journey. I have no idea how the man can sleep for so long, the sights outside my window are so mesmerising I can’t imagine sleeping through them.

At 1pm, I wake him up to eat something for lunch.

We order sandwiches, deciding not to waste money on the more expensive foods. His is some kind of vegetarian cheese and lettuce option, where as mine is just chicken. They’re pretty good for plane food, however not so amazing for Trost’s best airline.

The two of us sit together in those comfy plane seats, listening to the buzz of the engine outside, for a long while. I'm mostly focused on the sound of his breathing. I like to treasure every breath, and even in the seconds between each one I still manage to worry about whether or not I'll hear another.

Nothing unusual happens until it hits 2 o'clock. We have lowered down in altitude, somewhat inside the clouds, constant rain droplets tapping against the window. Marco frowns and I rub his shoulder softly to show concern.

I don’t even have to ask him to explain because he already knows I’m thinking about asking.

"I once read a book, and I have forgotten its name." He explains, "I can't quite remember when I
I take a sip of my water, letting the cold slip down my throat and make me shiver, "What was the book about?"

He hums and traces more infinity signs on my thigh. Whenever we want to show we are here for one another, it's in our instinct to do so.

"There were two men that loved one another. But I don't think they were allowed."

I snort, "Sounds like Romeo and Juliet to me."

He frowns and pulls a face as if to say har-har, very funny. I lick my lips and let him carry on, all the while drawing my own infinity signs on his thighs.

"No. This wasn't some...dangerous fling between a 13 and a 17 year old, disrupted by some family feud. They were grown men, and it was real love. But it wasn't allowed...because they were men."

Gulping, I usher him on.

"One of the men, he was an Angel...no, I mean his name was Angel. He kept dying and dying, but it was okay, because he lived. And when he lived, he met his lover again."
I find that I'm no longer circling his thigh; I'm clenching my fist and shuddering against him. Silent, non-existent sobs.

"T-That doesn't sound okay, Marco, Angel died. That's not okay!"

I hate this. I hate being made out like the one in pain. I hate getting all the sympathy when it’s Marco who suffers; I wish people would just stop.

The idea of people caring more about me makes me sick to the bones. In what world do I deserve that? In what world does he deserve that?

Each thought makes me tremble, and I become tremulous even more as I think about every time he’s had to die because he loves me. I find that my bones ache when I think about him dying. His pain is in my own fibres, but all it does is lie there and remind me that Marco has had to go through so much. I so desperately wish, desire, beg that I can swap places with him. If magic exists, how do I use it to switch us around? I should be the one with the curse, not him.

He wraps his own hand around my fist, "It's okay, because Angel is always reborn and his love is infinitely stronger than the mere seconds of pain he feels when dying. But Ellis, Angel's lover, his infinity is his pain. Eternal suffering."

"How is Ellis the one that suffers? Why does everyone say that?" I shout. I almost cry, I so nearly cry. The entire plane is probably listening, judging us. It’s hard to breathe. I let feathered white wings of hope surround me, like Historia's wings, and keep me from becoming weak, "Why does everyone feel sorry for me..."

The buzz of the engine and the people in the cabin talking seems to have stopped. There are even a
few small rays of sun visible through the thick glass windows, sheltered by the slowly moving clouds. It’s like the gates to heaven are opening. It’s magnificent.

Marco is holding me.

Not like he ever really has, it’s different. It feels like he is protecting me. Sheltering me from shards of glass falling around us. Wrapping his wings around me like a blanket.

The woman in the row with us disappears, completely, and soon all of the seats both around us and beneath us too. The plane becomes invisible like it was never there. It’s like time is frozen. Like we were able to manipulate the very thing that controls us.

I can feel him now, in a supernatural kind of way. Not just his actual touch, but the force…the magnetism…the love. My body feels limp and lifeless. The only thing I can see is him, no matter how much I try and look for something else, I only see him.

No, this isn’t something I can really describe. It feels like something in our life has snapped. Altered…drastically.

I can feel his memories like I was the one experiencing them, all his deaths, all his boredom, and then every single time he met me. I can see into the way he thinks, and feel the insignificance of all the times he died, and how much more he cares for the times he met me.

I even see how much he cared for his friends in all his lifetimes. I feel his love for Erwin and Levi and Mina. I feel his despair for a moment as he watched her pass, but it soon changes into a feeling of eternal respect. I feel how much he loved Hanji and Petra, their company and their charm. But what I feel the most, with utterly overwhelming force, is his love for me.
I shake as tears fall from my tear-ducts.

It’s because of me that the death in his life doesn’t matter. Deep down within him, in those neatly woven fibres, he holds every single moment we met in each lifetime and treasures it. Deep down he feels like dying is a mindless task, because in the end of it all he gets to see me again.

“Ellis,” He whispers with such volume that the word thrives throughout my body, “Jean, my love.”

I gasp at the feeling, the strangeness of it, how it feels both fantastic yet terrifying at the same time.

“Marco,” The name escapes my lips involuntarily, “Something feels…so…”

He trails his fingers down my spine. Suddenly, I feel much smaller and weaker. Even more than usual. Each fingertip touches my skin leaving me delirious.

“I remember!” He shouts, every part of him sobbing with joy, “I remember everything!”

We spin multiple times in the clouds, the candyfloss peach becoming our ground finally.
“I remember you following me to the top of Corcovado in Rio, when I wanted to see the statue up close. I remember being carried by you, two sweaty miles to the River Jordan after I got sick outside Jerusalem – you told me not to eat all those dates. I remember meeting you at that Italian hospital during the First World War, and before that I hid in your cellar during the tsar’s purge of St. Petersburg.

“I remember nearly running you over on a road-trip in Jinae. And when you danced me around and around at the king’s coronation ball at Versailles. You were the only person dressed in black. There was that artists’ colony in Quintana Roo, and the protest march in Cape Town where we both spent the night in the pen. When our plane crashed in the Indian Ocean. The opening of the Globe Theatre in London - we both performed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* together. I remember when I was diagnosed with AIDS, and you were the only person that loved and accepted me.

“And when my ship wrecked in Tahiti, you were there, as you were when I was a convict in Melbourne, and a pickpocket in eighteenth-century Nîmes, and a monk in Tibet. When I lay paralysed in a bed in my apartment after breaking my neck, and you accidentally hit a baseball through the window. I remember meeting you at the coffee shop in Trost; you gave me a free drink for being a good customer. And that Victorian house in Penzance where we rode horses along the beach. I remember it all, those lifetimes, this lifetime, the 230 other lifetimes…”

Finally, he takes a moment to breathe.

I am too shocked to shed any tears. Too heartbroken in the most wonderful way possible. No, it’s like my heart has been pieced back together.

*He remembers. He remembers.*

All those lifetimes where we met and fell in love, he remembers them without his death being even a point to mention in his story.
I’m not crying, but he is, for the both of us. His tears are of relief; the end of the longest marathon ever ran. It’s not the end yet, but we can at least celebrate how far we’ve made it.

In a complete state of ecstasy, neither of us notice that we are on the ground, against real pavement, familiar pavement. Ground so much worse than those candyfloss clouds. Somehow, the clouds… the plane… everything from minutes ago is gone. Like we weren’t even there. A huge black shadow, thundering and smoking, trembles away from us as if it was just about to attack, becoming part of some dark street corner. I barely process what I even saw.

The rain against our skin makes us jump, pull apart and gape at our surroundings.

“How?” He says, stunned, “We’re back in Trost…”

I grab his hand, and try my best not to yelp at how wonderful it is to touch it. Our emotions are completely connected; finally we are on the same level. I don’t know how, maybe I never will.

In all honesty, I’m unfazed by this situation, as in the whole transportation thing, I’m still getting over the initial shock of Marco remembering, never mind a mere teleportation. Some things are best off left unexplained.

“Marco, that’s the old Trost Library,” I point to the castle-like building at the end of the street, and he nearly grins because he knows, even if so suddenly, that the building is my old fucking house, and that’s weird. Really weird, “We go there, get the book, and figure this out together, okay?”

He sighs, and falls against me again, wrapping his arms around me, “I’m so sorry you’ve been alone all these lifetimes. I’m so sorry. Words can’t even describe it… you must have been so scared-”
“Marco! Firstly, you were always with me, as my motivation,” I put my hand to my heart, and he brings his to place on top of it, “And secondly, it feels completely worth it right now.”

I press my lips at his, feeling like the seas have calmed finally, and begin walking down the street towards the library, hand in hand with Marco – the man I love.

Searching for explanations with no resources or nothing but your own knowledge is the hardest task to do, but we have somewhere we can go. We have that book to find. I have no idea if the answers it beholds are anything useful – but either way just a sprinkle of information would be nice.

The entrance is dismal. The walls are overtaken by ivy. It’s sometimes pretty in the daytime, but with nothing other than the moon-like glow of the streetlamps it looks quite terrifying. The castle was never really a castle, despite what the history books might tell you.

It doesn’t even look like a castle. Its a manor. The very same fucking manor that Erwin took me to before we traveled down to Penzance. My manor. I’ve been back here too many times in the last few lifetimes. I miss being in different countries, all the recent times have been in Trost or general England.

It looks pretty cool now, better than it did back in the day, even better than in the 1800s, but it’s not a tourist spot because of its reinforcement, and some early 20th century guy decided to change it into a library. Anyway, a better library was built in the 80s on the other side of Trost, that’s where most people go nowadays.

The library is open at this hour, but as we stumble inside, there seems to be no one around. It’s completely empty. The carpets are a blood-red colour, lights an anemic orange. The shelving and desks are heavy and dark wood, all wearing away in areas.
It’s not very pleasant.

Marco walks slowly to a computer at one of the desks, the screen all switched on and ready for a user. He sits down at the seat and begins typing for the book.

After a minute, he calls to me, “3rd floor, the second Myths, Folklore and Legends section, should be right near the end because the author isn’t stated.”

I nod and let out my hand for him to grab, he takes it desperately. His breaths are heavy and shaking, his eyes tired. A light pink colour covers his forehead as if he has a temperature.

“You okay?” I ask him, worried.

He blinks with a small smile, “I’m fine. Just trying to get a grip around all this, you know.”

Nodding, I agree, “My love, there must be loads to process. We can take a break if you want?”

“No!” He pleads, “We have to do this. For you…for us. We get that book, and all can go uphill from there right?”

Everything seems so right, all going to plan. All saccharine and laid out in a way I’ve never really
seen before. Usually life goes in all sorts of uncoordinated patterns, but this…this seems too flawless. I just hope it’s not like some kind of equilibrium…all these good things will soon be met by bad.

No, that can’t happen right? Surely, if this is equilibrium, this is just the beginning of weighing out the good side. Not that all my memories seem so bad any more.

“Yeah, uphill.” I tell him, “I won’t sleep until I get to live a full life with you. It’s really all I can ask for now.”

He throws me another smile, and stands, knees shaking a bit before coming to stand by my side.

Unfortunately there isn’t a lift, so climbing the vast staircase is a bit tricky for Marco to accomplish. But he makes it after many refusals of my offer to carry him.

The third floor is so dimly lit, and unheimlich in more ways than one. Unnerved, we set out to look for the Folklore section. Marco first finds the first of the sections, and we then realize it’s just opposite the dark corridor.

Marco wheezes a bit, struggling to breath in the heat of this library, which is even stranger because I don’t feel particularly warm at all. I press my hand to his forehead, there isn’t much heat, but it does seem warmer than usual. Maybe it was just the staircase.

“Here.” Marco says, directing me to the end of the isle.
It's uncomfortable, strangely shaped shadows and themed photographs of demonic creatures from ancient cultures and religions covering the walls. They almost appear real with how terribly lit the isle is. Under the glare of many sets of eyes, we remove the book from its slot in the shelf.

“I wonder who wrote this,” Marco says as sweat drips down his forehead, “God, it’s hot in here.”

“Don’t worry love, we’ll get out of here soon, lets find the page first.”

I shudder as I watch him open the book, which is surprisingly thicker than I thought it would be. There isn’t a contents page, nor an index or glossary. It just makes Marco panic in the non-existent heat as he flips around for the page.

“Here, let me take it, we can go to one of those desks downstairs, there is better lighting down there.” I smile at him as he passes me the book, and turn around in an instant.

I head out the isle through the left side, Marco going round the right side. I walk towards the staircase, unconscious of the orange glow coming from many directions.

I frown in confusion, looking around the huge floor of bookshelves reaching 4 metres high, trying to spot Marco in the darkness.

And then I hear a bang.

Well, is sort of a bang, more like a crackling noise. Like popping candy. No – that’s it, it’s like a pop, or popping noise, like charcoal and paper on a fire, the noise as the wood cracks in the heat.
At the noise, the orange glow becomes much brighter, and I feel the heat. What is more important to me is that I can’t seem Marco, and all the isles of bookshelves are glowing with orange.

It’s only until I see the tip of a flame reaching over the shelf that I know, for sure, this is a fire.

“Marco!” I scream, snapping my head side to side in multiple directions.

Hurriedly, I slip the book under my arm and run back towards the isle. My heart beats a thousand times a second. The heat is sweltering – and it feels so sudden!

As I gaze back down the isle we started at, I finally hear Marco.

“Jean?” His voice is a simple whisper, “Jean where are you?”

I find myself running faster than ever towards his voice. I can almost sense where he is, in an isle near the stairs. I can feel it. I can feel the heat against his own skin. He’s not hurt, not yet, and that’s why I have to get him out of this building.

“Marco, stay where you a-”
He coughs loudly in the smoke. The thick black cloud is covering the entire corridor now, like Victorian smog or that of wood smoke. It’s choking and sharp, my eyes instantly burning in contact with it.

I see Marco, hunched over by the stairs, gripping the bannister for balance, face redder than before. His breaths are heavy and broken, hair matted against his face.

“It’s trying to kill me,” His voice breaks as he whispers. *The curse.*

“Get on my back,” I order him, “You’re not dying. Not now, not yet.”

He does as I tell him, pulling himself on as I crouch down to give him access. He grips his arms around me tightly, and takes the book to hold himself.

His limbs tremble against my body. I have no idea whether it’s pain, his multiple sclerosis or fear. Not much is clear in the smoke. Though it seems to disperse as we head down the staircase.

Trembling still, he grips be tighter like he is afraid of falling away from me.

“I don’t want to die.”

The words bite, they spit and hiss at me, make me feel guilty of a crime I didn’t commit. It’s the first time I’ve heard that, the first time he’s said it ever, in all these 249 lifetimes.
A distraught sob is released between his lips, stabbing me in the heart harsher than a knife ever could. He sobs more, whimpering against my back, “I don’t want to die, Jean, I don’t want to die!”

“You won’t,” I promise him sincerely, “I’m not letting you die.”

“How do you go about every lifetime without crying when I die.”

I reach the top of the first staircase and begin storming down each step, my back aching from his weight.

“I have to stay strong, Marco. Crying isn’t something I can do.”

“It doesn’t make you weak…to cry. Especially now, when I could-”

“Marco, enough,” I snap, “We’re getting out of here alive.”

As we get to the bottom of the stairs, he slides of my back with ease and onto the ground. I grip his hand tight, and drag him to the entrance.

The relief of fresh air is delicious to our throats. It’s honestly the nicest fresh air I have ever felt. We gasp for more of it like there isn’t enough left. It feels wonderful. Our bodies drop against the pavement together, luckily it’s not raining anymore.
Looking back up at the third floor window, there isn’t even a sign of a fire.

“I think I’m supposed to be dead.” Marco says, with an exasperated smile, “But I’m alive.”

I laugh at him, with him, and scoot up beside his weakened body, lying back down.

He hands me the book again. Closing my eyes and inhaling, I open it to a random page. Upon re-opening my eyes, I see the picture on the very page we saw back in the restaurant in Byeol-Nanseo.

Marco screeches in excitement, “You found it! You literally opened it on the page we wanted!”

I chuckle a bit, burying my nerves as I examine the drawing of Historia and I.

On the next page is a sketch of what looks like the Church round the corner of this street. One that has been here since the reign of Queen Alma. It’s the church where we stood for the announcement of our betrothal and prayed to a God we didn’t believe in. However, unsurprisingly, the church was demolished, buried, and rebuilt in the 1800s.

Underneath, it reads:

*The curse stated that one of the two men would have to watch their lover die repeatedly. Each time he died, they would both be transported into another life in a different time or place altogether. Every time, the dying man would forget all his memories with the other man, but the*
other man would remember everything.

The Queen’s message was never really known, but could possibly just have been an act of hatred for the men who didn’t follow her religion the way she ordered people to. She left the two men to the curse afterwards, waiting for the curse to be broken when either man realized her intentions.

She grew impatient with them, and angrier at her kingdom. Man after man tried to rebel, all after seeing how cruel she treated the lovers. Some tried to climb the walls to escape. Then she began killing them, one by one until the day she eventually died.

The bodies of her victims are said to be buried in an underground graveyard, haunting Trost eternally for its crimes against the Queen.

“That’s it?” Marco shouts, “That’s all it says? ‘Underground graveyard’…bullshit. What can we do with this?”

“Lots.” I reply, breathless, “Marco, I think I know where we have to go next.”

“Where?”

I place my finger on the picture of Mitras' Church, and then point slowly to the bus stop, knowing exactly how we'll need to get there.
“The church…” He furrows his eyebrows, “The church…”

The words seem to click in his head, his eyes widening fast, “The church! It’s completely built on top of the old one…the graveyard too.”

I laugh, nodding and standing up, “Yes! There is another graveyard beneath that one!”

In the glow of the street-lamps, he stands to meet me, knees shaking as he does, though he makes it just fine. His lips pull into a grin.

“Well, Jean, I have no idea what we’ll get out of this,” He explains, “But if that graveyard happens to be the place where hundreds of men died for us, we need to go.”

“Exactly,” I grab his hand, “It’ll piece together somehow.”

We follow the road to the bus stop at a slow pace; even my legs ache from it all.

To answer any questions, I also have no idea what the graveyard could do to help us break the curse. It’s almost like a jigsaw puzzle: the main picture is in the centre, and that’s what really needs to be built; however you always start with the corners.

With the book, with Marco’s memories reaching him, and with the knowledge Historia gave me, three corners are already built up. Perhaps this is the fourth corner. That’s why we need to go to the graveyard.
We need to unravel the foundations of our curse before we can really start exploring this jungle of a story.

I’m not going to stop searching for answers until I know that the man I love can be safe in my arms, alive, breathing, smiling, and the both of us can finally do what we’ve never been able to: live.

Chapter End Notes

NOTE: I will be moving soon and have upcoming exams so chapter 5 will be delayed!

My tumblr

Also, here is the playlist for this fic, however it is entirely KPOP, but if you're open minded enough, I'm sure you'll still like it.
But I still pray

Chapter Summary

Let’s run, run, run, again - it’s okay to fall down,
Let’s run, run, run, again - it’s okay to be injured.
I am happy enough even though I can’t get you,
Curse me, this foolish destiny.

Chapter Notes

Life got busy, also I have recently been drowning in BTS hell, mostly to distract myself from the shit that is currently going on in my life, ew, but whatever, I am back now mwaha.

To conclude, sorry for the late update.

This is the penultimate chapter, so it's pretty intense.

I make no apologies for using BTS Run as this chapter's song, despite Just One Day fitting better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is something rather terrifying about churches.

From the bland, neutral, stony walls, to the huge arched glass windows, to the raised crosses on each twin rooftop, to the excessively tall tower that spikes into the sky with force.

The church seems to glare at me disapprovingly. Its eyes are menacing and judgmental. Not all churches have this effect on me, but this one in particular does. It’s uncanny, unheimlich, not something I feel comfortable looking at for a long time.

I have to grip Marco’s hand to feel less on edge, though to no avail. He seems just as terrified as I am.
At this hour, the church is closed, but fate seems to unlock the door as easily as it rid of the plane, or put out the fire in the library, or forced Marco out in front of that car two lifetimes ago. We step inside with a tremble, my shoulders shaking and Marco biting his lip.

“I love you.” He tells me, in fear of being dragged away from me.

“I love you too, and don’t think I’m letting this church intervene.”

It’s desolate inside, entirely black with shadows that look more alike to thick streams of tar. There is nothing pleasant about this, nothing heavenly, nothing spiritual. This is disgusting; it reeks of Alma, even after being rebuilt!

We walk on the tiles of the church floor, knowing that below us, buried and flattened with soil, are the remains of the previous church here.

Even still, it looks identical. I remember exactly where I stood at the betrothal announcement ceremony, exactly where I stood in the wedding rehearsal, exactly where I stood as Marco’s death sentence was declared.

“Do you remember this, Marco?”

He inhales and exhales shakily, “I don’t want to.”
We walk down the aisle slowly, taking every step with precaution. I keep looking at Marco to see if he feels warm, perhaps he can now sense when his death is coming, or maybe that was just me being blind, I do tend to be oblivious to what could kill him, even if it is blatantly obvious, even if I foreshadow it in my internal monologue.

We make it to the lectern in precise synchronization, keeping our eyes away from the Bible at all costs, even as our hands find the top of the lectern and move it together. I refuse to see the book, strictly refuse.

Somehow, our instincts seemed to know to move the lectern, and to reach down for the large tile that was previously below it. Neither of us really question why, we’re past that point in exploration.

The tile slides out of its place easily. Unsurprisingly, below it is a trapdoor, a worn-out, woodlouse-ridden, dirt-covered trapdoor. Marco, ever the brave hearted man, opens it – despite the initial struggle – to a black tunnel.

Again, that fear of the unknown consumes me. I can’t help almost fainting as he reaches down into the black hole. What is down there? Graves? Dead people? Hell? He moves his arm as much as possible, and we both hear it hit something.

“Bingo,” He grins, “It’s a ladder.”

My heart slows slightly, but speeds back up as I realize what I need to do.

“I have to go down first, Marco, I’m not loosing you down there.”
He nods sadly, gulping as I move to put both legs down the hole. I have to keep strong, stay brave for him. With Marco in mind, the task seems easier. I find the wooden step on the ladder, and trust it will hold my weight. It creaks and strains under the pressure it probably hasn’t been put under in a couple of centuries.

The scariest part of this is that the ladder is leading me down into a tomb, the ignored historical remains of an ignored historical country, only known to have existed by the strange conspiracy of silence in Trost.

Marco switches on the torch setting of his phone, handing it down to me with ease. It casts hundreds of shadows around the room; it’s mostly filled with chests and boxes, some garden tools, some armor and weaponry, and an oak door. I assume that’s where I need to go.

I reach the ground finally, watching Marco do as I did with much more ease, even with his multiple sclerosis. He’s amazing, always has been.

“In there?” He asks, pointing to the door.

I nod, “Together.”

I grasp his hand naturally, and make my way to the door with him trailing beside me. It opens easier than the church entrance.

Expecting a dark room was nothing alike what we walk into.
The tomb stretches out into an impossible length ahead of us, four long, long columns of dark gravestones beginning where we stand, all the way to the end of the tomb. Between each row of gravestones is a row of candles, lit and burning as if someone lit them all but a minute ago. The room glows a comforting shade of orange, making the whole situation much less terrifying than it really is.

Though there are cracks in the foundation, it looks stable enough to hold us. We risk being crushed. It doesn’t smell, it doesn’t feel damp, it isn’t cold. In fact, it’s pleasant. This is a place I’d much rather be than the church upstairs.

“How are the candles burning?” Marco whispers to himself in disbelief.

I laugh, “Should we ask such useless questions at this point?”

He sighs, leaning to rest a head on my shoulder, “There are easily 200 graves here, and they all died to rebel against Alma. Some of them died for us, Jean.”

I glance at him. Tears drip from the corners of his eyes, streaming down his face with a warm colour to them, reflecting the light of a thousand candles. I try not to cry with him. I take the lesson Mina taught, and I use it. These men, in their graves, will be cheering at us for getting so far, not waiting for our grief.

“Thank you.” I say to no one in specific, “We’ll make it to the end, I promise.”
It’s okay to promise a happy end, isn’t it? It’s okay to make a promise you may not be able to keep?

Marco nods, squeezing my hand once more. As I breathe, a small cloud emerges from my lips, surprising considering how it’s warm. Still, the wisps are beautiful. My hands reach up to Marco, cupping his cheeks into a soft grip. I lean forward, and kiss him, feeling that static. I decide on not closing my eyes, keeping them locked with his all the while. He makes me feel so alive in a situation that just reeks with death.

It’s sad to pull apart, though the sound of his subtle gasp for air is always nice to hear. I keep my hands held at his cheeks, and he snakes his around my waist.

“The last time we kissed like this, with open eyes, was…was at Prekestolen…in 1924,” His lips pull into a grin, and I can’t help but grin with him. There is a wonderful twinge of excitement within me at hearing him link our pasts to our presents.

“Yeah,” I agree, “It was beautiful.”

“We should go back sometime,” He adds, looking up to the ceiling with a sigh. All of a sudden, he remembers something; “Hey. You also promised you’d dance to that song with me…Take me to Church, I now know.”

“Well, there are better songs on his album, but if that’s what you want, my love, I will dance with you.”

He grins and grips my hand once again, walking forward down one of the candlelit aisles with a smile upon his face. I follow him, walking down the isle next to his.
I notice that each grave has no writing, nothing at all other than a small-engraved circle, with two others inside, representing the walls. That’s the worst part. These are graves belonging to men who died so bravely in utter disgust at Marco’s curse, and their names aren’t even written on the stones.

Each grave has cream-white peonies lying gently against the stone floor, all freshly picked and placed. Somehow, someone, somewhere…at least one person is caring for these men. At least one person pays respects enough to light thousands of candles and lay thousands of peonies.

It makes me hope to god that the candles don’t just burn eternally for as long as the curse lasts, frozen in time. I beg that they have some respect given to them.

Again, I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt.

“Jean.”

I hear my name spoken in a sudden and intensely beautiful voice.

Initially, I think it’s Marco, but deep down I know it fucking isn’t. I would know his voice if I heard it. As I look down towards the end of the tomb at the ethereal glow, I realize it belongs to none other than Historia.

She is dressed in a pearl-white gown, so white it seems to light up, making my eyes water a little. Her sandy-gold strands of hair that hang at her cheek are tucked behind her ears neatly, slight waves reaching just below her shoulder blades. Her pale shoulders are bare with the way her dress hangs in slight frills from just above her breasts, held up by thin straps, a medallion placed mid-chest. She wears a sharp, spiked crown; the crown indicating that she is a princess. She looks
ashamed to be wearing it, embarrassed...perhaps humiliated. She trembles, but remains composed as always. There is no doubt, not with those ice-blue eyes, that this is Historia.

I run towards her, her small figure becoming more familiar as I do so. Your eyes can never really adjust to her beauty. Ymir would have been the luckiest woman alive to have Historia. As lucky as I am to have Marco.

We don’t converse, I just pull her into a hug, and my entire body shakes against her. I need to consume my emotions, I need to bury them, I need to act strong until Marco can be safe. I let no tears fall.

“You boys have made it so very far.” Her voice is like honey, so unbelievably sweet and smooth, “The both of you are incredible...so brave.”

I unwrap my arms from around her, and she proceeds to hug Marco all the same.

“It was you wasn’t it.” He says all of a sudden, “In Byeol-Nanseo. You erased your memory from me, but I remember everything. It’s been a long time, Historia.”

“It has, very long, but there is much more to go. Follow me. We have little time.” She doesn’t mention Byeol-Nanseo. It wasn’t her anyway, just a vision.

Underneath her eyes are dark purple patches from lack of sleep; I can’t help noticing these little things. Like how she looks ill, her skin is tautly stretched against her bones, scars marking her from burns or whips. Her wrists have rope burn, red-raw and nauseating. To think she’s ever been a victim of torture. To think what Alma has done to her.
We don’t walk very far, just to the end of the tomb, to the end that seems much darker than the rest of it. Vine-like plants grow from the cracks in the wall, leading their way into the abyss.

Historia moves soundlessly to the side, revealing the back of a gravestone, unlit and overgrown with weeds. My heart races, hoping to God Alma is buried 5 feet below that rock. I can’t help but throw a sinister smile at the idea, and, from the corner of my eyes, Marco’s lips pull into a grin similar to mine.

“I think this is the most important thing you will find here,” Historia explains with bottled sadness, “I’m sorry.”

I shrug at her, knowing deep down there should be something to worry about though covering it up out of pure stubbornness, or the need to convince Marco that all is okay. We walk forward into the dark area surrounding the grave.

Every footstep sounds louder than an explosion. Still, I hear Marco’s heavy breaths above it all. He laughs as he walks around the stone to the front of it. A laugh of fear and anticipation. I notice that, ever so slightly, his hand shakes.

There is barely a mark upon the scratched stone of the grave, but as Marco creeps towards it, trembling as he does; and following his finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave is his own name, MARCO BODT.

“This has been here all the time?” He cries, head buried in his knees.

Historia simply points towards the grave without speaking.
“O-Oh god.” It feels like bile is rising in the back of my throat. I have to be sick.

Her hand becomes limp, dropping back to her side.

“Historia,” Marco cries again, clutching his shirt, “No more. Enough! We need to know how to end this. We need to know the truth.”

She doesn’t speak, yet again, but shakes unlike before, her silence becoming more deafening than ever.

My head throbs, my temples pulse in excruciating pain. I feel so stupid, so ridiculously stupid. How could I not have figured this out long ago, that Marco’s very first grave has remained here all this time? How?

I feel ashamed. If I had found this a hundred lifetimes back, I’d already have a head start. We could already be free. He wouldn’t have to die anymore.

I stand up, legs shuddering at the weight of my life upon their weak foundations.

“I understand.”
The silence grows louder.

“I mean, what more is there to fucking understand!? Marco was cursed by Queen Alma in 1694 because he fell in love with a man. What else is there to fucking understand!?”

“Fuck, Jean, you are so close and have been ever since the idea of a curse even came into your head,” Historia shouts with such pain and impatience in her eyes, “How long does it take a man to release? Christ! You are just words away from ending this crap. If Marco or I tell you, it won’t end. It will carry on another 250 lifetimes, and more after that! Do you understand? You have to figure this one out, Jean, you! You are so close it is making me angry. It makes me angry that you hate yourself so much, that you blame this all on yourself. If you could surpass that self-loathing, you’d know the answer. It’s so unbelievably simple.”

Marco sobs into his hands, I can barely tell why. Even Historia has tears welling in her eyes. What over? What are they crying for? Who?

I feel so distressingly alone. How selfish to say that, especially after finally getting Marco back. That’s why I hate myself. I hate that I dragged Marco into this curse. I should have avoided him when I saw him under the Willow tree in the April of 1690. I should have kept walking and let him fall in love with someone else.

I should have Married Historia and watched Marco make a family of his own, and smile until he died. Properly died. I don’t care that he finds his deaths insignificant, because they are not. They are significant; every part of them screams Alma’s dreadful magic. Even if he can overlook them, they stick with me.

They are the prime reason I hate this curse. I hate watching him die, and I will be fucking selfish for a second and say that. It hurts, a lot, but I at least am not the one writhing in pain each time. That’s Marco – the man I love unconditionally, dying over and over and over. It’s never ending. He suffers; he’s just too incomprehensibly blind with love to see it.

I may be so close to the truth, but that makes the truth no more obvious. That’s not a clue, that’s
just a headache. I can’t discover an answer until I have sufficient evidence. I can see, in Marco’s deep brown eyes, that he knows. He knows the answer and probably always has done. That’s the worst part – I feel outcast now that this knowledge is one-sided. Maybe that’s how he has always felt around me. If so, then that’s just another horrid torture device to add to his list.

I know that the curse was made because two men were not allowed to love each other in religion, and Queen Alma was passionate about that.

I know that the curse was to make Marco reincarnate into different lifetimes, countries and eras, all to find me, and fall in love with me.

I know that every time we fall in love, he dies; sometimes so fast I can’t even kiss him.

I know that I just have to touch him and it all begins again somewhere else.

I know that if Marco dies in this lifetime, next time could be his last, whatever that means. I don’t know what ending could conclude this story so easily.

I know that Alma had an intention, apparently an obvious one, and I just have to feel something in order for the curse to be fulfilled and have a purpose.

I know that that is how I can end the curse; but I don’t know what that means either.
I know that if Alma wants me to repent, she is never getting that from me; because nothing in heaven or in hell will ever, and I mean this from the depths and trenches of my soul, make me regret loving Marco. That’s the only equation I understand fully in this. I love him, so why can’t that just be the only thing to care about?

Well, simply put, it’s the curse.

But understanding her ‘intention’, for a start, would involve me actually knowing what is meant by an ‘intention’. Historia said I have to ‘feel’ something, perhaps that is what I need. It’s probably the most simple thing in the world, but I just cannot see it.

You see: there are an infinite amount of possibilities.

I get one chance, one shot, one answer, and that’s it. If I get it wrong, who knows what happens next. It’s the price, it’s what all of heaven, hell, and the mundane are waiting for. If only I could figure it out.

“Historia.” I say, managing to bring my voice to a calmer, steadier state, “Show me, show me the equation, and I will solve it.”

She simply nods, and her lips pull into a weak smile. Somehow, she can show some kind of joy through her current frail state. She wants this as much as I do. Marco, looking at his very own grave one last time, stands up and steps beside me, clutching my hand in a tight, tight grip.

The shadows in the corners of the room seem to move a bit, swirling and grouping, splitting and forming into all kinds of sickening shapes. Some shadows look runny, some thick and cloud-like, all this morose shade of purple-grey in the darkness.
One by one, from the opposite ends of the tomb, the candles begin blowing out. Historia had better do something fast or we will be stuck in complete darkness. Marco, in fear, squeezes my hand tighter, shoulders shaking and shuddering from the pressure of his fear.

Historia glares at the shadows intently, watching their every movement. One detaches from the others, slithering away along the floor in her direction, terrifying as nothing is casting it. It is alone, alive, it’s own being.

No, Historia is summoning it.

She plucks it from the ground with her fingertips, molding the gooey shadow into a kind of rectangle, forming it into a steady shape before pinching it’s sides and pulling out. She stretches the shadow easily into a two-dimensional form, and then leaves it to expand into a door-sized rectangle.

“This is called an Announcer,” Historia says, “They are used in magic to send messages to people, but some use them just to see things from the past, and some use them for travel.”

At first, the Announcer simply hums like that static of a radio or television, however not long after an image begins to form within the centre, spreading out across the big black screen of the shadow. It’s vague, but I just begin to see it.

It’s a picture of a window at the end of a corridor, with a beautiful crisp glow of November sun shining through the glass, casting rays of light against the pale beige wooden floor below. It’s the floor of an apartment complex. A familiar one at that. I have been there before.
“T-That’s…my apartment building!” Marco exclaims, “In Dauper…Canada.”

“2001,” I add, shivering, “I hated that lifetime.”

Marco remains silent about his opinions. It wasn’t one of his favourite lifetimes at all, however he will still have enjoyed it in huge contrast to my feelings towards it.

I bring up my finger to the screen. It looks so real as I near it, like I can almost touch it-

My finger pushes straight through the image.

“What the hell?” Marco and I both say in sync.

“Go through,” Historia orders, “The only way I can ’show’ you is this.”

I nod at her, pushing my finger through the screen again. The Announcer shudders at my touch, flinching at it. I wonder if it tickles. Is it alive? What exactly is it? A strange tingling sensation occurs once my whole arm is through, but what is weirder is the fact that there is no temperature change, despite pushing into November from mid-summer.

I push through in an instant, maybe enjoying the sensation. Around me, the apartment glows. Its walls are still cheap and damp, exactly like they always were a hundred-odd lifetimes ago. The floor was always cleaned poorly, some muddy footprints trailing down the wooden planks. It was still a friendly place; all the neighbors were kind and benevolent, all trying to befriend Marco when
he never really could make friends.

That’s right, this is Dauper, 2001. The lifetime when Marco had broken his neck from falling down the stairs of his school building. He was paralyzed neck down. Only his head could move, he couldn’t even twitch his fingers or feel mine as I held his.

At this point in lifetimes, I was quite familiar with the process. When I say that, I don’t mean to say it didn’t upset me. All Marco’s deaths ruin me inside out; I had just accepted that there was no end to this back then. Still, looking back, I was miles away from knowing anything I do now.

Marco joins me into the corridor, and Historia after him. Marco and I are overcome with powerful nostalgia from being in a lifetime from so long ago. Not only that, we are together, not only physically, but in memories and emotions too.

“You hit a baseball through my window…my bedroom window,” Marco recalls, with a wonderful yet bitter smile upon his lips, “I’d always heard you playing outside with that Jaeger boy, but we never really met until then…”

I nod, feeling a luminous spark in my heart. I don’t know what it means, but it definitely has something to do with the way Marco remembering our past romances awakens every part of my living being, in the way a cherry blossom blooms in spring, and my entire body is filling with stars and galaxies just from the mere concept of how much we love and have loved each other all these thousands of years.

“Do you remember this day?” I ask him hesitantly.

“Vaguely. Certain memories feel vivid – my favourite ones – but all my least favourites, and all my deaths…they are vague.”
Inhaling, I reply, “This is the last day of this lifetime. I know because it was the first time we’d seen sun in a long two months of rain. It was strange. All the puddles dried up over night, and the entire complex came to play baseball. It looks like noon now, so the game will have finished. Everyone went home, and I took you home myself.”

“How?” His gulp is loud in the silence of the corridor, “How on earth do you remember this so clearly?”

I shrug, “I didn’t think I could remember my pasts so well, but being here, with you too, seems to have painted the pictures on a bigger canvas, you know?”

He nods with wide eyes, unsure of what else he can possibly say to me. He must be tired, I think, looking at the way his eyelids are half lidded, and his lack of electricity he usually beholds.

A noise can be heard from the staircase, a distant mumbling of voices, both seemingly happy. There is a clang of metal alongside the talking that soon stops as the voices begin nearing us; the people are walking up the stairs.

“-or we could take a trip to the zoo. I think that would be easier.” A voice says, talking to another. I know to whom the voice belongs to. I know too well.

“The zoo sounds great.” Another voice replies, silk smooth and sweet, causing Marco’s hand to clutch my own even harder, “Thank you, Jean, for everything. I couldn’t ask for anything more than this.”
The voices are past versions of Marco and I. Thick with a French-Canadian accent, no, they are both talking in French. I like the lifetimes where we don’t end up in Trost, and get to speak different languages and see other cultures.

Marco and Jean reach the top of the staircase, a limp-bodied Marco in Jean’s arms as he carries him bridal style. I remember it well, wishing he could feel my touch somewhere other than just his face.

“Leave me here,” Past-Marco says, eyeing the wall. His hair was much longer in this lifetime, he liked it longer, and couldn’t afford a hairdresser. His mother once cut it too, ending in a hilarious bowl-cut, and he was always fearful of that happening again. “Please could you help me with my meds after you’ve gotten my wheelchair?”

His smile is genuine. He loved me so much, he was so grateful that I looked after him when he couldn’t walk, and he felt useless a lot of the time, I had to reassure him he wasn’t.

“He can’t see us?” Present-Marco asks Historia in confusion.

“No,” She smiles slightly, “These are just shadows of a past that has been. Visions. Records.”

I walk with Marco slowly over to the staircase. Marco places his hand against his past lives’ cheek, but there is no reaction. It is so strange, to see two of them together. Present-Marco looks more tanned, much healthier, though somewhat tired. Past-Marco looks weak and through with his immobility, despite the smile upon his lips that I once caused.

We head down the staircase, to see the past-me. He is stood at the bottom of the staircase, out of Past-Marco’s vision. His previous smile is faded completely. His amber eyes look down at the wheelchair in his hands with such sadness, he is wondering when Marco is going to die - he quite
enjoys this lifetime and doesn’t want it to end.

He clutches the bannister of the staircase tightly, wheezing breaths coming from his mouth, shaky and struggling to exit his lips. His forehead is bright red, eye bags prominent. He is catching his breath. He is exhausted. He is hiding it.

“What was wrong with you?” Present-Marco asks, “Why were you hiding down here? I thought you had been caught in a conversation with the old lady downstairs or something…”

I shrug again, looking carefully at my weak past self. Shaking at each breath.

“I had…really bad asthma in this lifetime. And my arm was hurting; I sprained it in the game. Nothing much.”

“Oh, nothing much?” He repeats in more of a question, “I can hear each breath cracking, you sound like you’re having an asthma attack. Why did you never take medicine? And your arm…if you sprained it, and with the asthma too, why would you carry me up two damn flights of stairs?”

“Well there wasn’t a lift, was there!” I shout a bit, unintentionally, hoping my emotions didn’t show too much, “And I couldn’t bare letting you spend your life in that room. I had to let you outside, and carrying you was the only way.”

“But what about your health? Don’t you think about your own pain? Why would you make yourself suffer like that, for me?”
A few people pass in the hall of the apartment complex, all watching Jean for a moment as he wheezes, but passing and minding their own business. I wait for the birds outside to stop tweeting, for the people to stop walking, and for Jean’s breathing to calm down before answering him.

“If I could, I would die the utmost painful death for you, Marco. How you don’t already understand that is beyond me.”

“And what would that do? How the hell would that help either of us? Why would you do that? Why even think like that?!”

“Because I love you!” I spit, “I love you so much Marco, I can’t bare to watch you suffer. If I could suffer in your place, I would take the opportunity in an instant. I beg for a taste of the hell you get. I am desperate to let you finally be set free of this, and make a life of your own.”

Past Jean pats his hair flat lightly, it’s mangled with sweat. He flips his baseball cap back on top, picking up Marco’s wheelchair, and pulling the most disgustingly faked smile anyone on earth could ever pull, hoping to God that Marco won’t notice. He truly is happy to have Marco beside him, but his situation takes control of him, and it’s all a mangle of emotions no matter which one he wants to show.

“I don’t want a future without you Jean.” Marco whimpers, “You deserve freedom from suffering as much as I do.”

I let go of his hand coldly, turning back towards the staircase, and follow my past self slowly, speaking a reply in a hideously bitter tone, “As if I’ll ever know what suffering feels like.”
Historia is still there when we reach the top of the staircase again. She has been watching Past-Marco closely, hurting even more to think that her own Mother caused this, feeling as if she is the child of pure evil.

Past-Jean smiles still when I catch up with him. He opens the wheelchair, and lifts Marco into it with such gentleness. Jean looks so sad, so terrified, he will be feeling it too. He knows he’ll soon loose Marco, and he’ll take the blame, and he’ll just repeat it once again.

Still he smiles, and that’s the most awful part to watch. I don’t know how I’ve ever hid my inner feelings so well. Marco shakes beside me; he never knew I felt so depressed beneath all these thousands of smiles.

That’s not to say I’m never happy, of course I fucking am. Last lifetime had some of the greatest moments. So does every lifetime. I am happy when I meet him, in that short first meeting, and when I get to kiss him and he doesn’t die from it.

With Marco, I can feel such overwhelming joy, to the point where my skin feels tight against my body, as if it is physically unable to hold in any more ecstasy. I know I am damned lucky; I have the most beautiful boyfriend in the world. Beautiful in personality as well as many other ways, his voice is soft and velvet too, his eyes and his star-like freckles, the way the corners of his lips flick upwards when he smiles.

Past-Jean thinks the same as I do, well he is me after all, and as he carries Marco into his wheelchair, he see’s Marco’s beauty to the finest details. He finds them in both his perfections and imperfections.

“I don’t want to watch this anymore,” Marco whispers, “Not this part.”
“But you said you don’t care about dying…shouldn’t that mean you will be fine watching it?” I tell him, tracing the knuckles on his hand with my fingers.

“That’s not it, Jean, Christ.” He exhales unsteadily, “I’ve never seen your reaction to my deaths before…I don’t want to see your past self so distraught and pained…I don’t want to have to watch that.”

“I stopped crying over your deaths a long time ago, love,” I assure him, “I couldn’t be weak like that, not when you’re so strong.”

I chuckle to myself a bit, pulling a toothy smile in the process. Marco doesn’t join in, but it doesn’t matter. Then it twists within me, the memory of this lifetime, this was my 100th, so I had long grown a wall between my inner emotions and what I decided to show, however this one was different. This is a lifetime where I cried. And fuck, how had I not remembered that?

“What’s wrong?” Historia asks in concern as the three of us, plus our past selves reach Marco’s old apartment door.

“I just remembered…I…fuck.” I hiss, “Historia don’t let Marco see this…I was too weak in this lifetime, shit, don’t watch. It’s embarrassing.”

Historia throws me an empty glare, her marble-like eyes sending me a message she doesn’t even need to speak. Marco and I have to watch, it is for the best, and Historia knows it, so it must be true. God knows why.
Jean wheels Marco into the apartment, aching to kiss his boyfriend but fearing doing so. That’s right, they haven’t even kissed yet. The lifetime before this, Marco had died before I was able to kiss him.

My past self takes Marco from his wheelchair again, and lays him down on his bed by the patched up window, still not fixed from when I hit a baseball through it.

“We should talk, love,” Past-Marco’s French-Canadian accent sends shivers down my spine, familiar and alien at the same time, “You know we should.”

Past-Jean shakes his head, gripping Marco’s hand so hard it could snap, not that Marco would feel it in his paralysis, “Not now Marco. No. Don’t ask it of me, I beg.”

Marco wants to lift his body up to meet Jeans. He wants to stroke his finger along his thigh in gentle infinite signs like his instincts tell him too. He wants to hold the man he loves in his arms, and hug him. He wants to feel Jean’s hand when he holds it. He wants to let Jean kiss him all over and feel the tingling sensations everyone brags about. But he can’t have that. Deep down, he knows he has felt it before, but this time he cannot. And that frustrates him.

That’s why when he first met Jean, and saw how much fun he had playing baseball with the others outside, he opened up and told Jean that one day, he would like someone to give him an overdose of medicine, and he would like that person to be me.

I had found it absolutely unbearable to hear, and I knew that when he said ‘we should talk’, it meant he was ready to die.

It hurts now, it really fucking hurts worse than any stab or bullet could. It hurts on another level that the man I love, and want nothing other than to live a long life, willingly wants to die. To think that he has these thoughts…it fucking hurts.
Past-Jean, writhing in that pain, let’s himself be selfish, and drops into sobs, finally letting tears flow that he never allows. He never cries, but this time he cannot help it.

“I want to run with you Jean.” Past-Marco smiles, fucking smiles, “I can’t do it. I can’t move. I-”

Jean places his hand so shakily on Marco’s chest. Every bone in his body trembles, “Your heart is beating. Can you feel me? Can you feel my love for you?!”

“I can,” Past-Marco tells Past-Jean, “I love you so much. I trust you; you are the only person I would ask this of, Jean. I want to die. I want to touch you…I don’t want to live anymore. We can meet again, in the afterlife, I don’t think even death will stop me from seeing you again.”

My past self keels over the bed where Marco lies, still trying to smile. Tears drip one by one from his eyes, landing on Marco’s cheeks. Jean’s back lifts up and down in shudders that would reach high the Richter scale, his entire body feels crushed and trampled on. He allows it because he knows it’s just the pain Marco hasn’t felt this lifetime.

“Will you kiss me?” Marco asks him, “I can feel that, at least.”

Jean nods, leaning down to catch Marco in a kiss. It looks passionate, heated, like a burning fire in a cold and isolated land. I have to look away for a moment. I catch present-Marco’s eyes, welled with tears; they slide down his cheeks in glistening streams. I notice that my own eyes are watery, and I blink it away so frantically.
Historia is crouched onto the ground, hands over her eyes, she weeps. There is nowhere in this room I want to look anymore.

I end up turning back to my past self and my past Marco. They aren’t kissing any longer. Jean reaches his hands underneath the bed for the medicine box, along with the bottle of vodka that Marco stores under there.

‘Overdosing on Gabapentin can result in possible death, if a very high amount is taken, particularly if combined with alcohol.’ Marco had once told me.

Past-Jean opens the oversized pot filled with pills with a shaking hand at the same time Marco opens his mouth. He tips at least ten in at first, and then holds the bottle of vodka to Marco’s mouth in order to help him swallow some more. Jean is killing Marco, and he knows it, he is helping the cycle, and that is why he is crying.

He repeats this process until Marco has swallowed every last pill, still holding the vodka to Marco’s mouth and allowing every sober thought in his head to be drowned away. Marco coughs and wheezes, and my past self just watches with more tears and more sobs. The coughing comes to an end just as the evening sun has disappeared.

Jean strokes Marco’s cheek – a part of his body that works normally, drawing infinity signs so that it will be the very last sensation Marco feels. He whispers, “I love you, I love you, and we are going to see each other again. You’re so brave, you’re beautiful, I love you, I fucking love you.” Then Marco dies.

He dies in that bed, cheeks still blushed from Jean’s words, lips still tingling from where Jean kissed him, and mouth still pulled into a heavenly smile. My past self screams out into the silence, a loud and piercing wail, places his quivering hand on Marco’s cheek to initiate the change, and kisses him one last time. Marco couldn’t run with me, but he was more perfect than everyone around him.
This is just part of my reality. It’s just something that happens, again and again, and I just have to sit and watch him die. Even if it hurts.

“The room is fading,” I gulp, being the only one without tears in the room, “Historia, you need to summon an Announcer or there will be nothing else here…”

She forces herself to stop shaking, panic taking her over knowing we could just disappear with this universe when it fades away. A chunk of shadow detaches from where my past self kisses and holds Marco. It’s not as watery as the last one.

It’s a wispy Announcer, like thin clouds. More like the steam from a kettle. She manages to shape it into another screen, another passage way. I don’t bother looking into it. I take a last glance to my past self, wishing him the best of luck on his further journeys, and then go over to Marco.

He stands, still weeping, his legs seeming weak either from emotions or the MS, but I can at least tell that standing looks hard for him right now. I wrap my arms around him and lift him up; I will always carry him, no matter how far or how much he weighs. I lift him towards the Announcer as the world around us becomes white. We hop through, Historia following and closing it up behind her.

Marco whimpers inconceivable words into my ear. I know he is apologizing needlessly, so I choose to ignore it. I press small kisses on his cheek hoping he knows that I am okay, hoping he realizes that this isn’t about me. I kiss his tears, the corner of his trembling mouth; I kiss his jaw, his cheek again.

It’s all so tiring. We drop to the ground lifelessly.
Above us is a cloudless sky filled with thousands and thousands of stars, glistening and shining, mesmerizing. The ground below me is rocky; I can feel that familiar ache in my back. It’s a bit damp too, and it stinks of saltwater. Sea mist sprays gently at our faces, but it’s okay. I look out to the sea with Marco, and it’s calm and undisturbed. Not even the slightest undulation.

I would know this feeling anywhere.

This is the rocky land beneath The White Cliffs of Dover where Marco and I once jumped, when I tried to commit suicide. I want to scream. Just being here feels like my ribcage is about to explode.

Marco’s eye catches on the warm orange glow at the top of the white cliff, the glow of a campfire, the orange even reflects against the pale chalky surface of the rock. It’s the only light around other than the stars.

It’s the year 1784. This is my 19th lifetime, I had seen Marco die 18 times before, and I felt strongly that I could not let this carry on. I feel no pity on my past self in this lifetime, he was selfish, and he felt too sorry for himself. Well, I did feel much more sympathy for Marco of course, but I never knew Marco would die if I died, and that’s why I attempted suicide. It was to set Marco free.

I put my hand to my forehead, wanting anything but to have to watch Marco’s death in this lifetime. It’s as bad as the last one, completely different, but just as horrid.

“Jean,” Historia says, walking gracefully over to us, “Do you…have you…you know, anything to say after that?”

Marco sniffs and interrupts, “She’s asking if you’ve figured it out yet.”
I tip my head back, letting out a heavy sigh, “I don’t...understand what I’m figuring out…”

“Fine. You’re going to have to keep looking back on Marco’s deaths a few more times then. Until it clicks.” Historia whispers, looking more sorrowful than she ever has. Her eyes reflect the moon out above the sea; she looks up into the sky, as if she is searching. Her face isn’t blank, it is desperate, in a way that I would consider a face of love, utter devotion, even, for someone, however she is looking up at the sky, and I’m not sure if it is possible to fall in love with the stars and the clouds.

The entire place is silent as we wait for a noise from the top of the cliff. The sound of the pony and trap. A voice. A footstep. Something. Minutes pass, we sit and watch the waves lap against the rocks, watch some boats pass by, everything feels too calm.

The ground may as well be quaking with how much Marco shakes and quivers. I snake my arm around him, draw some infinity signs against his thigh, lean my head against his. Every touch feels like a countdown timer on a bomb. But I risk it, kissing him softly on his jaw and cheek. I can’t bear seeing him so down like this.

“Fuck you!” My past self screams so suddenly towards the vastness of the ocean from the distant cliff top, he is stood on a rock so very near the edge, releasing his anger. Marco jumps at his shout, “Fuck you, Alma, and fuck you God, and everything you both believe in. What did you want? Is this your punishment on Marco for loving me? Did you cause this? Did you want to make him suffer? Well, you’ve had your last laugh. I’m ending this.”

The sound of another horses hooves against the ground can be heard from the top of the cliff, it’s Marco pulling up beside Jean’s horse on his own, jumping out in panic after hearing Jean’s words on the way. I can still picture the face he pulled; complete and utter horror and just writhing in confusion.
“Jean, I have not got a damned clue what you are thinking, but-”

I remember pushing out my palm in his direction, motioning for him to be quiet. All I got in return were tear-filled eyes.

“Stay back, my love, this is for the best. I promise.” My past self reassures him. Present-Marco shivers at my past self’s words, maybe he can remember them as vivid as his past self heard them, and he only now gets the irony of it.

“Jean, please, I beg of you.” Past-Marco will have dropped to his knees at this point, “Don’t do this to yourself. You deserve to live, don’t leave me. I don’t even understand why you’re doing this when you’re so... happy... you need to live, Jean.”

“That’s the thing,” Jean will be saying to him, “I don’t deserve to live, I’m killing you from the inside out. This all my fault. It’s not happiness anymore. It goes round and round... I need it to end.”

I feel a hand grip my thigh, nails digging into my skin through my jeans; it’s present-Marco’s hand. I can barely see it in this darkness, “Jean. This isn’t your fault.”

I can’t answer him. Not with this situation. Not with my past self about to kill himself. Not when I know it is my fault.

“I love you Marco Bodt!” A scream from the top of the cliff sounds through the air, “I love you and I will always love you! Live on, Marco, live on, for me.”
That’s it.

The memory floods back like a dam holding back gallons of water has just cracked. It drowns me with such force that my bones and nerves have broken before I can even feel the sensation of drowning.

The memory is so absolutely terrifying and vivid that it looks like a photograph in my head, a video, the most high-quality video ever made. I remember screaming those words. Then my left leg stepped back first, then my right. I felt some hesitance, but watching Marco only made me feel braver. I tensed my fist, and threw him one last smile.

I remember turning away from him, unable to bare the sight of his distraught and confused face running after me any longer. I remember running, running faster and faster until I finally reached the cliff’s edge.

The minute I jumped I regretted it, but all at the same time I could just picture how Marco would be able to meet someone new, marry a kind, caring and beautiful lady like he deserved, and that he would have wonderful children, and I would become so buried within his memories that I’d seem much more like a figment of his imagination to him than a real thing that ever existed. Just the thought made the fall feel so much more worth it.

Present-Marco’s eyes widen into gaping black holes as my past self plummets to the ground. Literally a millisecond after the jump, Marco comes down with him, his instincts telling him there is no other way he can live unless he has me with him.

The boys land beside each other, a disgusting crunch I never wanted to hear again. I jog over to the bodies in an instant. My past self’s neck is twisted abnormally, my entire spine probably shattered along with all bones in my body. Two streams of blood fall from my nose. I should have been dead, and that is exactly what my past self is thinking.
Present-Marko joins me, having to turn around and throw up at the sight, his back trembling as he vomits. Our past selves look mutilated, twisted, deranged. I remember the pain that my past self is feeling. It writhed through my ever fibre, slashing and slitting at my nerves, worse than being eaten alive by beasts, worse than flames charring at my skin, making raw patches as chunks of my body burn away, worse than the feeling of drowning as your chest collapses and every part of you feels as if you’re being crushed under rocks. Landing on the solid, stone ground beside Marco was so much worse than any death.

Yet still, and I see it in the blackness of my past self’s lifeless eyes, the pain of landing was absolutely miniscule compared to opening my eyes and finding my lovers mangled and disfigured body as dead as rock beside me. There was no life within him other than that sad final smile he always pulled at death, and this time it really was my fault.

The Jean on the ground chokes. His body is already healing up, limbs snapping back to normal like something out of a horror film. No, if this were in a horror film it would be so insanely terrifying that people would drop into a coma just watching it. This is not a scene a person can look at and stay sane.

Past-Jean scratches at his arms until they bleed, he wraps his fingers around his neck and squeezes so hard that the blood vessels in his eyes burst, he slams his head repeatedly onto the sharp, blade-like rock of the ground. But nothing kills him.

He screams a broken scream, his throat too damaged to even work anymore. No one hears his scream; no one ever has heard my screams. He pulls a face like he is being tortured, and runs over to Marco. Jean picks up his body and looks down upon it, still finding him the most beautiful thing to ever exist. It’s true, even in death Marco looks more alive than anyone on earth.

Jean drops to the floor into sobs. This is the last time I cried before my 100th lifetime. Past-Jean’s back heaves up and down as he wheezes, letting every single tear he has fall out. He crawls back down beside Marco, whimpering and quivering beside his love. He lies for hour-long minutes, just staring into the abyss of Marco’s smiling eyes, feeling guiltier than ever.
I watch my past self press a kiss at Marco’s lips, and watch his dead boyfriend until he fades away, feeling nothing more than a murderer.

Deep down, around my heart, I feel some kind of strange and alien feeling, nothing I have ever felt before, however I can label the feeling in an instant, and I feel so dreadful for feeling this that I decide to hold it in, but the feeling that swirls around inside my stomach is one that people call *sympathy*.

But this isn’t the kind of sympathy I’m used to feeling.

This sympathy is not because *Marco* died.

I am feeling sympathy for *myself*.

I could get used to this whole Announcer-travelling thing Historia has going on. Though, I must admit, this Announcer is choking and thick, like dark smoke and tumbling wind, not really the kind of thing I want to be entering. But hey, a shadow is a shadow, and I feel somewhat closer to figuring this thing out. I have a gut feeling, I know it isn’t true, but my gut seems adamant it is.

It’s easily ignorable, I think.

“Do you recognize this street, Jean?” Marco asks me quietly as we step through the Announcer,
“I’m struggling to tell where we are…”

I wince my eyes and try to put a pin to my surroundings, to recollect when it was that I walked this very street, to remember the details of this lifetime. The road we stand on is surrounded by woodland, some small paths trailing off from the street into the depths of the woods. The ground is thick with snow, white layers after layers, almost a metre thick in some areas.

It’s dead silent, nothing but the slight sways of the tree branches and the whistle of the winter winds can be heard.

“This is Jinae,” I tell Marco, “No where else is this quiet.”

He nods, face dropping down until his chin is pressed against his collarbones.

“I remember now, this is 1984. Another modern lifetime…there should be a house somewhere down that road.”

“Fuck, yes, I get it,” I want to slap myself for not knowing, “This is our second lifetime, after the very first one. Your house is over there.” I point over at one of the paths leading off this main road, it looks blocked completely by snow, I am thankful I can’t feel it. We decide to head in the direction of Marco’s old house, the three of us walking at a hesitant pace the entire journey.

I remember when I first got to this lifetime, it was terrifying. It’s not an easy transition to go from 1694 Trost, to 1987 Jinae. Firstly, this Jinae is nothing like the Jinae I had known in my first lifetime, the walls were taken down after all. I remember opening my eyes all of a sudden, and everything was different. The clothing was insane, from women wearing shorts and trousers, which was not something I had ever seen before, and then there were all sorts of colourful jackets and jeans, mad hair-do’s.
There was a poster on the side of a building with a picture of a man with bright red and yellow hair, wearing make-up, and it had read ‘Love is Love’, and I remember seeing men walking out of the building holding hands. I guess that was why I felt an instant love for the modern day. I mean, fuck, I had just gone from watching my boyfriend die for loving a man, to a place with gay couples walking around. (I know now that the 80s is nothing compared to 2014 in terms of acceptance and whatnot, but it still amazed me. Jinae is one of England’s most famous safe-spaces for gay people, which I initially found hilarious in a way, considering its past.)

I had watched more people walk down the streets, so amazed by everything to even bother questioning how I got here or where I was. But then I heard a car engine, and I had turned around, just the sight of it terrified me…I thought it was some kind of demon. I must have looked like such an idiot, good god; I was running down the street screaming at the sight of a car.

I ran down this very road that Marco and I are now standing on, confusion suddenly hitting me, and then I saw him. Marco goddamned Bodt.

“This was one of your favourite lifetimes, comparing it to others, you smiled the most in this one,” Marco tells me out of the blue, “Why was that?”

I shrug, “I had just lost you, remember, and I thought that I had you back…for good. I thought we’d been forgiven…and than we’d been granted a life together in a place we were allowed to be together. How could I not have been happy? I never expected you to die again.”

The forest is only small, it’s more of a cluster of trees than a forest actually, and Marco’s house is there, out in the open. His parents were very rich in this lifetime, he still lived with them here in this house – despite being 22 – but this winter they took a flight to Australia without him, leaving the house up to him to look after for 5 or 6 weeks. They already knew about me and didn’t care that Marco and I fell in love, so I guess they were aware upon leaving what Marco and I might get up to.
Behind Marco’s woodland-surrounded house lies a lake, iced over from the freezing cold. The sight of it sends shivers down my spine. It’s midday, a crisp and heatless sun shining through the treetops and onto the solid surface of the water. It doesn’t look at all melted; it looks perfectly safe to ice-skate on.

We hear the fumble of Marco’s front door as he exits the building, hand-in-hand with the happiest looking past-Jean there ever has been. There is no way to really describe how I look, the corners of my eyes seem to have creases from the amount of smiling I have done in this lifetime, my lips are even pulled into a smile this very second, I look filled from head to toe in hope, nothing but positivity ahead of me.

I feel sorrow for my past self, I was so young and foolish…I had no idea I was going to loose Marco. I thought it was going so well.

Armin Arlert and Annie Leonhardt follow out of Marco’s house after he and my past self exit, they were his best friends in this life, all four of them hold ice-skates in their hands.

“Is there really no way they can hear us?” I ask Historia, feeling anxious and nervous about what awaits.

“I’m afraid not. You can’t talk to you past self.” She explains with a gulp, “That’s assuming that that is what you wanted to do.”

I nod, “Yeah. I want to warn him…or wish him good luck. You know, tell him it gets better.” But does it get better? When has this ever gotten better? Now? Now that Marco remembers everything?
She sighs for a minute, though in nothing more than a millisecond she widens her eyes and stares at me. I raise my eyebrow I her, willing her to speak.

“You want to say ‘Good Luck’…for yourself?”

That strange gut feeling swirls around some more, just like when I felt sympathy for myself. Maybe it’s guilt.

“I do…after all, he has a long way to go ahead of him. It would ease the journey if he knew Marco would die in the first place, I’d like to warn him or reassure him. Seeing Marco suffer is one of the hardest things to do.”

She lifts her hands up, raking them through her hair. She looks even more ill than she did back in the tomb, like she is being eaten alive or worn away. Like how rocks are slowly weathered by waves, “You almost took a big leap towards the answer then, Jean, but now you’re back to square one. I’ll admit, you’re closer.”

That gut feeling swirls again. No. It can’t be true, it doesn’t make sense. I won’t admit to that.

Annie and Armin announce that they’ll be heading home, and they wish our past selves a Happy New Year. Marco doesn’t seem to look sad that they’re leaving, because he finally gets some time alone with Jean. They sit on Marco’s ice-cold doorstep to slip on their skates. Luckily, I remember Marco teaching me to skate since the lake froze over on December 8th, so my past self if pretty good at it by this point. 23 days of practice doesn’t compare to how amazing Marco is at ice-skating. He could do flips and spins and lifts and all sorts of cool looking moves.

“Shall we dance?” Past-Marco asks me.
My past self raises an eyebrow, “How shall we dance? There is no music here outside.”

I try not to feel a little embarrassed at how my past self is still getting used to using modern speech. Even if the speech is correct, he looks so awkward saying it. By this point, I speak easily with modern speech; I much prefer it to how people spoke back in the 17th century.

Past-Marco shrugs, “We can dance without music, my love.”

He grasps Jean’s hand and they hop along the grass together, Marco finding it much easier to balance on his skates than Jean. They slide onto the lake, holding onto a tree trunk for stability. Marco manages to start moving much easier than Jean, but Jean eventually catches up.

Jean tries his best to speed up, pulling an embarrassingly determined face, taking this seriously. Marco giggles just within earshot of him, earning a sharp middle finger in return. They both burst into fits of laughter, Marco beginning to belt out Johnny B. Goode while performing the air guitar like Marty McFly in Back to the Future.

“Go go! Go, Johnny go go!” Jean sings out with him, snorting and chuckling in the still-flowing excitement of this new music he has been introduced to in this second lifetime, struggling to keep a straight face.

They skate towards each other, I remember how cold it was outside, yet how warm I felt as we grabbed hands and sang together, even if we looked like idiots. I can’t help but smile to Marco.
“I’ve not seen you smile like that in ages,” Marco laughs, “It’s really beautiful.”

I feel a blush spread across my face and neck faster than a lightening strike, “H-Hey now…”

Past-Jean seems to be blushing all the same as I am. He looks at Marco the way Gallileo looked at his stars, treasuring him so deeply, so thankful to finally have him back, looking out at his future with Marco. He isn’t counting his breaths like I do. He isn’t trying to ignore time because he knows it’s unnecessary. I remember how wonderful the feeling was, I remember how lucky I felt and how perfect I thought my life was, just for that lifetime.

Marco skates to the other side of the lake with a grin, Jean grinning back at him maybe even wider, “You think you can lift me up?” Marco shouts. All of a sudden, I feel sick.

Jean shrugs, “Maybe. I’ve picked you up before.” Just the thought makes the apples of his cheeks bloom pink.

Marco leans forward onto his right leg, about to skate towards Jean, “I’ve had…the time of my li-i-ife,” Marco sings out. My past self flops onto the ice in sudden hysterics.

“Do not sing Dirty Dancing songs!” He shouts, but he doesn’t really mind. Marco has an amazing singing voice.

“But you need to lift me like Johnny lifts Baby! Music is needed!” He calls across the lake, “Just give me a second, my laces have undone again.”

I turn to Marco, but this time I don’t have a face of happiness, I have a face of distress. Marco does
too. He grips my hand, and I don’t know how but I feel as if I need it more than he does.

My past self laughs at Marco’s as he bends down to re-tie his boots, hands shaking in the cold, “Hurry up, Mar-”

He is interrupted by the deep, heavy crack of ice. The thing is, it’s hard to tell where the ice has even split. The sound shudders and tumbles through the entire frozen surface of the lake. It echoes. Both of our past selves look at each other wide-eyed, standing up straight and not moving an inch, stone-still in horror. However, in the instant that Marco stands, another crack sounds, and this time they both know its where Marco is stood.

“M-Marco,” My past self says in such a lifeless tone, “Do not move, not even a millimetre, I am coming to get you.”

My past self steps off the ice onto the grass nearest to where he is, removing his boots despite how cold the floor is so that he can get to Marco faster. He runs at such a fast speed; panic spreading through every particle in his body as more cracks and crunches of ice sound through the air.

When he finally reaches the ice near Marco, there are so many splits around where he stands that Jean knows, deep down, it is going to be impossible for him to get out of this. Still, Jean steps onto the ice, the dryness of it burning at his feet with such cold that he swears that if he removes his feet the skin will be ripped off.

Marco is about 5 metres from the side of the lake, so close but so far.

“Marco,” Jean says his name again, “You need to stay still. Trust me, I am not letting you fall through.”
I want to be sick. Seeing myself make such a promise I can’t keep, I want to tell him…to talk to him…something. My past self trembles ten times more than Marco does, despite Marco being the one on the breaking ice.

“Just when you thought everything was okay…” I hear Marco whisper beside me. Again, that gut feeling swirls, much deeper and thicker than before.

“No!” I head my past self scream. He is at least a metre away from Marco, but the ice is just cracking more, “Marco, please, don’t leave me again…”

I remember the feeling of wanting to drop onto my knees and just beg to god that he live. I wanted anything but this. I wanted to switch places, I decided then that I would burn or drown thousands and thousands of times to let Marco live. But I couldn’t do anything. I was helpless. I couldn’t leave Marco to go and get a phone.

I had to save him myself, but I was terrified.

There is one last spine-breaking crack before Marco slips through, taking a poorly-timed gasp as he plunges, breathing in water. And then he is gone. All that remains is a dark and endless abyss.

It’s impossible to even see where Marco is. I remember never feeling so scared before this. I hadn’t chased him over even three lifetimes yet, but that didn’t matter, I knew I loved him, and that was enough to make the decision.
Jean jumps into the lake where Marco has fallen through; I remember the water being so excruciatingly freezing I felt as if I was already dead. It was horrid, much worse than burning. I remember spotting Marco a few metres away from the hole, banging against the ice, unable to see anything. I swam over to him, grabbed him around his waist, holding him so tight that even if we drowned together, our last feeling was that of each other. He turned around to see me, a smile across his lips, and I was sure that then he remembered the last life. I was sure he understood. But then his eyes rolled into his head and his lids closed shut. He had been under for two minutes. I knew that that was more than enough to kill a person in such cold conditions.

I couldn’t breathe; it hurt so terribly, my ribcage feeling as if I was being crushed beneath hundreds of rocks. Not much compares to the feeling of losing all air. I was so scared, indescribably scared, not even someone like Susan Hill could depict my fear. I wanted to scream. I saw the hole again and swam so desperately towards it, dreading everything. I began to hate my life in such a small amount of time. I didn’t know why this was happening. I had been so happy, my life had been ecstasy; I thought I had him back.

It felt like the real end. The end of the world. The feeling is so vivid within me that I can’t help but drop to the floor, holding back desperate sobs.

“Historia…stop it…I don’t want to watch!” I shout. No one answers. I suddenly feel as lonely as I always have been, it’s an overwhelming reality, my reality, and it’s awful. It’s so selfish to say it, but my thoughts are only about myself at this moment.

My past self emerges from the hole in the ice, taking such a huge gasp for air that even the inhale looks painful. His eyes are so white with fear. I can’t even tell if he has a skin colour anymore, he looks as white as paper. The veins in his face turn his skin a purple colour; it’s hard to tell whether he is a living being or a corpse.

He drags Marco onto the ice, so lonely and helpless, having no idea what to do. He doesn’t know how to do CPR, no, I remember not even knowing what CPR is. I thought the only way out of this was finding out whether he was dead or alive.
Past-Jean pulls Marco onto his lap, the frozen surface of the lake seeming a hell of a lot warmer than how it was in the darkness below. Marco’s eyes are half open, but there is no other sign of life within him. Jean screams, wails, yells, shouts, gasps, cries and whimpers, holding his hand to Marco’s heart. There is a beat, but each one is so far apart. It gets slower…slower…slower…

“Marco I’m so sorry,” Jean lets out a desperate sob, so distraught and hurting, the pain worse than the drowning, “I couldn’t save you again…I’m so sorry…I’m such a failure.”

Marco, slowly dying from hypothermia, cold shock or peripheral vasoconstriction or something like that, curls his lips so slightly into a smile that only I would be able to tell he is smiling. No one else knows him and no one else will ever or has ever known him like I do. Jean sobs once again, not understanding why Marco doesn’t hate him, because fuck, he hates himself.

“I love you.” He tells Marco, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for this. I’m so sorry I couldn’t fall instead of you…I love you so much.”

Jean feels Marco’s last heart beat.

He looks so frustrated. He crouches down, arms wrapping around his knees, not having even the willpower to cry anymore. But the small and lonely whimpers sound even more saddening that his sobs. I want to hug him…I want to reassure him once again…this is so ridiculous.

I remember crying like this for almost half an hour in the freezing cold before touching Marco and triggering the change again. There isn’t any point in staying here. I need to see something else. All I can feel within me is selfish thoughts of self-sympathy and tears welling in my eyes that I need to get rid of.

“I want to go home,” I tremble, crouching to the ground unintentionally, holding back my tears, “I
want to go home.” I don’t have a home, I don’t even know where home his, I don’t know where I belong or what the point is of this existence.

“I’ve had enough!” I yell, “I have fucking had enough!”

The gut feeling becomes obvious now. I understand what it is, and I understand that it is there for a reason, but I can’t allow it. It’s unfair…I can’t.

“What is it that you can feel, Jean,” Historia says with such little emotion in her voice, like her soul has completely disintegrated.

I choke on tears once again, looking over to my past self crying over Marco, crying over his guilt, I look up at Marco whose hand covers his mouth tightly, so horrified at the sight of me being so distraught.

The gut feeling spreads, through my veins and fibres. It’s too difficult to hold in any longer.

“Pity!” I shout. “I feel pity!”

“For who, Jean?” She replies, speaking loudly through a noise I’m not sure is even there, it makes my ears ache, “Who do you feel pity for?!”

I can feel Marco’s hand at my waist, but I don’t need them. I don’t need him to feel compassion or concern. I already have enough. In an instant, I shuffle away from his touch, jolting forward almost a metre away from him. Despite my shame, I turn their way anyhow, even though they’ll know
there are tears across my eyes. I step back again, taking a deep inhale.

“I feel pity.” I state, there isn’t any going back this time, “I feel pity. For myself.”

The noise disperses; it was a kind of static buzzing noise, unpleasant and electrical, somewhat terrifying. I feel like I can open my eyes again. It feels as if the world has stopped spinning for just this moment. Historia lets out a vast exhale, finally able to smile afterwards. Marco smiles also.

She walks towards me slowly but not hesitantly, holding out her hands for me. I take the hug because, right now, I’ve already past the line of selfishness, and I could do with a hug from someone I love. Her arms are motherly and friendly at the same time, I’ll always be thankful to have her. I love her.

“Do you want to go home again now, Jean?” She smiles, mostly with her eyes, lips letting out a gentle laugh, “There’s a distinct lack of Announcers, though, I’ll struggle.”

Finally, she lets go of me, and I let a tear fall, looking into those deep blue eyes once again. I get it now, I get Alma’s intention. It makes sense, I was just…oblivious. I want to go home.

The next pair of arms I find around me are strong and brave, but gentle and soft all the while. The clouds above me clear as I fold into him. Is this my home? I am unsure, but it feels like it. Marco holds me, and doesn’t call me selfish for letting a few tears fall. He strokes his hand sweetly through my hair, making my breaths shake in all sorts of ways, and I could stay here forever, it feels so wonderful.

His heart tells me he admires me, and that it isn’t my fault, and that I deserve to feel sorry for myself after spending a lonely two-hundred-and-forty-nine lifetimes chasing him, avoiding him, crying for him, loving him unconditionally. Watching him, caring for him, kissing him, holding
him, listening to him, treasuring him. Missing him, wandering for him, dreaming about him, waiting years for him, torturing myself for him, breaking down for him, and in the end receiving nothing but his death and another repeat of all that I’ve been through.

“You’ve been very brave,” He whispers, a prominent sound of happiness or clarity in his voice, “Crying will never make you weak.”

Deciding on not replying seems the best option, my lips can do all the talking, after all, words are just words. “I don’t remember.” “I don’t understand.” Things like that don’t last. My love for Marco does, and it’s not worth saying it when he knows, now, that I have spent so long showing it.

His lips are softer than they were before – feathery, light and dreamy, lulling me into such comfort and peace despite everything around us. Only Marco can make me feel that way, I am devout to him, every word he speaks is something I fall in love with. I’m so tired, using all my energy for this kiss. We’re much closer now to the end, and I need a break from it, just one small moment where I can relax with him and ignore my surroundings. A selfish moment…they are beginning to seem less rude.

“Come on, you two,” Historia chuckles, blushing a little bit, “We have more to do, and I can assure you that this next part is going to be the deepest river to swim.”

I catch Marco’s smiling eyes as our lips break apart, though I press against them again just for one more little kiss. He hums and giggles afterwards, small creases in the corners of his eyes. I’m thankful the swirling in my gut is gone. He has helped me realize it was okay, I could have figured all this out a long while ago.

I end up seeing my past self again, even now he is still sobbing into his hands. Aching, I grip my shirt above where my heart is, throwing a sad look towards Historia. She nods, almost as if she is agreeing with me. She drops to the ground onto her knees, her white dress falling like snow upon the frosted grass, eyelids shutting gently as she cups her hands against the floor.
There is another angelic glow from where she cups the ground, beaming through the cracks in her fingers. She hums a short tune, eyebrows furrowing in concentration. She honestly couldn’t look more spiritual, like the child of light, not a user of dark magic. There is nothing evil about this, it’s wonderful. Even the sight brings tears to my eyes.

“Hazen, loré, magia lorasari.” What language is that? Magic? I had never known until she met me on the beach that she could even use magic. It’s unsurprising really, as she has magic in her blood.

The glow dims a lot, shrinking to a small hum of light. Her hands lift off, fading away the light altogether, however from the ground in which she cast a spell blooms a white peony. Peonies are Marco’s favourite flowers. I smile at him, calm and sentimental, knowing he’ll remember picking them in Helston once, many lifetimes ago.

Historia stands once again, dropping her hand down to where the flower is and leaving her palm flat as if I am to know what I should do with the flower. It’s very beautiful, so strangely beautiful…it holds a beauty I can’t figure out. Maybe it is the good side of magic. Maybe it looks like a regular peony, but cast by the spell of a girl who may as well be an angel makes it a million times more special.

I bend over to pick the flower; it doesn’t lose any of its shine when I do. I only pick it just below the petals, leaving the stalk of the flower still on the ground in some sort of hope that it will one day bloom again. The flower feels like velvet, but silkier, much more delicate and fragile. But it is strong; all of the elements that built it are constructed in such exquisite detail.

I turn back to the lake where Jean still crouches and sobs. He hasn’t touched Marco yet. He doesn’t even know that it will trigger a change if he does. He hasn’t walked off the lake, as it doesn’t really matter anymore to him if he falls through and meets the same fate Marco just has. He feels worthless, he’ll feel worthless for another 247 more lifetimes, I still feel worthless now, but I have at least realized that I have a worth…even if it will never feel like it.
I am a human being, as inhuman as I feel. I am a human, and I feel emotion, and I am allowed. I am not perfect, I writhe in fault and imperfections, but I don’t need to hide it anymore. Marco loves every part of me, and I should be damned proud of myself for that. I am allowed to cry and be selfish, allowed to feel pity and sorrow and sympathy for myself after all I have been through, even if Marco deserves it more. Because I have learned, by looking back at myself like I am now in this cold, cold lifetime, that no one really deserves more or less than one another. I deserve a punch sometimes, but at least I deserve a hug once in a while too.

The lake doesn’t break or crack or whither when I step onto it. Despite Marco’s worried eyes and hesitance, I step slowly to where my love’s past self lies dead, not final, but dead. I put a hand on my past self’s shoulder. I wonder if he feels it, like a ghostly touch, or an inner thought, or a gut feeling, I hope to god he feels it. I am here for him, I am supporting him, and I wish the best for him. He is me, and I want to be happy now.

I place the peony into Past-Marko’s open palm, it is blue and shrivelled, stone cold and lifeless, but the peony makes him seem much more alive. No, he looks alive. I have said it before: Marco looks more alive than a living person, even in death. His eyelashes are dark, just as they look when he closes his eyes as I kiss him. His lips look soft, just like they are when they touch my own. Each freckle is there, and I have counted them many times, there are no more or less than usual.

He is Marco, and his favourite flower is a peony, and my past self does not know this yet, however when he finally takes a moment to look upon his lover once again and see’s the peony, he knows that the flower suits Marco more than any other flower on this planet ever could.

I step back, and suddenly a memory, a very warm memory, begins to unravel in my head. It is a vague memory, and I know as I step back towards Historia and Marco that this memory is a new one, and one I have just created. I remember leaning forward and looking intently at Marco, I remember some bottled hope that he was alive, and I remember a tanned-white peony in his sweet hand. I remember leaning to him in confusion, and pressing my hand over his frozen heart, and then I remember another change, just like I had felt before I arrived in this second lifetime, and I remember smiling, and that hope was not lost. Now I know. This is the reason why Marco and I love peonies the most. Hope.

“Let’s go home.” I whisper to him, and take his hand in mine, because he is my real home, and I would never want to leave.
Stepping through the very last announcer feels exceedingly easier and less alien than the past three times. Although I have many questions, I can repress them for the time being, push them out of the way and let the more important thoughts swirl around in the forefront of my mind.

Marco’s hand feels much steadier and comfortable in mine than it ever has before. It feels like a different level of calm. Not before, but after the storm. It’s wonderful. Everything within me feels accomplished, but, as I keep reminding myself, this is not the end, there is a long road ahead of us and we’ve simply passed a checkpoint.

The other side of the announcer is just back where we started. Thankfully not at the very beginning, but in that dark and unlit tomb beside Marco’s sad little grave. Well, it’s not so sad anymore. With an exhausted click of her fingers, Historia relights each candle all at once, the rows glowing with a warm orange once again.

“I figured out the curse.” I tell the graves, but really no one in specific, or maybe everyone, especially Alma.

My bones feel stronger. Restructured.

Historia lets out a long and tremulous exhale before sitting her withering body down onto the hard floor. It’s hard to tell whether she is human anymore or just a skeleton, “Alma,” she breathes, “She is waiting for you, Jean. You’ll have to summon your own Announcer to get to the 250th lifetime.”
I find myself completely ignoring whole ‘Announcer summoning’ part and instead smiling like an idiot at Marco, “No death? Like that? We just…step through and see what’s on the other side? If it was-”

“Jean.” She interrupts, her fingers tracing over the knuckles on her left hand, “It’s not that simple. I can’t go with you, and neither can Marco.”

My smile begins to fade. Like melting snow, when the rain comes again and washes it all away. It’s not a total loss of hope, nothing much has been said yet, but I can feel that a wave…a storm is coming. Maybe the calm…it was before after all.

“My love,” It’s Marco this time. I turn to catch his gaze and it explains everything, he already understands, “You can’t trigger an alter in time unless I’m dead, or we step through an Announcer. I’m assuming you’ll only be able to summon one this time because you’ve been granted the power by Alma…”

I shake my head so many times that my neck could snap. No. That’s the only word I can think of. Even the candles lighting the room look cold, everywhere feels damp and the air is thin, I can’t breathe, I’m suffocating.

“I’m not leaving you!” I shout, teeth clattering, “Not now, not after this, I’m not letting you forget me again.” My voice, though it started out so strong, becomes a solemn whimper by the end of it, I can’t help the tears in my eyes anymore.

Not now, not after learning it’s okay to cry. This is so selfish. But why should I have to loose him again? I understand the curse…I-

“250.” Marco interrupts my thoughts, gripping at both my hands, “I have loved you for two-
hundred and forty-five goddamn lifetimes, and these last two I have remembered all the ones where I forgot you, don’t think that something as simple as death is going to make me forget you. Breathe and I’ll come for you, Jean Kirschtein, we always meet each other. We always find each other. Even on the opposite sides of this whole planet, we fall in love. Don’t you forget that.”

Historia then smiles so softly, so sweet, each breath looks like effort, “It’s true, Jean. Alma wants it over with as much as you do. It’s me offering you the way of the Announcer, now that you have the ability, take the opportunity, because it’ll be painless for Marco.”

“And you?” I ask, “Will it be painless for you?”

She smiles again, “I’ve told you this before, Jean: I am just a vision. I’m really still in the first lifetime, how else could I communicate with Alma from here? The two of us, Marco and I – vision me – will just fade away with this lifetime. No pain, no game. It’s simple…until you get to the other side.”

I feel Marco let go of my fingers, stroking his thumb over my knuckles, my body becoming less tense. Maybe there is hope. Just maybe.

“What’s on the other side?”

The two of them smile at me reassuringly, the same kind of smile, a clueless one, but determined, “249 lifetimes of asking and I still have no idea,” Historia explains, “But I will do whatever I can to make it easier. If I can. We’re going to be dealing with hell, heaven, black-magic and God on the other side, Jean. It’ll be one of the hardest things you’ll ever do, but you’re capable, these many lifetimes are like…training. You’ll make it, both of you, together you can do this. I would end my life to get you both the happiness you deserve.”
The last part hurts both Marco and I, an awful kind of pain. I try and speak, “Historia—”

“Enough now.” She says, “You two can say your goodbyes now. We have a train to catch.”

I step anything but hesitantly away from Marco and over to where Historia sits, wrapping my arms around her and scooping her small body into a tight hug, tight enough to show her I love her, but gentle enough to avoid breaking her. Even if she is just a vision. She presses a soft kiss to my cheek. I’m so damned thankful to have a friend like her.


What if I go through the Announcer and he has permanently been erased? What if I can’t summon it and he has to die instead? What if Alma makes the curse carry on? What if this is a trap, and she won’t even be on the other side? I feel dizzy in Marco’s arms; I need his embrace just a minute longer, a lifetime longer, this shouldn’t have to end, even if it’ll all come back to me. This Marco, the one holding me, he knows, he remembers, everything. I can’t loose that. I won’t risk it.

But some things have to be done whether I like it or not. This is for the good of everyone, not just Marco and I. I need to end the curse, get Marco back, and kill Alma Reiss.

I deepen the kiss, so that Marco won’t know I feel nervous. I won’t cry just yet, even if I am allowed. I can taste him on my tongue; I can smell him, vanilla and hot chocolate. My thumb makes an unconscious infinity sign against the back of his head, one hand in his hair and the other around his neck. His hands are on my back, moving up and down. I could live off this. I could die from this.

He gasps as he lets go.
His eyes burn into mine.

“Walk on the smoothest paths, Jean.” He says, eyes watering over a little.

Between pants from the kiss, I reply, “What?”

“It’s a metaphor, fool.” He grins, pulling me into a soft hug, it’s nice and warm, simple but perfect, “Take the easiest routes… just… stay safe. Good luck. You can do this until we meet again, I know it. And then we will find each other, and I can help you out.”

“You really think?” I ask, my heartbeat at an uneasy pace.

“Yes.” His hand ruffles my hair, and I let out a giggle, covering it as best I can with an exhale, “You’re my brave boy, I love you. I love you so much.”

“Love you more.” This earns a swat. It’s not so bad.

I’m reluctant to let go of him, but I do it, it feels so difficult, almost needing as much force as it took for India to break apart from Africa billions of years ago. It’s hard; it’s always hard to leave him. I’ve done it before, and I’m even more confident this time that I’ll meet him again. Me and Marco, Marco and I, we connect on another level, ‘magnetic force’ was how he once described it, the strongest of all attractions, we pull towards each other whether we like it or not. That thought makes it so much easier to let go, and to walk hesitantly over to where the room is shadowed and away from any candles.
“You can close your eyes,” Historia says, “Just imagine it coming, and it will.”

I nod at her, shutting my eyelids almost instantly. I picture the dark corner, all its shadows lurking and swirling around and pretending they aren’t alive. I imagine the disgusting noise, the oozing, gooey sound they make, and I imagine one dethatching from the rest. This one is a heavy, pendulous shadow. It’s like a dark thundercloud, and it shuffles and tumbles along the ground, a tumult of wind around it, it rolls and storms towards me, but slows at my feet in fear.

I tear open my eyes and find an Announcer right at my toes, it’s not as solid and ungraceful as the one I imagined, however it’s close.

“Grab it, Jean.”

I nod again, watching it some more. I can’t help but gulp. In an instant, at the speed of a Great Blue Heron plunging into the waters with its beak for prey, I grip the shadow. The touch is disgusting, slimier and much more like liquid than I imagined. I expected some sort of velvet feel, as shadows look quite gentle and peaceful. Though I remember this one is alive, perhaps, or maybe just moving by magic, I don’t really know, only that Announcers are messengers or time portals, as Historia has already told me.

I manage to shape the Announcer into a rectangular form, portrait, and then as if on its own, it grows larger, the volume seemingly less, but the surface area much larger. It’s thinning out, becoming flat, two-dimensional, a door. Again, that vague buzz of an image begins to appear. I don’t even want to look.

“Sweetheart,” Marco whispers from beside me, “Be brave. I promise this wont hurt me, and that I’ll come back to you as soon as I can.”
“I’m starting to panic…I think.”

“No, no,” He says, looking at me as I stand with my back to the Announcer, his eyes veer over my shoulder and catch sigh of the image on the other side, he seems to smile at it, “Don’t be worried, you’ll be glad to see the other side. You’ll find me easily.”

My shoulders soften again.

I reach up and press one more kiss at his lips before stepping back some more. Counting each millisecond, embracing each scent and colour and fibre of this life, treasuring it, because this is the closest to happiness I’ve ever really been before.

“Thank you, Marco,” I say, “For giving me hope.”

And then I feel the cloud at my skin, the same silk-like touch of the portal, the same hum and the same intoxicating and hallucinogenic dream it sends me into, and I watch Marco, Historia and the tomb turn an angel-white in front of my eyes until a wonderful spring-blue bleeds into the picture.

I lean back, falling and falling until I land on the soft ground. It’s the easiest fall to make, and I’ve fallen this way before. I have landed on this same field surrounded by blue skies and willow trees, and patches of clear blue ponds, so transparent and reflective. I recognize this smell, of daffodils and daisies. I can hear the birds flutter past, and I can see in the distance a forest, a wonderful woodland of greens that block my eyes from the awful towns behind them. Yes, this is the nicest place for thousands of miles.

The best part, the part I love the most, is the way that, in the Afternoon, the sun shines on the inner side of the walls, and the dark shadow from stone no longer casts over this field. To my left is more woodland, and to my right is the very willow tree to where I once wandered, and fell in love with
the sound of a man’s singing voice, and met Marco Bodt for the very first time.

This is it. This is the area the furthest away from my manor in Wall Sina that I can possibly go, this is South-East Maria, right beside the thick stone barrier that blocked me from safety. This is the field I loved 249 lifetimes ago, because it was the only beauty I had ever come across. And yet, within this beauty, I found Marco, and he out-shone it all.

This is the very first lifetime. I’m back, back to the beginning, back to the place that two hundred and forty-nine lifetimes of misery and bittersweet happiness would shine ahead.

I have a few things on my agenda this 250th lifetime, one is to end the curse, one is revenge, one is to free Historia, but the first, and the most important, is finding Marco Bodt.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr

Also, here is the playlist for this fic, however it is entirely KPOP, but if you're open minded enough, I'm sure you'll still like it.

I BEG OF YOU PLEASE COMMENT.
Inauspicious Stars

Chapter Notes

this took so long i'm sorry especially to you LlamasInPyjamas, to whom i promised an update ages ago but never did oops.
also i rewrote this entire thing after realising how i disliked a lot of it so i'll go back and edit older chapters asap so that they're up to my current standard of writing :)

warning: probably filled with mistakes. literally. if u see one tell me asap thanks :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I woke with a start. For once, and for the first time, though, not in an uneasy way. I woke after sleeping for many hours upon the softest ground I had ever felt. Never in my life had I experienced this, never in my life had I felt the embrace of the sun like this.

I could have sworn, right there and then, that I had found heaven.

How had I got there? How had I discovered this place? I had to remain on the ground for a few minutes longer until my brain activated, and the memories started blurring back into a clearer picture. It was because, in the early hours of that morning, I had attended the official ceremony of my betrothal to Historia Reiss held in Queen Alma’s castle, all the way in Mitras. I had stood, blank and emotionless, as our crowns and medallions were handed to us, being reminded that in four years time, when we both turned twenty-four, we would be married. I was a nobleman, she was a princess - it had been decided whether we liked it or not.

I had made it through the ceremony. But as soon as I exited that hellish church, I had sprinted for miles. I ran until I reached the boat to the furthest area from Mitras, the southeast of the city, right near the walls, and I took it. My twenty-year-old and clueless self had no idea where on earth I was going, but my instincts clearly wanted to get as far away from Alma as possible. I ran and I ran, for more miles until my feet almost bled. Until the ground felt like glass, and that my feet would be dressed in scars on the morrow. But it didn’t matter. I remember making it all the way to this forest, running straight through it. I ignored my surroundings, which I should not have, considering the field I ran across happened to be the field I would spend many days in thereafter.
I ran until I could touch the wall, slamming both fists against the stone. And then I stepped back, a few metres, and fell into sleep.

That brings me to waking up with a start, many hours later, in the noon. I could feel the sun against my cheeks, the grass intertwining with my fingers, and the warm breeze. I could smell the daffodils and daisies. I tore open my eyes to a sight unlike anything I had ever seen. I had to sit up and let my senses become trustworthy, for all this could be a dream. I knew, after staring intently at my surroundings, that it most definitely was not a dream. But what had I woken up to?

Between the buzz of wildlife and the tune of the wind, I could hear a hum. The melodic beauty of the noise was so breathtaking to me that I was instantly attracted to it before I had even found the source of the sound. Words cannot describe how silky and smooth the voice was, yes, the voice, I discovered, as my body walked unconsciously nearer the source, which just happened to be a willow tree.

I brought my fingers up to the long, drooping, feather-like leaves of the willow, parting it to look through. The source of the voice belonged to a man. A young man. Of my very own age, surely. I could not make out his face, for he looked out upon the pond. Though I could see a vague reflection of him in the surface of the water. His hearing must have been exceptional, as in an instant he stopped singing, and let out a calm sigh.

“I do love spring. I love the way that all of the flowers, which were hidden and frozen in time throughout the cold months, can finally bloom again. It makes me feel alive.” He said, though I wasn’t sure if he was talking to himself or to me, “I hear that beside the north of the walls, there are a large amount of cherry blossoms that bloom at this time of year. A whole orchard of them.”

I gulped, his voice warmed my heart in an unfamiliar yet intoxicating way, “Y-Yes, springtime is lovely,” I could not help but pause, “But in Mitras and Trost, we get no greenery whatsoever.”

The man’s shoulders tensed, and his neck snapped around so fast I felt anxious as to whether he has broken it or not. My eyes caught his, such a beautiful and rare shade of brown, umber – so
dark they were almost black, and yet just around the pupil was a ring of lighter brown, which I rarely saw in the city centre. His cheeks were dusted in freckles. When he looked at me closely, his eyes began to widen, eyebrows shooting up into his hairline and shoulders shivering.

“Master Kirschtein!” He gasped breathlessly, standing and dropping onto his knee before me, “I should have...I didn’t realise you-”

“Please,” I begged him, “Today has been terrible enough, crowns and medallions, betrothals, ceremonies, ‘Sir’ and ‘Master’. I am sick and tired of it. Call me Jean, please, let me talk to you as if I am as free as you are.”

Slowly, the boy stood up before my eyes, stepping a few feet closer and holding out his hand to me, “M-My name is Marco Bodt. I’m just a commoner from the suburbs, you could say, but if it is really what you’d like, I will happily talk to you...like I would with someone from my village.”

“Jean,” I took his hand, and shuddered at the shivers of electricity that his touch sent up and down my spine throughout my nerves and to my heart in beats, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Marco Bodt. Would you mind if I sit beside you?”

“Not at all.” He returned.

“And can you please tell me some more about here...Jinae, and yourself, or even sing some more of your song? Anything, I beg. Give me your whole life story. I need a distraction.”

He brought his hand to my thigh in a way that confused my every fibre. I wanted to grasp him back, but ignored the need, because it was nothing other than a friendly notion. “Now, now,” He chuckled, patting my leg before going back to fixing up a daisy chain, “I will tell you all you want to hear, but it will take a long time, Jean. You may fall asleep.” It was then that he laughed, even if
just slightly, and I felt that I was a phoenix: burned at the stake and emerged from my very own ashes.

I shrugged weakly; dropping back into the grass and enjoying how soft the ground was there. My head turned towards Marco, I allowed myself to take in his beauty, after all I was only admiring, or so I thought. He was very handsome. He had a lovely scent too, of vanilla, a rare spice I had smelled once at my Mother’s biggest banquet. Perhaps here in the outskirts vanilla was something used daily. Everything about Marco seemed intriguing. I wanted to know more, I was drawn in by his touch and what it did to me, and the way his voice sounded like a song.

“I’ll have to come back then. Every day. Until you tell me every detail about you.”

“You’ll get bored, I assure you.”

“No way,” I shook my head, pulling a smile, “I would never. I think we can be friends, Marco. If you’d let me.”

“Yes, Mast-” He gulped, but smiled soon after, “Yes, Jean. I think we will.”

I learned that day that even if the walls blocked out the sun, Marco’s smile was more than enough to help the flowers bloom all around us, and to bring some light into a life I hated more than anything else in the world.
I have a few things on my agenda this last lifetime, one is to end the curse, one is revenge, one is to free Historia, but the first, and the most important, is finding Marco Bodt. Even if it was for no longer than a minute, I had hesitated the very moment I jumped through the Announcer, and the thought that I wasted precious time makes me feel uneasy. I find myself walking at a thunderous pace towards the nearest village: Jinae.

It’s such a small village, engulfed in woodland and wildflowers, so much so that it tends to be forgotten by the other towns within the walls, especially Mitras. Many of the people in the suburbs have audible enthusiasm, ability to farm in any weather, and high spirits beyond comprehension, which always surprised me considering how horrid everything within the walls is. The town is one of the most wonderful places in The Walls, because despite everything they still try and they still love. Being there for each other is much more important than what anyone else in other towns might do or say.

I had never thought a person could find happiness while trapped like a bird in this cage, humiliated, however here in the suburbs there are at least a hundred happy villagers. Maybe that’s what pulled me in, along with its culture and the Bodt family’s signature tomato soup.

I laugh nostalgically to myself as I pace through the sheltered forestry area at the overwhelming scent of tomatoes in this village, no one really knew why it smelled so strongly of them. Maybe because they mass-produced tomatoes or because Marco’s Mother sold her soup to almost everyone in the village, each evening they would gather around a huge cauldron of it and eat together, trying to enjoy themselves no matter what. Peonies grow here too, many, many peonies, you can see them in the windows of those slate-rooved houses, in plant pots by the front door, or growing on every patch of grass they possibly can. It’s no wonder, really, why these are Marco’s favourite flower.

Today Jinae is deadly silent, not even a rustle from the trees in the wind, or the subtle patter of birds wings, or even a single happy villager. There is nothing and I only notice how gloomy and solemn the village looks when I finally step out from the forest. It looks like the bustling life that once lit up so brightly has been entirely sucked out of it.

My footsteps are unnaturally loud against the rocky ground, each time my foot hits the path it sends cracks through the earth’s floor, like an earthquake will approach. It’s just my nerves. This isn’t an alien feeling as such; just one I’ve not felt in a while. I feel heavy and out of place, uneasy
about my surroundings, but there is really no surprise, especially considering I’m back in a lifetime I’ve not seen for 248 lifetimes in between then and now. No, what’s more important is that this lifetime could very well be the end to the cycle, maybe I’ll be stuck here, or maybe it will be my last lifetime altogether. God forbid I die here.

The walls had always been a little flaky in the southeast; some cracks in the foundations, however it always looked lighthearted among the rest of the inner walls. Much more beautiful than Mitras. But not today. I can’t smell the scent of fresh fruit or even tomato soup. And the only peonies in sight are dead ones, the villagers clearly lacking the energy to maintain them anymore. There is no destruction here, it just looks so solitary, and technically it is being miles away from other villages, but the citizens had made it feel larger than life.

Nothing. There is nothing.

That is until I hear my own name being called by a familiar voice, though this time there is nothing avuncular or benevolent about her voice, nor is there anger or hatred, not that there ever was, but there is distress, and I already know I’m going to hate seeing the owner of the voice in a state of sorrow. It’s Carla Bodt, and the sight of her messy dark curls falling lazily down her back, and the tears in her eyes, and the way her cheeks are red and patchy from crying make me feel a knot twist in my stomach. This is Marco’s mother, and she is all alone. Despite the way she runs towards me, there is silence other than her sobs, not even her footsteps. Perhaps my brain just wants to focus on what I find more important.

“Carla,” I say breathlessly, my heart soaring at a woman I’ve not seen in so long, yet a woman who I treasured as if she were my own mother as well as Marco’s, “Carla. What’s wrong?”

I crouch down to where she is, whimpering at her clenched fists, wide eyes furrowed into a blink, tears streaming along her cheeks, “They took him.” She says with slurred words, “They took him!”

Marco. The guards. It’s no surprise. I imagine they’d enter the village like thunder, storming into each household and evacuating the citizens until they found Marco, dragging him out by his wrists
and into a pony and trap, spears at his neck until they reached Mitras. The villagers would have followed, but Carla…she’d wait here, hoping he would return, or waiting for me to bring him home. She often waited if Marco and I went out together, waited hours and bit at her nails worrying for her dear son. It’s heartbreaking to imagine how terrified she must be right now.

“Please…Jean,” she begs, grabbing at my shoulders, desperate and distraught, “Protect him from Queen Alma, god, please bring him home…alive.”

I feel my heart twist in my chest, and my ribcage becomes horribly tight, “I will. I’ll find him and protect him. I promise.” I’ve never been able to protect Marco, nor has he ever been able to protect me, however today I feel like my words are much more sincere than they’ve been in previous lives.

“But you stay safe, too,” She bites back another sob, and I can understand the feeling very well, “I don’t know what I’d do if you both die-”

“We won’t. Not this time.” Carla luckily doesn’t question the way I phrase the sentence, as if we’ve died before, “I promise.”

I press a soft kiss at her forehead, the way my Mother used to kiss me when I was a child before leaving me at the hands of nannies for hours on end, even though Carla is the mother here and not I, but all I want is to soothe her and it works to some extent. She thanks me, and I leave. Just like that. There isn’t damned time to stay here with her when I have my lover’s life at stake.

I always thanked God, even if not literally, for Jinae being somewhat close to my Palace in Trost. Despite the three-mile walk through hilled forest and rocky pathways, lakes and streams
intertwined, Marco never felt too far away from me. Though, if I had to stay in Mitras with Historia for the weekend I’d feel years away.

Marco and I met up on a daily basis. We’d sometimes meet at night, and look at the stars, discussing dreams, futures and what lies beyond the walls. During the day, he’d tell me great stories about grand oceans and vast mountain ranges, and during the night he’d talk of northern lights and shooting stars. He’d always begged to see a shooting star, but no such thing was ever seen behind the walls. Instead he’d close his eyes and leave it to his imagination, thinking about riding horses through lush fields with me, or dancing with the stars. Late August crept upon us and we hadn’t thought at all that four whole months had passed. It felt like weeks, yet maybe lifetimes at the same time. Time became something neither of us bothered to consider. I began to revolve around him, and he around me. Sometimes, I lay down beside him on the soft grass and put my hand on his. I thought that maybe it was a thing friends did in the southeast. I had no idea I was falling in love with him. With a man.

It was on the first day of September in 1690 that things began to fall apart.

“Jean,” Marco had said, grinning at me as he turned to prop his head onto his hand, elbow holding his upper body from the ground, he was facing me and we were so close, it made my heart flutter, “Do you believe in God?”

“You mean like the God Alma believes in…the ‘Christian God’? Or the other Gods from other religions? Or just...any kind of God?”

Marco sighed. Neither of us had much knowledge of any God’s other than Alma’s God. Well, the god she believed in was supposed to be the Christian God, but her religion was very different in many ways. There were churches, and even a Bible, but she barely listened to the words of that book, mostly imposing her own views on everyone, as if she was trying to steal God’s place. “I don’t believe in God. I believe that the universe has always been here, for no reason – with no cause, and that it’s so large we can’t even comprehend the size of it.”
I nodded, and I could feel his breath against my face. He smelled sweet. Then a thought shot across the forefront of my mind, so vivid and exciting that I could see the streams of golden stardust float across the sky, trailing after my idea, “What if the universe just...goes on forever?”

“Forever?”

“Forever.” I imagined it was endless black, star-filled skies, moons and planets, comets and shooting stars. There must have be a lot of freedom in space, and to us that seemed so wonderful. More room, more land to escape from things. And if it ever felt too dark the sun was just surely a mere hundred miles away, “You know, your skin has stars...your freckles. They're like the stars up in the sky.”

He laughed slightly, breathy and soft. It was barely a laugh, though his eyes were pulled into crescents and his lips curled into a smile, “The sky is dark tonight. I doubt you can even see my freckles.”

I could see him. All of him. The moon had a powerful glow that night, not incandescent for the moon looked cold rather than warm, however it emitted light just as the sun would. Not as bright, but just as overwhelming. The grass seemed a shade of blue, and Marco’s skin a pale white, glistening. His lips were a sweet pink, and I almost wanted to touch them. He was very beautiful, the perfect man to marry a noblewoman. My stomach knotted at the idea of him finding a lover who would see him the way I did. Perhaps this was jealousy.

“I can see you,” Before I knew it, my lips were almost a milimetre away from his, “You’re brighter than the stars, Marco, you’re an angel.”

When we kissed, I tried not to think of how I would be killed for this. I knew fully well what sodomy was, but I had never considered myself a sodomite. But this wasn’t intercourse, this was just a kiss, and there was nothing against this in the religious scriptures. I had kissed Historia before, under Alma’s eyes, but it was not like this. This was what I was supposed to do: kiss Marco. Maybe, in this universe of endless stars, people are created and born differently to others, and that was
Marco and I. God must have had exceptions.

We were born to love each other in a world where it simply wasn’t allowed.

But I didn’t care, not that night. Not when his hand snaked up to my hip while he held me, and as I kissed him and shook in his arms out of fear and other sensations, not all bad ones, he soothed me, and it was all OK for the time being. I had to accept what I was, and it would take some time. But maybe I could grow to the idea of loving Marco without yet labeling myself as disgusting. As a sinner. No, what we had wasn’t sin, it was beautiful.

There was nothing ugly in the flecks of stardust he left against my bare skin after he touched it. He lit me up when I thought I had burned out. That night, I decided I would die without Marco. With him I was a supernova, and if he left I would become nothing more than a black hole.

I make it to Trost just a few miles away from the centre of the city fairly easily. My stomach rumbles, begging for food, and my throat is parched, but I don’t want to do anything here. I want to relieve the feeling of being caged, like cattle. My limbs ache. I may as well have no nails anymore considering how I’ve bitten the majority of them off. My nerves over Marco make my stomach feel as if it is tied in knots, although it’s not a new feeling to me.

Trost is busy. People swarm the streets carrying bread from the markets or meat; others are just out to walk. I can already see that there are thieves for one man slips his hand into a woman’s pocket and takes out a wad of notes. There are prostitutes too; I can tell by the way they stand with their arms crossed over their lower chest as they wait in a street corner for a sleazy man to notice them. There are children on the sides of the streets with blue eye bags from malnutrition. To the right side of the street is a body being thrown into a cart of others, to be burned, for people drop dead on a daily basis. This is what a place with a corrupt leadership looks like. The walls don’t even have a government, entirely run by a heartless monarch. It’s utter Hell.
I feel so sick that I beg to take a break but no words can even escape my lips. I have to keep walking and I have to get to Marco. I make it only halfway through the town when I spot a person in the distance and end up frozen in my place.

I wouldn’t notice anyone like this, just some person standing still within the crowd. But this time I do, and it isn’t even because the woman is looking directly into my eyes. There is an aura around her that makes me feel weak like she has a power no one can even comprehend. She has these golden brown irises and thin, demanding eyes, which I have seen only once before but can remember vividly. Her hair is tied back and her clothes look foreign and expensive, she has the attention of absolutely everyone who walks past her.

She is Ymir, and she should not be in this lifetime.

Perhaps it is that godly feel she gives that pushes me to walk towards her. I don’t want to, I wouldn’t want to with such confusion and fear writhing within my brain, but I do. Her hand is out and her finger seems to be pulling me in. Luring me. How is this possible? How is she here when she was from the last lifetime? Historia had said she was just a human unwillingly pulled into the magic of Alma but now she seems more. She seems magic in her own way.

“Jean Kirschtein.” The way she speaks has me wanting to get down on my knees and pray. The glint in her eyes doesn’t look human.

“Y-Ymir.”

“That would be me,” She says again, but this time her voice is more relaxed, laced with that tone one would use when saying something light-hearted, and yet I barely feel any more comfortable, “Why don’t you walk with me? Give me a chance to explain myself.”
One thing that I notice is that her thick Kiwi accent isn’t there anymore. It’s hard to tell what it is, but if I am to make a guess I’d say it’s a Japanese accent. Sharper and thinly spoken. This, however, still isn’t as confusing as her being here in the first place.

“Am I dreaming right now?” The words leave my mouth before I can swallow them back down.

“I get that one a lot. You aren’t, I will explain, but first just walk with me.” She holds her hand out for me and I reach to grab it. But right before I do, she moves hers away and grins while laughing, “You think I’m letting you hold my hand, kid?” I simply shrug and shake my head a little too much in response. “I fucking hate this city. The worst thing is, they all love God here and yet they’re the kind of people I bet God fucking hates.”

This, I can disagree with, “No. No one believes in God here. Queen Alma does, but I think that if God is real he isn’t the person Alma thinks he is.” I’m unsure of where my confidence came from so suddenly – it’s as if Ymir’s presence gives me energy.

“I don’t think God is a ‘he’,” She smiles, the corners of her lips flicking upwards as she does. It’s a nice smile, quite rare…like Marco’s. Her smile makes her seem welcoming, “I think God is whoever God wants to be. God is just God.”

We walk out into a clearing on the street where less people walk. My confidence rises knowing that I’m not surrounded anymore, seeing as most people know who I am. I don’t want to attract unwanted attention, especially considering I would be taken with a knife to the neck and dragged to Alma’s palace, then thrown into a prison and unable to get out. “Oh?” I say sarcastically, a raised eyebrow and a quirk in the left corner of my smile, “God told you that, did he?”

In the distance, I hear the sound of a bird singing. It isn’t a nice song, like one would imagine in a fairytale. A sweet melody for princes and princesses to sing to. No, this sound was almost like a
screech, something a human would only be able to achieve if they were suffering tremendous pain. Yet the sound of the bird may as well be music in this place, for it is a sign of wildlife in a city where wildlife would never be seen living. This bird is a good sign, I hope.

“Hmm, maybe so.” She replies, licking over her lips. I notice a glint in her eyes as if she is lost and searching, a sort of glint I suppose I must have right now while I search for Marco, “God has been watching you, Jean. For a very long time. It has been so long that this is no game anymore, and I’m sure God wants this over with just as much as you do. God is the only one who can play with magic and time, not Alma, and so here I am Jean, to help guide you to her. And to Marco, of course.”

If God sent her here, then she must be an angel. Almost like Angel Gabriel from the Bible, though he was a messenger of sorts. Ymir is not that, she is a guardian. My own guardian angel sent from God after he realized how much he pitied me.

I look up to the sky, but that bird is flying away. Though now I have my own pair of wings right beside me, as unexplainable as they are. And when all is said and done, I have my very own angel waiting for me to come and rescue him from a Hell where he never belonged.

*After we kissed, there was a long period of time in which neither of us talked. There had been an increase in executions for sodomites and it reached a point where I was too scared, too fearful that what we had done could ruin everything. I decided that it was best if I returned home to my palace and slept away how I felt, for leaving him back in those beautiful suburbs was some form of protection.*

*Meeting me proposed a whole list of dangers for us that I had not considered when I pressed my lips against his.*
Soon, December had passed so quickly that in just six hours the clock would strike twelve and the New Year would begin. It only dawned on me when we had separated that I meant it when I had claimed I would die without him; I meant it in every sense of the word. Against the bed sheets fell a small drop of salt water, a tear, I had shed many of those in recent times. So much so that crying was something I could do easier than eating. Was it even possible to fall in love like this? Surely love didn’t exist. Love was for fairytales, and I would only have believed it if those lovers were willing to die for each other, and had known one another for thousands of years. Yet there I was, sobbing against the rough cotton of my bed like I had fallen in love with Marco over night.

Was it even love? What was love? What was the meaning of the word?

Was love the feeling that twirled and twisted in Galileo’s stomach as he gazed up at the stars? Maybe it was the feeling of freedom when spring came along, and the blossom buds could finally burst, flowers blooming even if for such a short period of time. Perhaps love was what Marco’s mother Carla and his father Elliot felt for each other when Christmas came along, and the family gathered around the fire to open the small presents they were given, be it an orange or a hand-sewn handkerchief. Surely, when they looked at their beloved children, then back at each other they felt so much love that it hurt; they had raised a beautiful family under their own roof with their own bare hands. Love could not be something that simply grew through the months of spring and summer, autumn and winter, blossoming in the heart like flowers.

Even if it could, was that possible between two men? Since birth I had been taught that some men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. I didn’t think love could be unnatural, shameful, or an error. That wasn’t love - that was a mistake. And as I thought about this more and more it only made me sadder, wanting to return to Marco for comfort.

Thankfully, I was released only momentarily from my shell that night when Historia came to visit. I had heard a slight knock at the door in a tune only she ever made. I called for her to come in, wiping any evidence of tears from my cheeks. She walked into my bedroom dressed in all white clothing; the top of her dress covered her entire neck, and clung to her body until her waist. After that it fell outwards in a cascade all the way to the floor. I knew she was beautiful, insanely beautiful, though somehow I just wasn’t attracted to her.

Not in the way I was attracted to Marco.
“Good God, it smells awful in here. Stuffy,” She laughed, coming over to my bed and sitting on the end, twisting her body to face me, “You’ve been crying. Is it about that friend of yours, the pretty one? What was her name again…Mar…Mar…”

“Marcy.” I replied, my throat suddenly tasting sour from my lies, “Her name is Marcy.”

“Marcy, then. I don’t like her, she’s twisted your heart in all sorts of wrong directions.” Historia had that smile in her lips, one of willpower and strength, though there was a sense of benevolence through her cold shoulder sometimes, just a crack in the foundation that let people know she only wanted to love and care for her friends, “I think you’ve fallen in love with her. It seems that way. You’ve been so happy since spring and then suddenly it was all over. What on earth happened?”

Eventually I even noticed the smell, it was dusty and old, for I hadn’t left my room in so long, nor had I opened the doors. I slithered out of bed, wandering around her and finding myself at the other door. I pulled at the wood and slid open the door easily, bones cracking from such a long time with no movement. When the door slid open I could gaze out at the palace gardens, stone paths on grass now coated in a thick layer of snow. The air felt good against my skin, and I wondered if Marco was looking out into the white abyss just as I was.

“I don’t think I can love Marcy, it isn’t possible Historia. If this were as simple as heartbreak I would not be so upset. This is completely different.”

Turning my body back towards her, we caught eyes, and there was a sort of knowing look in those blue irises, “How is it different? You know that what you tell me stays with me, Jean, I would never think to judge you for anything you say.”

Unconsciously I found myself back at the bed, though this time I sat beside her. She wrapped her arms around me and my head fell upon her chest. I could hear her heartbeat as loud as I could feel.
my own, but our hearts didn’t beat for each other. Mine beat for Marco’s. That much was clear to me.

“Marcy is a man. His name is Marco.” I said, quietly, “I have fallen in love with a man.”

Historia was silent for a while. It wasn’t a particularly bad silence. Her palm rubbed against my back in circular motions, like we were mother and child, yet she was really just my best friend. Because we were born into a world without love or affection, we guided each other. She was the only person that I could trust to help me when I needed it most.

“When my Mother questioned your parents so suddenly about a betrothal for us in the near future, you had all thought it was a random, sporadic decision. It wasn’t, Jean, she had learned something about me and thought that marrying me off was the only way to end it,” I lifted my head up from her chest to look at her closer, there was a sadness to her gaze. Distant and wistful. “My mother made me marry you because I had told her I was attracted to women and not men.”

I felt my entire jaw drop.

Women could love women, men could love men, I was not alone in this world. My own best friend, my own fiancée, and my own future wife, was attracted to women. Neither of us could ever possibly love each other, and yet we both had emerald medallions around our necks, the jewel falling at our chests so everyone knew we were to marry. It was such a ridiculous situation that not even the most creative poets or writers would have thought of such a concept.

“A long time ago, there was no such thing as Christianity, Jean. When the Romans ruled Europe, all emperors save for Claudius took on male lovers. Have you ever learned about Hadrian and Antinous? They were a couple well respected by everyone. Jean, there is nothing unnatural about us. That’s the word of the Bible. Of Saint Paul, and Mark and John and Luke and Matthew. The words of some men who simply think thought knew what God asks of us. The Bible isn’t God’s book. You are allowed to love Marco; there is absolutely nothing wrong with it. Nothing, Jean, nothing at all.”
“You’re saying that the Bible is wrong?” I retorted with a wheezing breath. This entire conversation seemed unbelievable to me and yet I was a big part of it.

“Yes. I know the Bible is wrong. Or else there wouldn’t be so many different Gods and religions. There is one God and no one knows who they are lest they meet God themselves.” Historia replied with a smile, patting my shoulder as if to say it was time for us to part. “You love Marco. Go to him. I’m sure he loves you back.”

Looking back on my first lifetime, this moment especially, I can easily conclude that without Historia I would never have spent all these years chasing Marco. And as I have said before, I do not regret those lifetimes. For that, I am eternally grateful to her, for she is the reason we are together. She is the foundation of our relationship.

After she had spoken to me, I found myself running just as I had in the spring, though this time I wasn’t running away from anyone. I was running forwards.

Queen Alma’s castle is in the absolute centre of the walls, Mitras. Its miles away from Marco’s house in the suburbs, but it all feels the same to me. I was born just a few miles from Mitras, Trost, raised in my palace all my life as a nobleman. It was planned from birth that I would marry a noblewoman, but we hadn’t known it would be the Princess.

The castle in Mitras is a foul looking thing, artificial beauty, much more brutal than pretty. It’s gothic, despite not being Victorian architecture. That’s why it feels so terrifying and uncanny, so different to the disgusting buildings surrounding it, only it isn’t better, but it is ten times worse. There are all kinds of heavy stone statues and features engraved into its structure, detailed, but
built by forcing hundreds of men to work sixteen hours at a time in the creation. It's a castle from hell, and everything about it makes me shiver and tremble.

“Honestly,” I say to Ymir, “I really, really don’t want to enter.”

She doesn’t reply from behind me, she is dead silent, almost like she isn’t there. We have been walking for over an hour together now yet neither of us chose to mention why she was with me in the first place. If she is really an angel, and how on earth she had been in Yeowon-Seom as well as here. Still, I step forward, towards those large wooden doors, made of oak and cheaply put together, worn away by weathering. The handle is an iron ring, rusting slightly and it feels highly uncomfortable when I bring my hand forward to grip it. Rust is a horrid thing; I don’t know why I hate it so much.

“I don’t want to,” I repeat, “But it’ll be worth it in the end, right?” Again, no answer. I decide to repeat, turning my head back, “Right-”

Ymir is nowhere to be seen. There is no sound nor smell of her, no godly charm remaining, not even that glorious glow she carries around upon her skin, not even her aura lingers, and usually it tends to stay with me. My heart beats a lot faster in surprise. No, I cannot let this deter me; she has just disappeared as fast as she appeared. It’s Ymir, after all, I don’t expect anything less from a woman who feels more like a Goddess than a human.

“It will be worth it,” I have to convince myself, “You’ve done well, Jean, you’ve been through a lot. You can take this.”

It’s true, I have, and now I can accept that. I can accept Alma’s intentions, and I can see them clearly, and I can see how she has deeply affected me.
Upon pushing open the doors, I expect to hear something as simple as silence. That calm, lifeless energy that runs through any building Alma enters. She can kill things that are already dead. But I don’t get what I had expected at all. I am welcomed into her castle to the sound of a piercing scream, so sharp and so pained that it hurts me too. It doesn’t belong to Marco, but to someone much less predicted.

The scream belongs to Historia.

“Fuck!” I nearly jump out of my skin from the shout beside me. My neck practically snaps as I turn sideways, and find Ymir beside me again. Where had she gone? Why was she back? “Fuck, that’s Historia!”

She charges past me at a speed surely inhumane, running up the spiralled staircase before I have even stepped inside. I don’t have much time to look around, analyse and note all of the features of the room. Not the cracks in the wall, or the red carpets, or the knives hanging in picture frames as if they are appealing to the eye. Instead I find myself running after Ymir. I have to trust my guardian angel, and the scream of my best friend.

They may be the only two things that can lead me to Marco.

“Carla, do you know where I might find Marco?” I couldn’t help panting at the doorstep, bracing myself with my hands on my thighs as I hunched over. I had run nearly four miles as fast as I could to get to Marco.

But I was at his house now, at his front door, and I had come across his Mother at the entrance. She always reminded me of him, similar soft, lazy features, making him appear gentle and sweet to all who looked at him. Though, she didn’t quite have his eyes, or his golden skin, and especially
not those freckled cheeks. Behind Carla were Marco’s two older sisters, dressed in wonderful clothing just like their mother. Such outfits must have cost them a lot of money.

“Marco is upstairs, dear.” She replied to me with a solemn smile, “I haven’t seen you in so long, Jean, what has happened? Marco has fallen ill these last couple of weeks…he can’t even come out with us to celebrate the New Year!”

“You were going out?” I asked, ignoring the whole part about Marco being ill.

She nodded, “Yes. For the village fireworks. Marco wouldn’t come. Perhaps you could talk to him?”

That I knew I could do. After all I had only come there in the first place because I wanted to talk to him. I was aware that Marco hadn’t fallen ill – he was simply upset after I completely blanked him out. He loved our friendship and I had ended it overnight because of my ridiculous feelings. I wished Carla and Elliot, as well as Marco’s siblings, a Happy New Year before they stepped out of the house and left for the fireworks. I always loved how homely Marco’s house was; with paintings hung on the walls, ornaments and flowers, drawings from when Carla’s children were young, books and worn furniture. It was so beautiful, surely each item beholding a long line of memories. I traced the bannister along the staircase two floors until I reached the attic where a small brown door stood. I knew that behind that door Marco would be there. I wasn’t sure what he would be doing, whether he was crying or simply staring out at the snow, perhaps just sleeping, or drawing. My biggest guess was that he would be in the very corner, looking up at the sky and humming out a broken tune.

When I pushed open the door, he was exactly where I had guessed, his thin blanket wrapped around his body. He didn’t turn to look at me immediately for his brain seemed to be in a slower mode, thoughts processing after a longer wait than usual. Though when he did turn towards me, a scowl upon his face thinking I was his sibling, his eyes widened. At the sight of me, his jaw dropped, and he gathered the blanket around himself to stand up straight. He had lost a lot of weight over the last few weeks, dark eye bags and chapped lips, however he was no less beautiful. When our eyes met it dawned on me that I really was, whether the Bible disagreed or not, unconditionally in love with him.
I shook my head lightly so that he would know I wasn’t asking for words or explanations, apologies or forgiveness. I wanted nothing but him. Raw, unspoken, breathtaking, perfect.

My feet moved before my brain decided they needed to, and I walked in his direction. It didn’t take long for me to wrap my arms around him and pull him into the most gentle of hugs. He didn’t respond but rather fell limp against me, relying all his weight on my body so I was holding up the both of us. His shoulders began to shudder, again and again, until the dampness of tears pooled onto my shoulder.

I knew I needed to confess to him, for it was now or never. I had to tell him about my feelings before there was another long gap between us like what had just happened. Yet I held him like this for more than five minutes, just listening to him cry against me. I hoped to God he would be OK with it when I said I loved him. I knew he would not love me back, for I was one of a rarer kind, but I had to show him. Provide him with answers as to why I kissed him that day underneath the stars.

There honestly was little to say to him other those three most obvious words. I couldn’t say them, my throat was parched like I had swallowed down sand, and no sound wanted to leave my mouth when I opened it to speak. Not a single word. For moments it was simply our eyes that were used to communicate, as if those brown irises were swallowing alive my own.

As his eyelids fluttered shut, I knew then I had said all I needed to.
It was different kissing him this time, for I was aware of why I wanted to do so. I was aware that I
was in love with him, and that his lips were mine. If he wanted them to be. He was under my
fingertips, back pressed against the cold walls of a household in mid-winter and warming
ourselves from our own heat. The blanket was wrapped around him and so I pulled it around us
both. I didn’t so much just kiss him this time, but I pushed further until I could taste his tongue on
my own. This was what I needed. All these weeks away had shown me truly that parting is the
sweet sorrow needed to help a lover know what their feelings mean. This kiss was the final piece to
a jigsaw puzzle.

His tongue explored my mouth and his left hand trailed up my spine, fingers tracing the ridges
until he curved his palm around the back of my neck, deepening the kiss. I held my own hand to his
ribs cage, cold against warm, warm against cold. It was a mixture of everything. He pushed his hips
forward and rubbed them against my own, heat swelled in my stomach at the new feeling. I had
only felt this aroused when I touched myself, even more aroused when I did so whilst thinking
about Marco, though this was on another level.

I felt his own growing hardness rub against mine, and only when he released my lip from the grasp
of his teeth did either of us try and speak. “Jean, what are we…what do you want…what should
we…I…” He gulped, leaning forward until his lips were touching mine so lightly that there may as
well have been half a millimetre of air between them, “This is dangerous…very, very dangerous,
Jean. What if Alma ever found you and I like this?”

I rolled my eyes a little and moved to bury my face into his neck, inhaling his scent, “I love you. I
love you like Galileo loved his stars. Or the way you love springtime, when the flowers bloom. Like
your Mother and Father - that sort of love. I love you how I should love Historia. I have tried, but
it’s only ever you. You, angel.”

Marco brought a hand to his face where his tears were half-dried, and wiped any of the wetness
away. Perhaps he had realised there was no need to cry anymore. Not when I was there for him,
finally, after almost a year of spending every single day, hour, minute, second beside him. I had
watched the seasons change with him already, and a flower of my own had bloomed with the ebb
and flow of the sky.

“Don’t you dare leave me again, then.” Marco said back, and I could see that strength in his eyes,
“Don’t even think about leaving me. If you love me, you’ll stay with me forever.”
“Of course I will, I promise. I won’t leave you, and if you leave me I’ll chase after you. I want to stay with you forever, angel, forever and ever.” At the time, I had not known how bittersweet and blatantly honest that promise was. “Can I touch you?” I asked him, watching as an imperceptible pink blush spread across his cheeks. The colour suited him well.

“Please. Please, Jean.”

Those words were enough to bring my hand to his crotch, rubbing gently at the raised area of his trousers. There was no need for that thin layer of cotton to be there anyway. I helped slide down the trousers until they pooled at his heels, and then guided him to the bed. It was cold against my back when I fell against it, but it warmed as soon as he joined me. His fingers fumbled for my trousers too, whilst he set to remove them I took off my shirt. I wanted to feel ultimately close to him, in a way we had never been before. Skin against skin against skin.

Soon he was straddling my hips; lazily rubbing down against me and experimenting with the new and wonderful feeling that it gave him. I wondered if he touched himself to the thought of me. He began unbuttoning his shirt to join my condition, so when he was looking away I wrapped a hand around his cock, and thumbed at the slit. It felt good when I did it to myself, yet I never made noises like the one Marco made when I touched him. It was like a shaken gasp through a loud moan, two beautiful noises sewn together. So lewd and sinful, only a noise the most heavenly of people could create.

“God, Marco, just like this. Until I learn more about how we can, uh, just...let’s do this. It feels amazing.” He hummed at my words, gyrating his hips against mine. This streak of electricity shot through my groin, and my knees turned weak at the shiver, “You’re so beautiful, angel, you’re so perfect. How are you so perfect?”

I then sat up, just to place my hands at his hips and dig my fingers into his skin, so soft I knew there would be bruises. He leant to my shoulder and trailed kissed along it, reaching the base of my neck and kissing more there. He was barely watching what he was doing, simply rubbing himself against me slow and deliciously. He was intoxicating. I reached a hand for our cocks and
held them together, both slick with precome. My thumb dug into his slit again before I began dragging my hand up and down our shafts. This was a feeling too good to explain. I felt so unbelievably close to him.

“Oh god, J-Jean,” He slurred his words again, like he was drunk despite not having a single drop of alcohol in his system, “Jean, I think I am-”

The next noise he made was a whimper that seemed almost comparable to a cry. I felt it throughout his body, this shiver of electricity, and then he came in two ribbons upon our laps. He continued to move his hips still, faster this time, until finally I came with him. We were wet and sticky afterwards, but it didn’t really matter. I held him close for a moment. I felt as if we were two criminal lovers, committing a crime but not daring to care when we were too caught up in each other. It took nearly ten minutes for our breathing to calm, and once it did we used the blanket to wipe away the mess. We wouldn’t need it anymore when we could just hold each other for warmth.

I lay down beside him even though the bed was too small for the both of us, and wrapped my arms around him. I wouldn’t ever let him go, and even if we were ever caught together like this I would die before anyone could touch him. He was mine now.

That night I made a promise to myself to never let anyone hurt him.

Some minutes later, a distant noise of popping and cracking sounded through the air, the fireworks. They exploded at the same time as his heartbeat thrummed in his chest. His lips pulled into a smile finally and I made sure to be grateful that he was happy again. Thanking myself for being brave enough to approach him, and thanking Historia for helping me find the courage.

I watched him smile and whisper in my ear, “Happy New Year,” and then, “I love you.” Before he finally fell asleep.
Marco is stretched out, arms extending far and wide beside him, slanting towards the air in a way. Around his wrists are two metal wrist cuffs, attached to long, spider-web chains that reach all the way up to the ceiling. He has two more cuffs around each of his ankles, though they are fairly useless for he is hunched over on his knees, unable to bend much further what with the restriction of his hands. His shirt is stripped completely off of him, in a crumpled pile on the floor, and all across the golden skin of his body are whip marks and bruises from weapons I don’t quite want to picture. I couldn’t picture them, not when they hurt Marco.

He looks so beaten and defeated that when Ymir and I enter the chamber he doesn’t even hear our hurried footsteps.

Somehow, despite following the screams of Historia, we had stumbled upon Marco. Not that I am so bothered by that. “J-Jean?” God, his voice is so broken to pieces I can barely tell it belongs to him. He lifts his head just slightly, hair matted against his bloody forehead, eyes so thinly opened that they seem shut. We catch eyes again, and in an instant I notice tears fall down his cheeks, “Oh, Jean. It is you. I was worried you’d never make it through the Hermaeas.”

He remembers. He remembers everything.

“Yes. I made it, I promised you I would. I promised I’d never leave you, and that if you left me I would chase after you, didn’t I?” At this, he smiles, thinking back to the promise we made that winter night, the very night we first touched as lovers and not friends.

“Jean?” Ah, this time the voice belongs to Historia.
The room is somewhat like a corridor but much wider; at the end of the room is the wall in which Marco is chained to. But to the left of him is another turn, which I assumed was simply another empty area. However when I step forward and peer around the corner I see the railings of a jail, and inside stands Historia in that black dress – this time it is torn and ungraceful. Her hands are bound behind her back, but she isn’t in chains like Marco.

“And…wait, what on earth…” Historia stands then and walks hesitantly to the railings, wincing as she gazes through the gaps, “Y-Ymir?”

Slowly, Ymir steps towards Historia. She reaches out and grips the metal railings, shaking them at first to see if they are loose. The railings don’t move. “I came to get you, Historia. You deserve freedom just as Marco and Jean do.” Ymir leans through the thin gap of the jail and presses her forehead against Historia’s. For the slightest moment, they kiss, and I swear that my knees shake at the sight of two fucking angels in love.

What I don’t expect whatsoever is for Ymir to then grab the padlock at the side of the railings, thick and made of iron with a large keyhole in the centre, and completely snap it off the jail door. This doesn’t open the jail, but it showed complete superhuman strength. Ymir then holds her hands out, hovering just slightly against the iron bars, and suddenly a loud hum swirls through the silence. The iron bars begin to slide, without Ymir even touching them, and then the jail itself opens. I turn in amazement to Marco, only to find that his chains are pulling and unravelling until they completely snap, along with the cuffs around his limbs.

“What the fuck?” The question, I suppose, should not be a question, and yet I am so confused that I managed to somehow say it like one. Ymir doesn’t answer me whatsoever. She wraps both arms around Historia and turns to me with a soft smile. I see over Historia’s shoulder Ymir’s head drop down to bury into her neck. Vaguely, I hear a string of apologies but not much that can be classed as speech.

Decidedly, Ymir and Historia deserve their privacy. My eyes gaze slowly down to Marco and this time I know that I’m a thousand times closer to ending this than I was just half an hour ago. Marco
looks weaker than before, but the strength in his heart is audible when he reaches for me to help him stand up. When our hands touch, we’re stronger on another level. Slowly, he stands to join me, both of his hands snaking their way to my hips before pulling me in. It feels like we’re in the sky again, in those vermillion clouds after the plane disappeared, like freedom and happy endings. There isn’t so much reason to kiss just yet, however our foreheads press together and it feels enough like a kiss to suffice any shred of hunger.

All is OK. All is good. This might just be the calm after the storm, or the part between where the water moves in smooth waves before steadying. I have Marco and he has me. What else could I ask for?

I would ask for freedom, firstly. I’d ask for freedom from this cycle that I’ve suffered from for too long. Two thousand and five hundred years. I’d ask that Marco live a long life and die in his sleep as an old man, and if possible I could have that death as well. Yes, death, something I’ve never had.

I want a taste of mortality.

I would want Historia to have her own release, because she has been kempt up in this fucking castle for as long as I have chased Marco. She’s been biting at her nails for thousands of years until there is no more nail left, just waiting for this whole thing to be over. When she took me to that lifetime in Mississauga when I had to kill Marco, I had watched her drop to the ground in a crouch, sobbing relentlessly. I know she has been just as upset watching me suffer as I have been suffering. Maybe, just maybe, I would ask that Ymir and Historia could stay with each other. Too long has Historia had to fend for herself. With Ymir, there would be someone for her to rely on. And I’ve seen the way Ymir looks at Historia, and I want no one else to be with her because no one could look at Historia like that. Complete and utter devotion. So whoever and whatever Ymir is, I’d ask that she can be mortal as well.

It seems that the four of us were too held up in our own little worlds that none of us really notices the loud swinging of a heavy wooden door, or the sound of sharp footsteps against the ground. Each step paced to make tension, yet fast enough to be overly shocking.
“Well, well,” The voice says in that hideous, croaked tone, “It seems, children, that I have spent two thousand and five hundred years of magic, only to find myself in a room full of faggots I’ve tried so hard to cure.”

Marco’s hands tense up, fingers digging so sharply into my hips that it no longer feels good. He is terrified. My entire body twists round to face the voice, my back pressed against Marco’s so I can protect him. To my right I can see Historia and Ymir in practically the exact same position, Ymir standing guard to keep her safe.

I almost don’t want to look forward. Not when I have to meet eyes with Queen fucking Alma.

“Maybe, bitch, you should learn that fucking magic is God’s to use, not yours.” Somehow there are no flaws in Ymir’s words, as expected from a woman who looks faultless. She acts and speaks it too. I begin to believe that she isn’t just strong, but omnipotent. There doesn’t seem much that could defeat her.

“Don’t you understand?” Alma raises a thin eyebrow and speaks with a breathless laugh, “I am God. I am the fucking leader of this universe. I speak and people bow to me. The Bible worships me.”

Her hair is coal black, like tar and the area of the ocean so deep that humans cannot venture there. Her eyes almost match her hair colour, too dark for her pupils to be seen, as if each of her eyeballs have their own black hole. The human race, if they didn’t hold on tight enough, might just be sucked into them. She is too thin, a layer of skin painted on her skeleton. Alma’s skin was always a very pale colour, thin and white skin so lightly coloured that veins show through. Under her eyes are bruises; much of her face is the same. For the skin that should appear as white as an angel’s is tainted with the slightest morose shade of yellow. Her lips aren’t this beautiful peach alike Marco’s, they are purple. Purple like the vile she made me drink, purple like the skies of Bristol in Victorian England, purple like Marco’s skin after being beaten by Thomas. She is dressed from neck to ankles in a deep red dress. There is no way on earth, nor in Heaven or in Hell, that Alma is God. Surely.
It is impossible.

She makes me feel so livid that the skin on my arms begins to crack from the heat. I can feel my blood boil, sizzle and curl until I become a monster. When I close my eyes, the only colour is red, this blood-red colour that should be black. I hate her this much. I would never commit murder, but I would give her the most painful death.

Oh, but her death just wouldn’t be enough revenge. I’d have to kill her again, and again, and again, and again…

“How dare you.” I can hear Ymir spit, but I just don’t look underneath my eyelids. I have to keep them closed because looking at Alma would make me do something I might regret, “How fucking dare you. You’re not God. Don’t you dare take that title. God is superior to you; you’re just a rat. You’re a fucking worthless piece of shit. God didn’t spend years of effort to make someone like you. How dare you think you can speak to me like that.”

I see in Alma’s eyes the way she sharpens, like a sword in a whetstone, sharper and sharper until she is nothing but a blade. She steps forward to Ymir but nothing seems to make the girl back down. “How dare I? And who do you think you are speaking to me like that? Who are you, faggot, dare I say you think you’re God.”

“Oh, and just what if I am?”

“You’ll step away from my daughter,” Alma replies, “Surely God deals with things that actually matter.”
At those words, Ymir snaps. There must have been some kind of chaining around her bones, her fibres, that stopped her from lashing out the minute that Alma walked in. She isn’t like me, she can’t just close her eyes and stay silent in fear. No, Ymir dives right out, those chains tearing apart until she grabs Alma around the neck and throws her back into the wall. This is not a fight between humans. This is a fight between God and the Devil, and yet I can’t quite tell who is who.

Historia screams so loudly that she has to cup her mouth to stop herself from vomiting. Ymir has dented the walls from pushing Alma so hard into them. There are cracks spurting out in a spider’s web around the woman, threatening to make the building fall down. Alma’s eyes have rolled back into her head from the impact, so blinded with pain that she can’t even scream. I wish her dead. Why isn’t she dead?

“Fuck! Fuck, Jean, help me!” Ymir shouts through the buzz of noise. It’s the kind of sound that plays after a microphone is tapped and a sharp sound of electric blares through the speakers, “There’s a knife here, at the strap round my leg, fucking kill her.”

I step forward fast, and bat Marco’s hands away from his grip onto me. He can’t stop me from this. It all happens too fast, so fast, and I barely count my breaths. I barely breathe at all. Ymir has a small brown strap around her thigh, so I reach to grab the knife through it, though I could have sworn the strap wasn’t there before this. Alma is struggling against Ymir’s grip and I know she is trying to use magic. I see it from the purple emitting through the air, blending with the red of her torn dress into a horrid brown. The knife slides easily from the strap, but doesn’t fit so easily into my shaking palm. There isn’t much I know to do anymore. I’m based purely on instinct. There is a large portion of Alma’s neck showing just above where Ymir’s hands strangle her, yellow and creased skin, and I guess that her windpipe runs just below it. The blade of knife looks much nicer just hovering at the skin of her neck than it did at Ymir’s leg.

I make sure, for this important moment, that I’m looking at Alma directly in the eye.

The tip of the knife digs lightly into the right side of her neck, and just as I pierce the skin she groans in pain. Yet, even if it is hard, I press the knife down further, and drag it ever so slowly across her neck. About halfway across I tear the knife faster, hearing an awful noise of torn flesh and feeling blood spray at my face. It feels good in a way to get revenge, I think purely about everything she has done to Marco and I, and it makes me feel stronger. So strong that I slice the knife through the bone, almost unconsciously, and cut as if I’m cutting into bread. I have to move
the knife back and forth, even if at this point she is already dead. I press further until her head drops to the floor.

I have fucking killed Queen Alma.

And worst of all: I don’t regret it.

When I turn around I find that Historia is completely devoid of emotion. She sits there with her eyes focused wide on her mother’s head, and yet there is nothing showing on her face. In the corner beside her there is a small pool of vomit - though it mostly looks like water - for she was too scared and disgusted that all of her food had come back up. Behind me, Marco has his eyes shut and his fist between his teeth. God, he was holding back a scream. Ymir, however, looks pleased with me. A small, subtle smile lies across her lips. And as for Alma, there isn’t much to say.

“Alma was going to cut off their heads and put ‘em on sticks for the kingdom to see,” Ymir explains and points over to Historia and Marco, “You did to her what she has done to hundreds. She’s done worse than that, you’d know. Don’t feel too guilty, Jean, even if the Bible says you must forgive. You can’t forgive what she has done.” At first I’m unsure about why she is talking to me in such a gentle tone. Usually she speaks loudly and relentlessly, but not now. I look up at her and there is this calmness to her eyes that seems quite human, despite how she normally is. When I bring a finger to my eye, I feel dampness spread over my fingertips. It isn’t blood, it is tears. I hadn’t felt at the time any regret, or instantly after doing it, but my tears tell me otherwise.

Unless the tears are of relief. Relief that things have ended. Perhaps fear too, because I’m not quite sure what will happen from hereon. In some kind of numbing silence, Ymir picks up Alma’s head by the hair and hands it over to me. I take it with some hesitance, but look forward and pretend it isn’t what it is. This doesn’t feel victorious, like the soldiers in the war who would cheer after a murder. The Kings and Queens of England who would chop of the heads of their citizens and line them up on sticks along the bridges across the river Thames. There isn’t much good to this at all, only that I have managed to rid of the devil. We walk to the room next door in which leans to a balcony, and step out into the fresh air. There are crowds of people waiting outside knowing that Marco has been arrested. I spot the stake in the centre of the balcony, ready with ropes beside for Marco to be tied up on. This is a stage. It is a fucking stage and everyone below is the audience. Another reminder of how disgusting Queen Alma was.
“Everyone, listen up!” Ymir shouts suddenly, causing heads to turn in an instant, “Today I want to say to you all that Queen Alma is dead! We have her head right here to prove it.” Reluctantly, I lift up my arm and turn her so her face is looking out at the people below. It earns a few gasps, but soon after the crowd begins to cheer. Especially after noticing who I am.

“Today I want to sincerely apologise for everyone who has suffered all these years under Alma’s reign, but now I am opening up the walls. I have arrived with the magic to break the spell that keeps you trapped in here, and as my apology I will set you all free.” Finally, I find myself cheering along with the crowd and throwing my hands into the air. Where was Ymir 249 lifetimes ago? Why didn’t she remove the spell then?

I look up to the sky, even if only for a moment, and watch as Ymir begins removing the god-awful purple hue from the atmosphere. It begins disappearing at the centre of The Walls, just above us, as a small circle appears where the natural daylight shines through the purple. Then the circle gets bigger and bigger, unravelling itself faster until it gets to the wall. Now, the spell is gone. The people of The Walls are no longer caged animals, and they will finally be able to open the gates again. People run back into their houses for their possessions, others run straight to the gates and begin pulling them open. I let go of Alma’s head and watch as it falls a thirty-foot drop to the ground. It is over. The Walls are over.

When I turn back to Ymir, she is perched high on the railings of the balcony, gazing down at Historia. She turns her eyes to me and smiles. Only now to I understand who she is. What she is. It finally makes sense.

“You’re God, aren’t you.” I don’t ask it as a question. I know it. I know the answers.

“Yes,” She replies and wets her lips, “I’ve been God for three thousand years. Before that, someone else was God for three thousand years. Today is the day I get to make a new God, and to choose whether I die or become human.”
“It didn’t exactly talk about that in the Bible, Ymir.” I roll my eyes in a way that would suggest I don’t believe her. But I do. She glowed from the very minute I saw her back in Byeol-Nanseo. I always thought she looked like a Goddess, but I had never guessed she really was.

“That’s because Christians believe in one God. Just as Hindus believe in many. But it doesn’t quite work like that. No one really knows, they just assume.” Her accent, which had just been Japanese, has changed again. This time it is an undetectable accent. Not quite one I have ever heard before - it is indescribable.

“You come in one at a time? For a certain period?” She nods at this, “So you’ve been around for three thousand years…five hundred years longer than I’ve been chasing Marco, then.”

She shuffles off of the balcony and comes to stand in front of me, placing one hand upon my shoulder, “Yes, and I’ve watched the whole time. It’s been like one giant film. Honestly I decided to do nothing about it…but then I got angry over how much Alma was using my magic. She shouldn’t have learned it in the first place. And after I came here and intervened, and she ended up making me part of a lifetime. That was when I met Historia’s vision: Christa. I’d watched her too all those years…but I never quite fell in love. I knew I had to do something at that point after learning what love feels like, and plus, you weren’t learning anything from the curse. I didn’t want another 250 lifetimes to pass, Jean. I wrote a book on myths and legends. A subtle hint. I couldn’t reveal much but it helped anyway, just look where you are now. It’s over. Almost over. I am so sorry that you were cursed in the first place, Jean, because my magic is not here to set curses. I don’t believe in punishments unless it is for murder, rape…those sorts of things. Loving Marco was not something you deserved punishment for. And god, I’m so sorry. But I can help you now. I’m here to grant you a life you’ve always wanted.”

There is a small silence. No one talks, no one moves. The world is frozen.

“I am here to offer you freedom.”
I woke from my slumber to the sound of four loud taps at the wood of my second door – the door that lead out to the gardens rather than the entrance to my room. I had never heard anyone knock on the door before; it was completely and utterly unexpected. Supposedly out of curiosity I rolled out of bed and meandered hesitantly to the door, pausing at the thought of it being someone here to murder or attack me. But then again: why would they knock first? I gripped the frame and begun to slide it sideways, only to find myself greeted with Marco, who was grinning beautifully at me and hugging his blanket around himself.

“My god, angel, you must be freezing!” I laughed at how ridiculous he was.

“Then let me in and warm me up, sweetheart.” Despite me not agreeing to his entry, he stepped through and into my room as soon as he had spoken. I was nervous about him being here, for he was poor and I was rich – not to mention we were lovers. But I decided risks were worth taking sometimes.

It dawned on me as we sat beside each other on the bed that this was our second winter together. It had been a year since I had confessed to him and we had made love and yet he hadn’t once been in my house. I felt a little guilty about never inviting him. He was wearing a shirt in the usual shade of cider-orange, one that matched his golden skin just beautifully. Although the blouse was nothing special compared to my clothing, it was much more appealing for me to look at. He could make any kind of clothing look wonderful. There were snowflakes melting in his hair, and so I lifted my hand to ruffle them away, the snow leaving dampness behind. My hand cupped his cheek for a moment, contrasting completely to the cold of his cheeks. I hoped that if I left my hand there for a minute he would warm a bit, and I could see those rose-tinted cheeks again.

“What brings you here?” I asked calmly, “If you’re caught you could be killed...”

He nodded knowingly; perhaps Marco didn’t care much about the risks if it meant that he could see me. “I came because I wanted to tell you...that I, well, I told my mother. About us.”
For the longest minute of my life, I stared back at him with my mouth wide open. I had never before heard a statement so shocking, so surprising, that he had told his own mother that he was committing one of the city’s greatest sins with his own, now married, best friend. There was a wetness welling in my eyes and a horrid feeling of grief swirling around in the pit of my stomach. I felt sick, immensely so, for he had spoken so fast and easily, yet this was something more serious than he obviously thought.

“Do you know what she said, Jean?” No, if I had known I wouldn’t be almost at the point of tears from pure worry, “She said that love is something for everyone to share. I thought that was quite nice to think that way. She said that the Bible does not condemn two men loving each other, but only sex. Because two men can’t marry, and so pre-marital sex is the sin. Not us…our love. She said there is nothing wrong with us as long as we are both happy. But still, she is worried sick, Jean, she is terrified that something bad might happen to us…”

I sighed heavily in relief. A weight was lifted high off of my shoulders just as fast as it had been placed there, and I felt so suddenly light and airy that I might just have spread my wings and taken off into the skies. Flown past that purple barrier of a spell that kept us trapped there. Somehow, with Marco in my arms, I felt we could break the spell. It was the first time in my life that I had some hope. Hope that maybe one day I would defeat Queen Alma. Maybe in a year, maybe in ten. A hundred even. Perhaps a thousand and more. But one day, I begged, I would be able to break free.

What Marco and I has couldn’t be a sin, not if God had made us, because I didn’t choose to ever fall in love with Marco. I didn’t choose at all. It just happened. Almost like the buds in late winter on the cherry blossom trees, how they would ripen and soften, and then overnight the most beautiful transformation would occur so that the next morning people could wake to a beauty so rarely seen in The Walls. My love for him bloomed just like that, but no one was here to gaze at the beauty just yet. God designed me this way, it was his intention, I was just human.

Slowly, I leant in to kiss Marco, holding his bottom lip between my teeth teasingly, earning a small giggle from the back of his throat. His eyes curved into crescents and then he kissed me back, so deeply that I could taste every drop of vanilla on his tongue. Even after over a year, kissing Marco hadn’t gotten old. That night, there was lust pooling in my chest, and I wanted to go a lot further. Though we hadn’t done anything much more than touching each other over the past year, I knew there were other ways to find pleasure. Sodomy. But was sodomy safe? There was no one else in
I wet my lips and watched him hold a fist to his hand, swallowing back any noises. “Don’t do that, angel, no one will hear. And if they do they will think I am with Historia. You look beautiful, keep making noise. So beautiful, angel, you’re perfect.”

After three fingers, Marco was arching his back and begging for it, in a language of only slurred words and lewd moans. His eyes were shut and I wondered exactly what he was picturing under those thick eyelashes and tanned eyelids. After taking a minute to admire the smoothness of his golden skin, from his collarbones all the way down to the sharp bones of his hips, I removed my own clothes and positioned myself at his entrance. Surely, it wouldn’t be so different to three fingers.

Yet when I pushed in he felt so tight and hot, letting out a gasp at the feeling. This was my first time doing something like this, especially with another man. But it was so beautiful. I looked down and realised there was nothing better than seeing myself buried within him, so much closer than I had ever been. I thrust in slowly that night, small rolls of my hips and patience as I listened to the sharp moans coming from those soft lips. When he came, I followed seconds after, and wiped us clean with a cloth. I knew that this wasn’t the best it could get, but we had our whole life to try new things. For our first time having sex it was enough. It was just perfect. I lay beside him and looked into his eyes, tracing my fingers on his chest in circles, infinite circles. Round and round and round. I wondered for a moment if God would ever treat us to an infinity.

An infinity with Marco seemed a gift from Heaven back then.

“Do you think anything...bad, maybe, will happen to us, Jean?” There was a sadness to his eyes. The light that shone through the barely open slit in the door reflected in Marco’s irises, though I could not tell if it was the beginning of tears or just the moonlight.
“No, angel, of course not. Nothing bad will ever happen to you when I am here. I won’t allow it, I’ll never let anyone hurt you.” After saying such words, Marco began to cry. It dawned on me then that all this time he had simply been scared. It hurt to imagine how terrified he had been the whole time, how frightened he was that someone might come and take him away from me forever. And as well as that he had told his mother, he must have been so anxious and sick in the minutes before talking to her. I knew then that I couldn’t let anyone lay a finger on him. There was no way he was being hanged or decapitated, drowned or burned.

Not when I could be killed instead.

“I-I don’t w-want to lose you…I-I don’t want to die. A-Alma…she would…she would k-kill you. And m-me. W-What if she f-finds out…and I will n-never see…see y-you again?”

I brought my thumb gently to the inner corner of his eye and wiped it across is lash line, swiping away those tears. I pressed my lips against his in that silly, playful way that always made him laugh. This time he only smiled.

“If Alma ever found out, we would both be killed. She would kill us together. If she didn’t allow that, then I would ask for it. There is no way you will die without me, angel.” I pressed my forehead against his and kissed him once more, suddenly realising how cold the room had become, “No matter what Alma does to us, I am going to fight. It is the same with the world, my love, because people will always hate us. I don’t care. I will fight for you. I will love you. And I will choose you, always. So don’t ever be scared. No matter where you go, I will follow you. I won’t give up following you. You’re all I’ve got, my death-defier, and I’m not letting you slip away so easy. Even if it means I will suffer, I’ll find you. We’ve already lasted this long, we can last a thousand years more if you want. Is that what you want, angel?”

There was a small, such a small and insignificant, pause of silence. Soon I understood that silence didn’t really exist when Marco was there. I could hear the snow outside, pattering on the wooden canopy. I could hear the slight song of the wind through the open slit in the door. Beside me, Marco’s heart was beating fast enough for me to hear. No, silence didn’t exist in a room with someone so blooming with life. Finally, I repeated my question from before and awaited an answer.
Slowly but surely, his lips pulled into a smile again. “Yes. That’s what I want. If I let go of your hand... I’ll just reach out and grab it once again.”

And that was exactly what happened. Not for one, nor for two, not even ten... a hundred - but two thousand and five hundred years after that. I never once let go of his hand, because we couldn’t let the world tear us apart that easily. We had shaken the yoke of inauspicious stars, resisted the domination of tragic fate, fought and fought and fought against unfavourable fortune...

...essentially, we had defeated the curse from the very beginning.

White. Everything is white.

I look up to the sky where I am used to seeing grey, or sunshine, maybe even a blue sky and pearly clouds. But this time I am absolutely blinded by the whitest of whites, so incomprehensibly white that I find it hard to believe what I am looking at. To my right and left is the exact same colour, and even at my feet. Though there is indeed a pathway, just a shade darker than the other whites. It is heavenly porcelain, like the fair skin of a doll, and each step I take upon it causes a blush of pink beneath my feet. Marco gasps behind me, quietly talking to Historia about how completely magnificent this place is. He is true; there is nowhere quite like this. Nowhere on earth, anyway, that’s light reflects onto your skin and makes it dazzle as if there are billions of microscopic crystals buried within your pores. We walk for merely a minute, simply staring in awe at the sights. As my eyes adjust, I notice the slight haze of wispy white swirling around my legs: clouds. Sweet, ivory clouds. Just as beautiful as the vermillion clouds I danced through with Marco. No, they are even more beautiful than those.

Through the wisps of cloud I finally spot the glint of golden metal. So pure and shimmering that it cannot possibly be just gold. The gold belongs to a throne, so brilliant and breathtaking that I
nearly drop down to the ground in floods of tears. Ymir is sat upon the throne, legs set in a juxtaposing casual position, and body clothed in nothing but a flawless white tunic, much like an Ancient Greek chiton, or a Roman tunica. She has a crown of gold on her head. It is carved like a crown of ivy, yet all made of the golden metal. At the front are three crescent moons, two back-to-back and the other above them on its side, spikes facing to the sky. To finish it off, there is a simple five-sided star within a circle, and an impeccable turquoise gemstone below.

I only have to take one slight look at her to realise that she has transported us to a very important place. One that humankind might call *Heaven*.

“Well, at least I think that the Bible says something like that…”

“*‘My Father’s house has many rooms,’*” I quote with a grin, “It’s a line for those who don’t want to believe in Hell. They imagine that instead they all go to Heaven, but the sinners end up in worse rooms than others.”

“It’s a pile of word vomit, that’s what it is, Jean.” I hear Historia and Marco laugh at this behind me, “Hell ain’t real, and no one comes to Heaven. You die and that’s it. Heaven’s just my house, I’d rather not have millions of dead people cause a commotion up here.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see a fleck of glitter, but it suddenly splits into a hundred other speckles. The lights grow bigger until they form ivory silhouettes. They are humans, with wings. Angels. Angels exist, and so does God, but Heaven still doesn’t work quite how I had expected. The angels become more humane, they are all so beautiful. Each has a different ethnicity, some are black, some white, others Asian. I definitely hadn’t assumed angels would look this way. Each angel has these faultless wings blooming from their backs, and as they land the wings curve and fold backwards into two neat arches.

“Today is the most important day in a million millennia. We gather here both to watch as I choose my own fate as a God, as well as to offer a new fate to three human beings who have been caught
up in the worst curse ever recorded in history.” With a clap of Ymir’s hands, three chairs appear behind us. They aren’t gold like Ymir’s, but rather the purest silver. Wrapped around the legs of our thrones are strings of flowers, the most beautiful flowers I have ever seen, but each throne is decorated with a different kind. Historia’s throne is coated with red gloxinia, a flower meaning love at first sight. Ymir has carefully selected such flowers for a reason.

Marco’s chair, however, is dressed in white hyacinth. Which mean loveliness, and suggest that Ymir is praying for him. Not just Ymir, but fucking God is praying for him. Prayers from the creator of the universe are being sent to Marco, so nothing bad can happen anymore. And lastly, around my own throne are strings and strings, rows and bundles, bunches and gatherings of white heather. Though they are not the most beautiful of flowers, their meaning is what matters.

Protection. That my wishes will come true. Ymir is going to grant me my happiness.

I turn back to Ymir with teary eyes, and watch closely as calla lilies begin to bloom themselves around her own throne, winding around the legs and intertwining with the details carved so intricately into the metal. Calla lilies mean beauty, and I couldn’t agree more that they fit her better than any flower in the world.

“Ymir, what happens at the end of a God’s lifetime…three thousand years?” There is a hoarseness in my voice and I want to think it is a sore throat, but really it is because I am scared that Ymir is going to die.

“I get three options: number one is choosing to die. I will pick another god, and then wither away, I suppose. The second is becoming an angel, just like all of these beautiful ones beside me. They are angels who were once God’s themselves.” She explains, widening out her arms and guiding my eyes to the angels around her, “The last option is to become human. I’ll be sent down to earth and born, not remembering a single thing about my life as God.”

Never had I guessed that God’s worked this way. It is sad, really, that they can’t choose to be God forever, and have to lose a part of themselves that they’ve had for three thousand years. “What are
“Please don’t choose death!” It is Historia who has shouted so suddenly, her body lifting entirely out of the throne as she runs over to Ymir. Before the God, she drops to her knees and places her hands on the floor, just like in a praying position, “I don’t know what will become of me anymore, but I do know that all I want is to be with you.”

Oh, it seems Marco and I aren’t the only lovers with a sad little story.

“Hush, now, Beautiful, I will explain what will happen in just a moment.” With another clap of her hands, Ymir moves Historia’s throne beside hers, so they can sit together. God and her most favourite angel. The sight is much more beautiful than Heaven.

“First and foremost, we must end the curse.” Instantly, Marco leans forward and questions why it is still here. “A curse with God’s magic only ends when the cursed one finally states the reason for their curse and it is correct. If you get it wrong, the curse isn’t ending, Jean. You only get so many chances.”

“You’ve been very brave, so brave, my love,” I remember Marco whispering in the clearest of voice, back in the second lifetime, Jinae, after the curse finally dawned on me, “Crying will never make you weak. Neither will self-pity. Do you see what you’ve had to go through? How much you’ve suffered, with no one there to comfort you?”

Yes.
I know exactly how much I have suffered. I have suffered two thousand and five hundred years. Nearly nine-hundred-and-twelve thousand and five hundred days. Two hundred and fifty lifetimes. Too many hours. Too many seconds. Too many breaths. I have suffered what feels like an eternity, and now I can finally end the curse. Crying does not make me weak. Not anymore. Even before God and the angels, stood in the centre of heaven, I find myself with tears streaming down my cheeks. This time, for the first time, I won’t hate myself for crying.

“M-Marco was not cursed by Queen Alma.” I begin slowly, though my throat feels dry, “Yet I have spent two and a half millennia thinking that he was. But I understand now. Marco has always been happy, because he was left clueless each lifetime, blinded by his love for me so much that nothing else mattered. Alma gave Marco happiness in the way he forgot each time, but she didn’t give happiness to me.”

Finally, I reach for the betrothal pendant wrapped around my neck. The emerald gemstone that was once so bright is now a disgusting shade of purple. I snap the chain with force, and throw it so far away that no one will ever find it again.

“I was the one cursed back then. I was cursed. Not Marco, but me. I drank that magic in the vile and it cursed me all this time. All these years I have hated myself too much to realise that I was the one suffering. Loneliness, suicide, depression, confusion, hatred, anger, melancholy, choked back tears and nights where I wanted nothing more than reason to fucking smile. Queen Alma cursed me, and I finally understand. I can finally accept myself. I have been deprived of happiness for nearly as long as you have been God.”

From behind me, I feel two arms wrap around my waist, trapping my arms beside my hips. Marco holds me tight and yet loosely at the same time. Even if he let go, I wouldn’t lose him. The angels sing their song around us - even if just for a minute - and Marco leans forward to whisper in my ear, “You’ve done it, my death-defier, you’ve fought the most impenetrable war all alone, and now it’s all over. Sweetheart, my love, you have won.”

I let out a long sob, shaking under Marco’s touch. I have found a cure to this terminal disease.
Finite time to this relentless eternity. The strength to overthrow the magic of God. I did it all for Marco, all for him. There is nothing more in Heaven, nor on Earth, that a person could do to prove their love for another.


Nothing.

“Marco is very true in his words, Jean.” Ymir smiles, voice back to that playful tone rather than the gentle one, “I’m going to offer you a sleeping pill for your insomnia, kid. Three of them.” With Marco, I step forward. Just a few metres until I’m stood quite close in front of Historia and Ymir. This way we can hear them easily over the sound of singing angels, or the buzz of magic. “Three pills: Death, Eternity, Mortality.” Though I don't understand, I nod her on, “Which do you choose, Jean?”

Oh, the answer to that is so easy. Especially after all I’ve been through. I can accomplish anything now.

“I choose Marco.” Yes, Marco, that’s the word, “Every single lifetime I will choose Marco. Just as he has chosen me. I’ll love him with all my heart, in every life and through every death. I choose Marco, because I promised I would never give up on him. I’ll follow him forever. I will go where he goes.”

I turn to look at him; this sweet smile takes over his lips. I can hear the way his heart throbs in his chest, partially out of nerves, but mostly out of excitement. I feel the same. I feel almost every positive emotion there is, but in the end it is balanced with anxiety.

Equilibrium.

“Your decision will have to be mutual then. But you have to choose one of those three. They are all
I can offer.” Ymir replies with a frown, “Death means that you and Marco can end it all together. You can die right here – painlessly – and it will be like none of this ever happened. You can be in peace.”

No. That is not an option. Again, I turn to Marco and he has a knowing look in his eyes. Neither of us wants to die without a taste of what a peaceful life together is like. Ymir seems to note the look in our eyes, for she moves onto the next option with a breeze. “Eternity means, simply, that you two will be granted an eternity together. Not a normal eternity. It will be a continuance of what you already had. Marco will die each lifetime, and remember nothing the next. I know you won’t want this, but I have to offer it anyway. Just in case.”

Marco shakes his head, “No. No way I’m forgetting Jean again. He shouldn’t ever have to suffer this any longer.”

“Fine by me.” Ymir smiles and licks her lips, glancing for a second to Historia, “The final option is mortality. You will both be sent to earth and born in the wombs of new parents. You will be human, and you will live a human life. It is exactly the same choice that I have. Mortality.”

Marco’s hand finds mine and gives a hard squeeze. We turn to face each other with vast grins. Yes, this is what I have always wanted. Mortality, a life beside Marco that we can live until old age, and die as a human would. I have never been human, and I would die to be so. This is the option: option three. I choose Mortali-

“But.” Ymir interrupts my thoughts sharply, “There will be a cost.”

“Fuck, fuck. What cost, Ymir?” I hiss.

“The Walls, firstly, will no longer exist. But worse than that: neither of you will remember each
other. Nor will you remember anything that has happened over these lifetimes. You will remember nothing, no matter how hard you try.” She says slowly, “…And I cannot promise that you will even meet.”

No.

God, no.

If I forget him, and he forgets me, then what was the worth of all the years of suffering? What was the point? There would be no point if we were to just be reborn clueless. I would meet him but there wouldn’t be that past, nor those shared memories. Not even dreams of the wonderful times we have spent. It would be a complete and utter waste. Wastage of my efforts, I would be useless…worthless.

And we might not even meet?

I could end up living a life with someone else! I could pass him in the street and that would be it. Nothing. Fucking nothing.

“Y-Ymir…we can’t just forget!” Marco cries breathlessly, “We can’t just…waste Jean’s blood and tears…w-why can’t we remember?”

“It ain’t a waste, kid. How is it a waste if you can be granted with that life you always wanted? Even if you don’t remember anything, you can still love each other. I know it is heart braking to loose your past like…that.” Ymir snaps her fingers in a clicking notion, “-but it is not a waste. Whether or not you remember it, you still won a war, Jean. It is no waste.”
Marco lets out another cry, so I pull him into my chest and try to argue against Ymir once more, “Please, God! What if we don’t even...m-meet...”

Ymir smiles again, though there is something in her smile I haven’t quite seen before, “When has finding each other ever been an issue for you two?”

Oh, well. I can’t quite disagree to that.

“If you choose mortality I will use the last pieces of my faith and pray that you two will meet again. I trust in it. I believe in it. You have the prayers of God, boys. And Jean, you are the strongest human being in the universe. Don’t think a little Mortality can tackle you down.”

Despite myself, I laugh at this. Once again, I turn to look at Marco. He has stopped crying; instead his face is covered with this look of hope. I love seeing him like this. If he believes in us, I believe in us. Somehow, Mortality doesn’t seem so bad anymore. I grab Marco’s hand again, and I won’t let go of it. No longer will I let the world tear us apart.

“Mortality.” Marco and I both say in perfect synchronisation, “We choose Mortality.”

The angels, finally, stop singing.

“OK. I hereby announce the curse over.” Ymir says again using that soft tone, and she takes Historia’s hand in hers just as I have taken Marco’s.
“Will you be able to spare some of our friends from over these years?” I ask suddenly, “Like Hanji…Eren, maybe. Mina?”

Ymir thinks for a second, gazing over to her angels and communicating simply with her eyes, “I can save a some, Jean. A few. But I can’t save Mina. Mina died, I cannot bring her back to life.”

“Oh, oh,” There is a throb in my chest, even if just a small one, “But she is with the stars, right?”

Ymir opens her mouth to say something, but changes her mind and says something else, “Right. Yes, that’s right. Mina is with the stars now, and she’ll always be looking down at you.” I like to believe that if I looked at the faces of all of the angels here in Heaven, I’d find one named Mina, with night-black hair and a beautiful smile.

Just for a moment, I let go of Marco, and walk over to Ymir. My arms wrap so tightly around her that I know I might just die from such treatment to a God. But I don’t care. Not anymore. I have to hug her, because I owe her my life, “Thank you Ymir. Thank you God for giving me the one thing I have been stripped of for too long. Thank you.” Happiness. Thank you for happiness. I let go of Ymir before she can reply, and take Historia into my arms.

She smells just as she did when we grew up together. She is just as beautiful, just as innocent and just as angelic. Historia is my best friend, and she has spent two and a half millennia praying for me. Even at the cost of hourly beatings from her mother. Even at the cost of her health. Of her life. She prayed for me and God answered those prayers. “Don’t you dare find anything other than your own happiness, Historia, you deserve it just as much as I do. Thank you. Thank you for giving me hope. For accepting me when I nearly pushed away the love of my life. Thank you for everything. I love you.”

Historia can barely speak back. She only hums those three words that mean so much to me.
Finally – and this is the final finally – I join Marco again. I take his hands for the very last time, and pull him in for a kiss. This is the best kiss yet shared, and I know that in our next life, our last life, we will share many more amazing kisses just like this. In a Mortal life, I will make more memories with him than we did in all of our lifetimes added together. I have him now, and this is more infinite than any kind of eternity. Oh, but the thought of not knowing him is so terrifying. I can't help the tears that fall from my eyes, so heavy and bitter that I can barely see. Marco brings his hand to my cheek and asks me what is wrong.

"I'm scared." It feels relieving to be able to admit my fear for once, "You won't know me. You won't remember. And me with you too. Everything will be different."

“Sweetheart,” He says in that deep, deep voice of his, “do you think that will stop me?”

I shake my head and look down. I am crying more, sweet tears of honey. Somewhere within me, I play over and over every memory we have, like a film that goes on for millions of years. I replay every moment, every touch, every kiss. Letting it burn within me, so that when we’re reborn as mortal, I’ll at least have a shred of recollection when I look into those beautiful umber eyes.

“I love you, sweetheart. My love,” He says in between gasps and sobs, shakes and cries of his own. I have to look at him again. His eyes are wet with tears but they are still his eyes. “I love you so much!”

I look up to the sky once more. The white is gone now, replaced by those breathtaking clouds of vermilion. It is so beautiful that I forget how to breathe for a moment. But at the forefront of my mind I know there is something, someone, so much more beautiful to look at.

He is stood in front of me, and his name is Marco Bodt.
The prettiest flower that ever bloomed.

“Oh, baby,” I whisper, just loud enough for him to hear, “I don’t think ‘I love you’ will quite do my feelings justice anymore.”

No, those three words never quite fit. But they are the very final piece to our jigsaw puzzle. The very final thread to the tapestry. The very final star to a sky filled with billions.

And yet, despite everything I believe in, I find myself whispering such words to him anyway, because at least when I say them I mean them with much more passion than any lover to have lived.

"I love you, angel. Goodbye, let’s meet again on the other side. ”

But this time it isn't goodbye. It's until we meet again.

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*CCLI, Manchester, 25/02/2015*

At seventeen years old, not many kids find there way to one of the busy areas of Manchester, suitcase in one hand, phone in the other, and almost a thousand buckets of nerves swirling around in their stomach. But I must be different to those kids seeing as I find myself in that exact situation.
Around me, people ebb and flow in this constant tide, some running through the gates and boarding their trains just on time, others walk off the train and move slowly just to piss off the hurried business people surrounding them. Hopefully, if the next year of college goes well – which my Mother has repeatedly convinced me it will – I will not have to mingle with these people. All of them look so unhappy. Unhappiness is not something that I particularly want to feel in my life. I never wanted to be a businessman; so moving to Manchester for inspiration a year before University is a big step towards that happy future. Though I don’t exactly know what I want to be in the future, I am unsure if there will be other steps to such happiness. All I know is that writing and drawing and philosophising are my only hopes.

I gaze my eyes around the room hesitantly. Now that rush hour is over there is a much smaller crowd, not many of which are running. Most are tourists, or kids perhaps skiving off school. I wonder if anyone is questioning my reasoning for being here, I must look like a tourist, not a kid from Devon here to meet a friend who will take me to my new apartment block.

“Jean?” I nearly drop to my knees in relief at the recognition of the voice. He’s not speaking in his Southern accent though; perhaps a couple years in Manchester have altered the way he speaks already. “Long time no see, bro.” It feels great to hug Eren; I’ve missed those short little arms, even if they’ve got enough muscle mass to crush me alive.

“Yeah, it’s been fucking ages.” I greet him enthusiastically. It has been two years since Eren moved to Manchester, meaning a long time not seeing my best friend. I know deep down that two years is practically nothing in the grand scheme of things, but I can’t help feeling ecstatic that we’re together again. Skype just isn’t enough these days. He offers to take my suitcase for me, being nineteen years of age and two whole years older than me. I suppose it is his way of acting responsible.

“This is your first time in Manchester, right?” I nod slowly. There is an odd churning feeling in my stomach, one I only get in the most nerve-wracking of situations. And although I have never been to Manchester, a feeling of déjà vu within me causes my mind to perceive my surroundings as if I am fairly familiar with them. “You’ll love it here, I know it. There are tons of places to shop, and the people are lovely. You’ll be in an apartment block just across the road from mine, so if you need me that badly I can get to you fast. I know your neighbours too. Hanji and Petra, you’ll like them easily. They’re practically a Mother and Father and they’ll dote on a cute kid like you.”
As soon as Eren and I exit the station and I have nodded along to many other idle facts about Eren’s city-life, we are greeted to the Piccadilly Station signpost and a busy road. Behind those is a street of tall, grey buildings, the closest seeming to be a pharmacists, and the other a beauticians. I vaguely remember seeing this place, even though I haven’t. My mind has always been strange in this way, like there is a constant haze throughout my memories, or memories that are there in microscopic volume even though I have never experienced such things. Like the one time my family and I went down to Cornwall, but there was something so damned striking about the beaches in Cornwall that I had found myself feeling sick. Penzance, specifically.

“What is my apartment like, Eren?” Perhaps the question is ridiculous, and maybe I should already know the answer. I should really have taken a short trip up to look at the apartments before contacting the landlord and asking to rent, though I didn’t. Rationality isn’t my forte.

“Real nice actually – for cheap student housing. I mean at worst you have a couple noisy neighbours, but they aren’t bad people. Just crazed students, you know? And hey, maybe hearing the guy next door sing in the shower will be enjoyable to you. He could be the next Elton John, Jean.” Eren looks left then right before we cross the road, trying again to be responsible again, “Though apparently he’s been singing Crocodile Rock on repeat for the last month, Hanji is considering tearing his ears off. I fucking hate that song, so good luck.”

When we reach a hotel, a soot-black building with turquoise-tinted windows and rows of cars parked outside, Eren turns us right after passing it. Manchester has a different vibe to it than Devon does. It feels so bustling and full, like there isn’t enough room and so all they can do here is build up. The sky is always partially blocked by the towering buildings, and there just aren’t many pleasing things to look at. I guess I’ll have to try harder to find something beautiful in this maze of brick and stone. One lonesome peony in a field of charcoal.

“Well unlike you I love Crocodile Rock. I’ll happily join in with this neighbour if he sings anything by Elton. I still have that giant poster of him on my wall back at home. You always said it would be a phase, but I don’t to phases. Once I find love for something I love it forever.” Eren laughs loudly at this – thankfully I am close enough with him for it to be easy for me to admit to such an embarrassing fact. You see: Eren, from the second we met, was much different to the other people I had met previously. I saw him from the corner of my eye and suddenly I felt overwhelmed with a sense of déjà vu. I had asked my Mother if she recognised him, but she didn’t. He recognised me too, however, and his parents always said we had a friendship crafted in Heaven. Though I haven’t seen him in a while, I remember vividly the days we played baseball together, or paddled
in the sea, and even when we both decided we’d be singers in the future - though the plan failed miserably. I’ve had dreams but they’re all impossible to grasp.

Eren hums a song I don’t particularly recognise, and looks up at the sky as if he’s searching for something and wants to speak, but he decides not to say a word. The sky above us is very white, nothing to see, no sun or stars, clouds or lightening. But then again, there isn’t much in the sky anyway apart from air, wisps of white or grey and the occasional shade of pale blue. Thunder and lightening are rarer displays in this country.

The street seems rather devoid of life. Everything is painted in this grey colour that makes the flesh of my eyeballs itch. I’d paint the city in reds and blues if I could, add life to it. Plant trees where there are instead lampposts, let ivy intertwine with the cracks in the buildings. My feet trace the yellow lines at the side of the steep and tiring road, like my body is trying to stick to whatever colour it can find. The lack of anything pleasing to my eyes just messes up my nerves even more, worse than when I sat my Middle School exams, worse than when I said goodbye to my family in Devon before boarding a train. Worse than starting college without even Eren there to help me out.

In the distance I can here more people chatting idly for we are approaching another high street shopping district. Though, strangely, my ears detect a much different sound than that of voices: the strumming of an acoustic guitar. I always preferred the sound of acoustic guitars to electric ones, just like natural beauty to fake. There is something so beauteous about the sound they make, the vibrations that send along the strings and soak into the wood of the body. The feeling that the guitarist emits when they play, like the guitar has taken them on long journeys beyond one’s imagination.

This particular sound is, well, a different sort of different. The song playing is one I know very well, one I played on repeat a thousand times as a child and just never grew out of. Even though Eren looks as if he wants to turn left, I beg that we go right just so I can watch when the guitarist begins to sing, or if he even does. I walk around the corner and grab Eren’s arm so he will follow me, giggling at the screech of my suitcase wheels from such a sharp turn.

“And I’d give up forever to touch you, ‘cause I know that you feel me somehow,”
A crowd of Japanese tourists stand in front of the man singing, taking photographs, clapping and blocking my view, yet even though I can’t see him I can picture him. Just from his voice my brain learns to thread together an image of a man with a boxy smile, almond shaped eyes that move into crescents when he smiles. Thick eyebrows and soft hair, creases by the side of his eyes when he laughs, beautiful golden skin. Freckles. The feeling of déja vu that I get from his voice is exactly how I felt when I had met Eren, but this time I don’t even have to see the man to feel it.

His voice; deep, low, smooth and soothing, is one I have heard before.

God only knows where, god only knows when. I don’t, I have no recollection of where I have heard this man’s voice before. And fuck, the song makes me want to cry. It feels so familiar, and although I’ve heard it countless times before for that very reason it is different now that this man sings it. The words of the song in his voice make him sound understanding, and never in my life have I felt understood.

“You’re the closest to Heaven that I’ll ever be, and I don’t wanna go home right now,”

It’s then that the tourists clear away, throwing a few coins into the man’s guitar case before leaving, and I finally get to see him. The most terrifying thing on this planet is not being locked in a haunted house, being trapped in the dark after a horror film, being in a car crash or having your life at the line, witnessing a murder or even being murdered yourself, no. No. The most terrifying thing is looking down at the exact person you pictured in your head seconds ago, when you have never even met him.

“And all I can taste is this moment, all I can breathe is your life. Sooner or later its over, I just don’t wanna-”

His singing stops when his eyes lock with mine. We are both overwhelmed with an omnipotent feeling of having already experienced the present situation, one so powerful that it surpasses the short fleeting moment of apparent recognition. It isn’t like this is something that has happened a
couple times before. It is like I’m just meeting my home again, after years living somewhere else. My heart suddenly feels so comforted, so loved; nevertheless the sheer insanity of the emotions within my mind at this moment makes me feel dizzy. I am going to vomit.

Before any further feelings come crashing down on me, I know I have to turn away. The man has finished playing his guitar for sure, because music is no longer sounding through the city air. All I can hear is my heartbeat throbbing painfully at my chest.

“Hey, you, hey!” The man calls and another surge of dizziness flows through my veins, “Wait! Do I know you from-”

“Eren. Eren, we’re going to my apartment.” I interrupt loud enough for the man to hear, just so he knows I am not willing to talk, “Now. Eren, come on.”

The rest of the night flies by after that. The apartment at first glance is just simplistic and pleasant, nothing much to it however. It is the distinct homely feeling that it lacks: of pictures hanging on the walls and flowers in vases on the sideboard. Shoes strewn across the floor, unmade beds and dirty dishes. Marks on the plaster of the walls from times the owner won’t even remember. It lacks that, but I’m too sickly to care. I don’t feel much like food, showering or even unpacking yet, and so I take to my bed and try my best to fall asleep. It takes a few hours for my eyes to finally close shut, though I was unsure of what kept me so awake.

I dream of stars that night, and beaches. Skating over frozen lakes and dancing over vermillion clouds. A man with this beautiful, beautiful golden skin. With Freckles. It should be a dream, but half of it feels like a nightmare.

A part of me believes that none of it is a *dream* at all.
“You’ve lived in Manchester for three days, Jean, and yet you’ve already got Hanji and Petra cooking you breakfast. This is unbelievable.” Eren leans back into the chair at my small, four-seater dining room table. He reaches out to run a finger along the white heather neatly arranged in a vase at the centre of the table. Hanji had brought them to me the day after arriving, with Eren and Petra beside him.

I had almost had another one of those panic attacks when they stepped into my doorway, but I managed to control it for nothing was as hard to understand as the feeling I got from the street singer.

“Come on, it’s not that fast.” Armin replies and leans forward towards the table unlike Eren, “When I moved up here Hanji was making me food the second I arrived. I can’t complain though, it’s fucking delicious.”

Petra laughs at this and soon agrees. Hanji pours the last bit of pancake batter into the pan, proceeding to hum a tune afterwards. Armin I had met the day after Hanji, along with his flatmates Mikasa and Annie, and had another reaction. They were starting to weaken the more that they happened. It is strange to me really that it only happens with select people, and those people tend to ask me whether we’ve met before. None of us ever mention the feeling, and so we believe it is something natural. Déjà vu is something I’ve studied for a long time through Philosophy classes, but no one ever told me it could be mutual.

“You guys all need food, there isn’t any excuse for missing out on it.” Hanji says calmly and brings the final pancake to my plate. “Don’t be like Mikasa and Annie: skipping meals for the sake of their jobs.”

I sigh at this knowing that tomorrow will be my first day back to college to start my final year before heading off to University. All of these friends I have made over this short amount of time already attend Uni, and some – like Mikasa and Annie – have fulltime jobs. Even Hanji and Petra
plan to open up a café soon…everyone is finding their future’s at lightening speed and yet I haven’t the slightest clue of what mine will be, even after seventeen years.

My fork prods and pokes at the pancake but I don’t really feel like eating it, all because I’m nervous about starting in a new college. Will there be more people I will find myself having breakdowns over? Mostly, my brain is trafficked busily with thoughts about the street singer and those fucking umber eyes of his.

“I’ll eat that if you aren’t having it.” Armin laughs and takes my pancake off of my plate, sliding onto his. I smile back at him even if I don’t particularly feel happy. I am hungry, but for what I am not sure. “Hey, Jean, have you met Marco yet?”

The name sounds like one I am familiar with, though I can’t remember any Marco’s off the top of my head, “I don’t think so. But Eren must have mentioned him before ‘cause I recognise the name.”

Eren wets his lips and raises an eyebrow at me, “Uh, no. I haven’t mentioned Marco before. He said he’d come round here at some point. He was the stree-” His words are harshly interrupted by the loud buzz of the doorbell. The sound hurts my ears more than it has done previously, and there is an unsettled swirling in the pit of my stomach. Petra, now being the only person not eating or sitting down, offers to answer the door. Examining her walk I find that I must truly be the only one feeling sick, for she looks perfectly normal while she exits the kitchen.

All I hear after that is muted muttering, clicking of a door, and the sound of footsteps increasing in volume as they near. Petra soon pops her head through the kitchen door and grins, “Talk of the devil, Marco is here.”

But it is not the devil that walks through the kitchen entrance after Petra. He is the last person on earth I would class as a devil; he is an angel. His name is Marco, and he is the street singer from three days ago. This time, his fingers aren’t occupied with a guitar, nor is his body cradled in a coat. He is wearing baggy black trousers with an oversized white shirt, and his left hand holds a small bouquet of wild daisies, while the other remains in his pocket. My heartbeat increases again,
much to fast this time, and the dizziness takes over.

The next thing I feel is my head hitting the table as darkness completely consumes me.

Upon reopening my eyes I am met with a wave of glaring moonlight and the tall silhouette of Hanji Zoe. “Go back to sleep,” He says to me softly, but I can see that he is standing up to leave, “You fainted. Sleep, everything is OK.”

The door shuts behind him though darkness doesn’t follow suit, the entire room is lit up by moonlight. Something has changed now, and nothing feels OK. I can see Marco’s daisies on my bedside table, so beautifully selected, and quite possibly the most beautiful daisies I have ever seen in my life. But that isn’t the reason as to why my room feels different, nor is the moonlight staring through the window. The entire house no longer feels empty, for through each fibre of fabric and through each breeze flowing through the air, I can smell vanilla.

_Fucking vanilla._

My first class started an hour and a half before lunch a few days later. Luckily, I didn’t even need to set an alarm to get there on time. The college looked brilliant from the very second I stepped through the gates; all of the buildings are brand new and painted flawlessly white. The paths are paved in russet bricks, clearly done over a long period of time, and at the sides of every path are beds of flowers. I had checked my timetable and noticed my first lesson was fine art, sadly my least
favourite of all the subjects I have chosen. The maps located on every square inch of campus guided me to a very small yet pleasant and quaint art studio at the far left of the college.

Inside the art room were three others students and one teacher, who I learned soon after arriving were the only people I would see in this classroom. Not many picked art. Two of the students along with the teacher were very much normal and I didn’t react to them at all. However the third student, who I had almost recognised from the back of her damned head, had caused me a near heart attack when she moved to face me. For a short moment, we had stared at each other with wide eyes and found ourselves enclosed in a mad silence.

She’d been the one to break the silence, “H-Hello. I’m Historia. Historia Reiss. Do I know you from somewhere?”

“Oh Jean Kirschtein. I get that question a lot.” I had replied while shaking my head in disbelief at how familiar she looked, “I don’t think we’ve met before, but I know we both feel like we have.”

Historia, eventually, moved right to the top of my list of people in Manchester I can trust and will be very good friends with. Because god, she was up there with Eren – a friend who I have known for over twelve years – yet I had just met her. We spent the lesson looking through her artwork. She works with paints mostly, and had decided when joining the course that she was going to paint the beauty in things that are seen as controversial or things that people are ignorant to.

Most of her paintings are of a girl named Ymir, her partner, who I found stunningly beautiful even though it was only a picture. Historia had explained that she doesn’t care about people judging her paintings of her girlfriend, because there are worse eras to be born in and in 2015 people deserve a slap with reality. Historia has coincidentally almost the exact same lesson schedule as me, except for her choosing French over English Language. The next lesson was Philosophy, so I had walked with her and chatted like we’d known each other all our life.

And that brings me to now, the present, sat beside Historia in a small lecture hall in the humanities department. I have my notebook and pens splayed out across the desk before me, not alike Historia
“The meaning of life, literally, is to die. Just as Hao Qian has said: there is not much meaning to a human life, we are all insignificant. We live to die. But everyone has different opinions on the topic, especially certain religious people, who believe that God created them and so their life does have meaning. They look to God as proof for their worth.” The man mumbles unenthusiastically. After listening, I regret ever not doing so, because I disagree with absolutely every word he has just said and I would love to argue back.

Not quite sure what I am attempting to do, I lift my hand in the air and catch his attention. He doesn’t ask me to speak, rather just simple raises his brow and leans his weight to the left side of his body in wait.

“Not at all, prof. The meaning of life ain’t to die, or that God created us. Lets say God is real: which God? There are millions of religions and millions of ways to go about the idea, so who can really make a judgement on whom or what God is. Whether he exists at all, in fact.” A few heads turn in certain areas of the lecture hall, but some students still seem completely bored. “So lets say this with the idea that God doesn’t exist as there isn’t enough evidence to prove he does. You’re got two states really: immortality, and mortality. If mortals live to die, then what is the point of bothering? Why do we bother setting alarms in the morning to head off to an education system if we’re going to die? Why do we bother spending time cooking up meals when our family come over if we’re going to die? Why do we make friends, fall in love, have sex or get married? Give birth? Spend hours groaning over bills because our jobs don’t pay enough?”

Finally, the last few people turn to face me, and this time the teacher looks less burdened by me talking and rather more intrigued to hear me carry on. Historia has turned her chair completely just to face me, so I look her in the eye at least because now it feels less like I am talking to a group of people I don’t care about and more that I am talking to a lifelong friend.

“People make bucket lists in life because they have goals they want to reach. Fulfilments. Things to which they can say: oh yeah, I’ve been there, done that. But logically, if one were immortal their life would be hell, because they’ve literally got a complete and utter eternity of repetition and loss of everyone around them. It sounds pretty lonely to me, I would despise immortality. People only
crave it because they can’t grasp the sheer insanity of the idea or because they’re terrified of oblivion.

“But what life means is reason to go out and do these things, because we know there is a deadline and an end to all we can do. We have to reach those fulfillments as we’re scared we’ll die without having enough in our past to make us matter. So, at the end of the day, I think the meaning of life is to live because we want meaning. It’s an invalid reason, so pointlessly invalid, but it’s valid in its own way. That’s my opinion: we live to live. Death ain’t life, and neither is living for the sake of God.”

For seventeen years now, I’ve not had an answer to the question of what do you see yourself doing in the future? Or what do you want to be when you’re older? It is because I never had any insight as to myself in a few years from now, life is too unpredictable. I have never had even the simplest goal. At the end of the lesson, I stare down to my notebook to find pictures of pendants, crowns, beaded necklaces and storybooks, horses and syringes, knives and cars. Coffees and baseball bats, ice skates and a pair of angel wings. None of the images mean anything to me really, yet the lack of meaning means something in itself. I’ve grown attached to things I don’t even know. I’ve grown attached to someone I don’t even know. The drawings do mean something after all.

I should talk to Marco.

He’s clearly where fate has led me, and I don’t want to crash against the rocks before I even reach the shore.

At night I walk Historia to the local flower shop where her girlfriend Ymir works part-time. I end up entering and meeting the girl myself. At this point, I don’t let the shock of déjà vu overwhelm me; I’ve felt it enough. It might just continue happening with select people for the rest of my life so being scared by it all that time would distract me from more important things. Ymir looks, to me, like a Goddess. She’s got this tanned skin like the sun kisses her daily – much like Marco, actually – and this crazy aura that one could only describe as intoxicating.
Though she is just human, I find myself struggling to breathe, as when she speaks I’m not talking to some greater being or external force - I’m talking to a mortal like myself, yet she feels so Godly my mind is torn apart. I take both Ymir and Historia’s numbers after a good three quarters of an hour chatting to them, and buy a small bouquet of peonies before I leave. Outside, the sky is clouded over and nearly pitch black at this time of night. When I breathe a cloud of white emits from between my lips. I barely remember where the apartment block is from this area of the town, so I follow the pavements and let the world lead me where it wants. I’ve done that long enough, and it seems to have worked well.

Above the rooftops, I see a distant cross sign, so small and far away that it barely looks like a cross at all. The cross is held up above the steeple of what looks like a church, one much taller than any of the buildings around me. My feet walk closer to the church building, even though I hate churches, and would never willingly go to one. In the distance, much alike the cross, I see a dark silhouette of a boy about my age, a man staring up at the cross with an emotion I can’t decipher from such a distance. Yet even from so far away, I know exactly who he is, because fate has led me to him just like I trusted it to. I’ve evaded the rocks, and there’s merely a metres stretch of water left to sail.

He doesn’t turn to me when I near him, keeping those eyes locked onto the top of the church building, but as I get closer I can see that the emotion painted across his face is that of worry… uneasiness. Wisps of air exit his slightly parted lips and fade away under the glow of the streetlights, this entire scene feels like one I’ve experienced before.

“I hate churches.” I hadn’t expected him to speak, but when he does I’m not exactly caught off guard.

“Me too.” I reply, “An entire fucking building devoted to worshiping a God that people aren’t even sure exists. It’s crazy.”

He hums at this, still not turning to face me, causing a desperate yearning within me that begs for him to do so. So I can see his face again. “It really is. Do you believe in God?”
“I don’t want to, yet I find myself wondering how there isn’t someone up there in that great big universe. How can it be just an infinite mass of nothing? Maybe the stars just need a lot of room...” He laughs at my words but I hadn’t said them as a joke. Something in his laugh sounds quite sad, like it wasn’t genuine. I’d die just to hear what his true laugh sounds like. “Uh, Marco, I-”

It’s now that he chooses to finally face me, sucking in a deep breath and widening his eyes when he turns. He doesn’t make me feel like Eren had done, nor Hanji, nor Historia and Ymir. He is much different to them, and it makes meeting them a simple step where as for Marco I feel like I’ve ran a billion miles. Until my feet are scarred and bruised black, worn away until I’m nothing but bone. His eyes and his lips and every feature upon his face make me feel out of breath.

“If you’re going to apologise, don’t.” He says, “Just tell me your name and we’ll start fresh. We can ignore the last couple of meetings.”

There is no way that I haven’t met him before. Whether it be once as a child we met on the beach and played for a few hours, maybe he worked at a coffee shop back in Devon, perhaps he went to my school for a while but he was just a face in the corridor. I can’t quite fathom what he makes me feel. It’s so rash, so sudden, and so brilliant at the same time.

“Jean Kirschtein.” I smile and hold out my hand for him, “Its nice to meet you, Marco Bodt, I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Yes. He likes to sing in the shower and keep the entire apartment block awake. He manages to fall asleep during class halfway through answering a question, and annoys Eren when he begins to snore in exams. Apparently he can’t cook so well, and has a terrible fashion sense, but there is something about him that everyone loves. He’s the ideal friend, according to Armin, and I will love him too.
He hadn’t needed to tell me that. It feels like I already do.

“Nice to meet you too,” He takes my hand and there is this fucking magnetic attraction that trembles through my body the second my skin touches his, and I know he feels it too by the small gasp that leaves his lips, and the way his hand tightens on mine, “You’ve heard a lot about me, but there is always more to learn. What do you say, Jean, to becoming friends?”

Friendship. The idea makes me feel like I am a heroin addict taking the smallest dose of methadone, sufficing my needs for the shortest moment. But I need more. For now, though, I’ll be OK. I feel home, and that’s a sign of good things to come.

“Yeah, friends.” I squeeze his hand once more and let go. The loss makes me sigh in disappointment. I lift up the bouquet of peonies in my other hand and hold them out to him. For a second he looks at me confusedly, wondering why on earth I’m holding flowers to his face, though it soon clicks that they’re for him. “I feel like I owe you this at least. For being a dick. Honestly though, I haven’t stopped thinking about you this entire week, so I’m sorry I-”

“Don’t apologise!” He shouts – softly – and clutches the bouquet closer to his chest, “I don’t have anything against you. Forgiveness is what I’m best at. God, these flowers are beautiful. Peonies are my favourite, did you know that?” I didn’t know it, though I obviously made the best choice in selecting them. “Hey, Jean?”

“Yeah?”

“Do I know you from somewhere?” This question makes me laugh like it holds an old joke, one between two very close friends – a joke no one else understands. But there is nothing funny to it, and yet we both end up laughing in the bubbling feeling it gives. Nostalgia. Sentimentality. That’s what I feel like when I speak to him…look at him.
“You look cold, Marco. It’s freezing out here. Look, it’s starting to snow.” He lifts his eyes to the sky and a few small snowdrops flutter down onto his eyelashes. A pink blush dusts across his cheeks and nose, however I don’t think it is from the cold. “How about I buy you… a hot chocolate, or something? To warm you up.”

His eyelids close just for a moment, as if he is taking some time away from the world just to breathe in his surroundings. Like there is something new to them and he needs to get used to it. Understand it. I would know, for I feel exactly the same way. Almost a minute passes and then he turns to look at me again. “A hot chocolate?” He licks his lips, “To make up for the money you didn’t throw into my guitar case the day we met?”

Oh, so Marco Bodt has some mischief beneath his sweet little angelic appearance he fools people with. Just like Eren, you’d never expect it. “I thought I was forgiven for that!” My feigned despair makes him laugh even more, “And no, if I was going to pay you in coffees what I’d have given you that day, I’d say I’d be buying you at least fifty of the damned drinks.”

I’m unsure when the both of us began walking away from the church, but the building is far behind us when I next look to check our surroundings. Watching it fade into the shadows behind me feels good, warmth snakes its way around my heart and latches on. It feels like I am leaving behind the darkness in my life and starting fresh, letting go of sadness and walking towards a new, honest beginning, where happiness will only lie ahead. A future. A destination.

There is no other way I can describe it.

“Fine by me. You owe me fifty hot chocolates now, no taking it back.” Marco grins. His eyes do become crescents when he smiles, and his temples do crease up just like I’d imagined. His lips pull into this boxy smile and I just want to drink up everything he has to offer to me. I don’t believe in love at first sight, and I don’t think that I ever will. Listening to my gut, however, I decide that this isn’t love at first sight.

We’ve met before, sometime in the past, and perhaps one day I’ll remember when and where. But I
must have loved him since then, because I sure as hell do now.

With the church completely gone behind us, and a new path lying ahead for us to follow, I conclude that Marco will be worth spending the rest of my bank account on. Even if for cheap, coffee-shop hot chocolate. I’d buy anything if he asked; I’m already weak at the knees for him.

After all, there are harder things one might have to accomplish just to give another happiness.

Chapter End Notes

epilogue will be out tomorrow
My tumblr
EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The nicest thing about our apartment is the far wall of the bedroom being made entirely out of glass. We pushed the top of the bed against it, for no reason in particular, but overtime I have grown to find that it was the greatest idea we’ve come up with so far. I have my head upon the pillows, my scalp merely inches from the glass, and I can see the sky in its entirety. It’s infinity. It’s perfection.

My eyes latch onto this one star, much brighter than the others, and the sight of it makes my heart throb for an unknown reason. I love the way that in summer the sky clears and there aren’t any clouds stopping me from seeing the universe anymore. Even now, in the late days of June, the moonlight shines through the window and falls upon my face in a blanket of silver. The sky is one of the three most beautiful things in my life. The second, I would say, is nature. My eyes trail away from that star and fall upon the near-twenty vases filled with flowers we have scattered around the bedroom. There are more in other rooms too; he adores flowers, especially for their smell. I like them for their beauty, their strength to keep looking so pretty even after being picked, lasting over a week before they start to die.

I’m glad I can’t smell them because I want the scent of vanilla to be the only thing I ever smell again.

But along with the flowers, I love the pictures hanging on the walls. My favourite is one of the two of us just a couple of weeks ago on a weekend trip to Devon, when we’d visited my parents then gone for a walk along the beach. A couple had offered to take a photo of us, and it was only when I looked back on the picture that I spotted the gorgeous vermillion clouds behind us, and how wonderfully they lit up his skin. There are other photos too. One of he and Ymir posing enthusiastically for one of Historia’s paintings. There’s a funny one of the both of us stood beside Eren. In fact, many of the pictures are of our friends and us. Friends are family - the greatest kind. That was something I had learned in Philosophy class, you can choose your friends, and that’s one of the most beautiful things in the world. Well, perhaps friendship can be added to my list of beautiful things then, I’ll knock the number up to four. Friendship really is beautiful, for I have made a million memories with my friends despite it being nothing but three months since arriving in Manchester.
The click of the front door sounds through the buzz of silence, and I hear him removing his shoes and humming whilst he slips off his bag and jacket. In an ideal world, our part time jobs would end at the same time, but he usually returns home an hour or so after me. After opening Kaffihús, Hanji had offered us both jobs, but I suppose it would be bad for the business if he and I finished work at the same time. His footsteps reach closer and then the door swings open.

Ah, him. Marco. The other most beautiful thing in the world.

“I’m home!” He sings, removing his jumper. The moonlight looks wonderful against his bare skin. His trousers fall easily down his legs into a pool on the floor and then he crawls onto the bed towards me. I love looking up and seeing him on top of me like this, waiting for him to bend down and give me a kiss. Our lips don’t crash against each other unless we’re in high moments of passion, but these slow and addictive kisses are just as brilliant. Wet, teasing and intimate. He sucks on my bottom lip lightly, then lifts himself off, rolling his body left and dropping into bed beside me.

“How was work, angel?” I’ll never grow tired of the way he blushes at the name each time I say it.

“Boring. ‘Was thinking about you all the time.’ I watch him closely as he looks up at the stars for just a second, eyes focusing on that bright one like we have shared emotions. Shared memories. One time we talked about alternate universes, and we both agreed that we’re probably lovers in every single one of those too. It could explain our strange imperceptible memories of a past we never had.

“Really? About me?” I trail my lips along his neck aimlessly, “Hmm, and what exactly were you imagining?”

“You, here.” He says, and I expect this to the beginning of a delicious string of dirty talk, “Lying in bed like now because you never leave the house, rotting away from malnutrition and lack of vitamin D from the sunshine…”
I can’t possibly help but roll my eyes at him then, pinching at his arm just lightly to leave a sting as his punishment. The notion only makes him laugh, though I don’t complain. I wouldn’t care in what context he was laughing, because his laugher makes the torches glow. He is much better than the stars I was occupying myself with just minutes ago. “I’ve got plenty of vitamin D. It all comes from you, sunshine.” Marco brings two fingers to his mouth and pushes them inside, making the most ridiculous sound of retching I’ve ever heard. My stomach nearly hurts from how hard I laugh. “Hey, I suppose I do get some vitamin D from you after all, if you know what I mean.” His cheeks puff out in order to hold back a snort, “Anyway, in all seriousness, it’s not that late yet. We can eat in an hour or so. I’m sure I won’t die of malnutrition until then, dear.”

We spend a few more minutes just sighing at each other; mostly with Marco just lying there while I kiss at his achy limbs, suck a few marks into his golden, freckled skin. I listen to his sighs intently like they are lyrics to a song I need to learn. I’ve already learned them, a long, long time ago. At some point I lose count of time, instead counting in kisses. I’m trying to make up for seventeen years when I wasn’t beside him. Drinking every beam of light he emits.

“Hey, Jean?” He says and I hum in response, “Can I just, uh…say thank you. I guess. For loving me. Thank you so much. There have been too many people to break my heart, yet you seem to want nothing more than to be with me any time you can.”

I nearly cry at his words, they rip and tear at my heart as well as sew it all up at the same time. So bittersweet. Feathers of lead and streams of tar. “Oh. Oh angel, don’t thank me for loving you. Thank you for letting me love you. I’ll always be with you, Marco, I don’t think I can ever let go.”

He reaches his hand out and rolls onto his side to face me, tracing these infinity signs on my arms. The sensation is heavenly. “Always? You can tolerate a guy like me forever and ever? Gosh, that’s devotion.” He laughs at his own attempted comedy, and the notion only makes me join in with a childish snort.

“I’m unsure now, Marco. I might have to lower that always a bit, might get a bit tired out.” I say to him jokingly, “Hmm, I’ll settle at about two thousand-years. After that, I’m out.” He smiles again, but this smile is in his eyes too, and his cheeks. His entire face lights up, I wasn’t joking when I said he was my source of sunlight.
“I’m personally offended, sweetheart.” He places a hand at his chest to emphasise his complete and utter betrayal, “I was at least hoping for two-thousand five-hundred! I suppose-” He brings his index finger to the corner of his eye, just to wipe away imaginary tears, “-I will love you for five hundred lonely years after you leave me, then. Oh, what despair! Parting is such sweet-

This time, I pinch at his skin twice and he erupts into more giggles. Our relationship is one that might make people vomit from the extremely cliché aspects of it. Though I personally think there is something different about what we have, something no other lovers in the entire universe have. We’re different; our love is the strongest it gets. I don’t know why, I just feel it. Intuition, perhaps. “Damn, did I say two thousand? I meant two-thousand, five-hundred and one.” Just alike him, I bring a finger to my eye as if to wipe away tears that aren’t there. “Oh, such despair. A whole, long and lonely year without you, I-”

He shuts me up with a kiss, but I don’t complain. A few more minutes pass of just this, pecking at each other’s lips, savouring the taste and licking at each other’s mouths in some sort of desperation. Well, we are mere mortals, and we’ll only live once, so we like to make sure to fit in as many kisses as possible. When we pull apart, he pants heavily – out of breath. It shows that we need to start getting a little more exercise than simply the activities that take place in bed.

“How calm down, old man,” I joke, “Don’t let you’re heart rate get too high or it’ll end altogether. And your face is super wrinkly as well. I’m starting to think this is already our two-thousand, five-hundred and first year – we’re that old.

“What happens next year then, Jean?” He laughs, still catching his breath, “If you’ll only love me til then.” He uses that tone of feigned sadness, yet another emotion shines through the foundations of his act. One I cannot understand.

“I’ll have to run after you!” I shout, pretending to have a powerful, manly voice and making myself sound stronger, “I’ll chase you, hunt you down! I’ll follow you. All the way to our two-thousand, five-hundred and second year!”
When Marco had first walked into the bedroom, he’d been freezing cold. Just like the night that I saw him outside the church and promised him friendship and fifty coffees (I gave him friendship, sure, but not fifty coffees. Though I made those up to him in a confession, a peck at his lips, and a hot make-out session at the entrance to my apartment). But now, Marco isn’t cold anymore. Just with lying here beside him, we’ve warmed up to the most perfect temperature we can be. Just the right heat, the right brightness, the right breeze, the right everything.

There isn’t flaw in my life when he’s beside me.

“You’ll follow me?”

“Of course, angel.” I lean in to kiss him again, wondering if I’ll ever feel too full-up from loving him. Currently, I believe that I’ll always be hungry. “I’ll always follow you. I always have.”

There’s a hidden meaning in those words, one not even I can decipher. Hidden away behind a haze of vermillion clouds. Behind the cryptic doodles in my notebook that I unconsciously draw, or the strange dreams I have and explain to Marco only to have him claim he finds them familiar.

“You’re being too cheesy again, Romeo. It’s high expectations to think we’ll live to a hundred and yet you’re promising over two and a half millennia.”

When I fell in love with Marco, it was like I was the bud of a cherry blossom tree in late winter, waiting for the sun to come out. Then he did, he showed up so suddenly and I tasted that sunlight and bloomed. All for him. Seasons change and seasons flow. But every single year cherry blossoms bloom in spring and that’s exactly how we work. That’s exactly how two people can have an eternity together and yet still taste the delicious life of a mortal. Birth, Life, Death. But some things are infinite like our love.
Even in death, Marco will be alive. And I’ll be right beside him. Forever.

“Nah, angel, I don’t think two and a half millennia can kill us. Nothing can kill us. We’ve got the power to overthrow God, don’t you think, m-my…my…” Usually, the names come flowing to the forefront of my mind and fly from my lips effortlessly without even thinking much about them. But this time, I have to look at the stars once more just to confirm that this name is the perfect one for him.

“…my death-defier.”

Ah, it does suit him well. Like peonies, and vanilla, and tomato soup after a long day at work. Like dumb, baggy clothing and boxy smiles, like hot chocolates with only white marshmallows. In fact, there are infinite things I could link to Marco, from somewhere deep in the back of my mind. So many billions of names I could call him that would suit him more than his very own.

At the end of the day, carpe diem – one might say, there’s only one name that suits him to a point where even God would struggle to comprehend why it fits him so fucking seamlessly.

“I love you,” I whisper, “my angel.”

Seventeen years, what feels like thousands of years, have passed in my life with me yearning on both knees in desperation for a future. A place I can settle down and claim it will be the place I will spend the rest of my existence in. Everyone was already finding that place whilst I was still searching.
But I’ve found it now. This is my future: lying beside Marco under an ocean of stars, just soaking him in until I’m almost dangerously full. Him; he is my future. He is my life. Yes, I have finally fucking found it.

I have found happiness.

Chapter End Notes

*sips coffee with bloodshot eyes and counts his 378th hour since his last sleep* IT IS OVER.

This has like 2 hits but I’m still very thankful for those like 2 hits so thank you thank you. I have however had some amazing comments so gosh can I hug you all? And a special thank you to the couple of people who have shared this story on social media because wow dude please wow thank you :’)

I know I’ve only been posting this for a few months but this story has taken me over a year to write so wow has it been a journey for me. Sorry for making you all cry by the way literally all the comments are like FUCK YOU I AM CRYING FUCK AHH MY HEART but don’t worry I cried too. So much actually.

I’d say this has been some experience where I’ve learned more about myself but honestly all I have learned is how gay I am sooo.

Thank you again for reading/giving kudos/bookmarking/subscribing/commenting/sharing!

8Tracks Song Playlist Here: CLICK ME (It will show as a playlist for a different fic IILGOYH but they are both the same fic just two different pairings jeanmarco and taekook)
Alternative Link Here: OR ME
As always, song recommendations are welcome :) One of the songs LlamasInPyjamas recommended is on that playlist so yours could be too wooooahh.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!