Dancing Daffodils

by grayclouds

Summary

A god falls for a man.

Spanish | Russian

Notes

Important to know before you start reading: the setting in this is going to start vague, but pick up as the story goes on, mostly because I tend to be a very character-focused writer. So if you're here for the world-building, it'll be slow in the beginning but expand as the plot develops.

For now just keep the "Fantasy" tag in mind; at the very least this won't be taking place anywhere in the real world, though it borrows heavily from real world mythology and religion. Also, the characters themselves in this case won't be exact replicas of canon, since this is an alternate universe where they have completely different backstories and completely different experiences. their core characteristics remain the same, though.

Hope you'll enjoy!
at first sight

Victor has always been a simple man with simple wants and simple desires who only ever wished to lead a simple life. He used to have it as well, back when he still lived in the village.

Unfortunately, few things concerning the hearts of men are ever allowed to be simple, and soon after he reached his adolescence he found himself on the sharp end of a sword pointed at his neck. Death or exile were his only options, so he moved to a small cottage on the edge of the Great Forest and settled on the solitary life of a hunter.

Now his days are as simple as he wants them to be—most of his time is spent on either hunting game for food or working in his garden, avoiding the villages nearby as much as he can. It is a very lonely way to be, particularly for one who so enjoys the company and attention of others, but he finds comfort in the simplicity of it.

As is the case with everything in life, however, this too does not last.

One day, when Victor stops to rest during one of his hunts in the forest, his eye catches the peculiar sight of a single flower growing beside the river. It’s not that he’s never seen flowers by the riverbank before, but something about this lone flower, hanging over the edge as if a mere breeze could blow it into the rapid currents below, arrests him.

He steps out from under the shade of the trees and towards the daffodil bathed in sunshine, gleaming brighter than the glimmering water below it.

For a moment, he is tempted to pick it, but discards the thought a moment later. It’d be a shame to ruin something so beautiful out of thoughtless impulse. Instead, Victor moves closer, combing a long lock of hair behind his ear, and is about to settle down beside the flower on the edge of the bank when the snap of a twig behind him makes him halt mid-movement.

“How is it that he didn’t hear anyone approach him earlier? Victor considers the man carefully—he looks unassuming, wearing a long cloak with a slip of plain tunic and trousers peeking out from under it. No weapons; not out in the open, at least. A dagger or two would be easy to hide underneath that cloak.

“How is it that he didn’t hear anyone approach him earlier? Victor considers the man carefully—he looks unassuming, wearing a long cloak with a slip of plain tunic and trousers peeking out from under it. No weapons; not out in the open, at least. A dagger or two would be easy to hide underneath that cloak.

“Hello,” Victor returns with a friendly smile, the tension in his arms the only thing betraying his wariness. “Out on a walk?”
The stranger smiles back slightly, seeming entirely unperturbed by the fact that he has an arrow pointed at his jugular. His eyes—appearing pitch black in the shade—shift from Victor to the daffodil beside him.

“II was looking for you.” Victor tilts his head slightly, but before he can reply, the stranger glances back at him and shakes his head. “I’m not from the village.”

He finds that rather hard to believe. “Then why else would you look for me? And who are you?”

The stranger pauses, considering the question for a while as Victor waits, and then he says, “You were lonely.”

It’s not much of an answer to either of his questions, particularly the latter one, leaving Victor only more and more confused. The way the stranger looks at him is starting to make him uneasy, as if he were staring right through Victor’s eyes and into his head. He feels far too exposed and vulnerable, never mind the fact that he's the one with the weapon.

Victor breathes out a long-suffering sigh, having half a mind to just turn on his heel and leave. All he wanted was to enjoy his morning hunt, not get tangled up in the cryptic nonsense of a possible madman. Still, it’s an interesting change of pace from the routine he constructed for himself. A break from the lull of daily life.

“Let’s try this again,” he decides brightly. “Why were you looking for me?”

The stranger pauses for a moment, eyes flitting here and there, and suddenly he looks very young. “A girl asked me to see you.”

Victor tenses. “Sara?” He hasn’t seen her for nearly a year, the last letter he received dating three months back. Tentatively, he lowers his bow. “What for?”

“She thinks that you might…” The stranger pauses, seeming to search for his words, head ducking slightly and gaze aimed to the ground. Victor can’t quite tell because of the shade, but it almost looks as if he’s blushing.

“That I might…” Victor presses, curiosity piqued.

“She thinks you need me.”

Victor blinks and the stranger starts fidgeting, shuffling about on his feet, adjusting the strap of his belt in the long stretch of silence that follows. It’s rather endearing to see, especially since he appeared to be so composed before.

It doesn’t really clarify much, though.

“Alright, I’ll bite,” Victor humors, sliding his arrow back into its quiver, though he keeps a hand close to the knife strapped to his belt. “What would I need you for? What is it that you do?”

The stranger is quiet for a moment, the unease seeping out of his posture and replaced by a more thoughtful expression. “Mostly, I bring people together. Sometimes, I tear them apart.”

Victor frowns. “I don’t understand.”

“I know,” the stranger says and smiles indulgently, before his expression turns a twinge sad again, the corners of his mouth twisting slightly.
The gaze on him is making Victor feel uncomfortable again, but at least it seems this man truly isn’t a hired killer sent by Sara’s brother. That doesn’t get him any closer to the truth, however, and the stranger’s bewilderingly vague responses don’t help him along much either.

Victor takes a moment to look at him a second time. He only paid attention to the clothes and possible weapons the stranger could be carrying before, disregarding anything else about his appearance. Well, aside from perhaps his eyes, of which he still can’t tell what the color is due to the shade of the trees enveloping him. His hair seems just as dark, cut short and combed back.

There’s something odd in the shadows around him, Victor notices then. They look like they might start moving if he stares long enough, almost seeming to be curled around the stranger like a dark, thin sheet.

Or it could just be his mind playing tricks on him due to a lack of sleep.

That seems more likely.

“Maybe we should start from the beginning,” Victor mutters, mostly to himself as he tears his gaze away from the shadows and back up to the stranger’s face. “What’s your name?”

“There’s…” The stranger falls silent for a few seconds, chewing on his lower lip. “I have many.”

“Do you travel a lot?”

The stranger furrows his brows slightly. “Not exactly.”

“Do you want me to try guessing?” Victor suggests, and while most other people would have grown exasperated with the evasive answers, being that he hasn’t spoken to another person in so long Victor can only find amusement in the situation. “An assassin? A spy, perhaps? A writer with an excessive fondness for pen names?”

The stranger shakes his head again.

“What are you, then?”

He looks conflicted at the question, face turning away from Victor who waits patiently for a reply. Whatever it is that he does, it can’t possibly be that bad if Sara was the one who sent him.

“I wonder if you’ll believe me,” the stranger muses.

“Never hurts to try.”

The stranger hums, then nods to himself, seeming to have decided.

Victor watches cautiously as the stranger steps out of the shadows, and his heart all but stops.

He’s radiant.

Not in the way a flush can glow on pale skin, and not in the way a smile can brighten a face, but in the way that just as shadows cloaked him before, sunlight gathers around him now. It’s an unearthly golden light wrapping him like a blanket, and Victor finds himself transfixed.

The stranger smiles, pure and warm.

“I am Love.”
“Odd place for a flower to grow,” Love says quietly, staring at the daffodil that drew Victor to the riverbank in the first place, not that Victor is in the right state of mind to notice.

He knows of magic, of sorcerers that summon fire from their fingertips, of healers who close wounds with the glow of their hands, of oracles who relate the prophecies of gods to the people, he knows of temples and rituals and worshippers devoted to their deities, but it was never anything of interest to him.

All Victor wanted was to lead a simple life.

“Victor, are you alright?” the man who introduced himself as Love, who shines like a torch in broad daylight, asks as his brows furrow in concern. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Should I—”

Love takes another step towards him, and in a single fluid motion Victor’s hand yanks out the knife from his belt and swings it to rest the tip of its blade right below Love’s chin, aimed at his neck.

“Who are you, really?” Victor demands with a tremble in his voice, because as much as his eyes see, his mind refuses to believe. “A sorcerer, trying to trick me?”

“Who are you?”

“I am Love.”

He doesn’t understand.

Love moves closer until the edge of the knife is pressed against the skin of his throat. The sound of the river rushing behind him prevents Victor from taking a step back, as he might lose his balance and fall if he inches away any further. Love watches him with a troubled frown.

“I am Love,” he repeats, “but as I said before, I have many names. Your friend, Sara, called me Eros.”

Victor stares.

Eros, the god of love.

This man is claiming to be a god.

Victor’s reason insists that this is just a delusional sorcerer with a magic trick, that gods have never and will never walk the earth among mortals, and that even if they did, he would be the last person the god of love would visit.

But another part of him feels Love’s light seeping into his hand like the soothing warmth of a hearth, feels the burden of being the focus of Love’s eyes like a heavy stone weighing on his shoulders, and it makes him doubt.

“I suppose you won’t understand until I show you,” Love says with a sigh, and before Victor can even think of what to say or do in reply to his absurd claim, he grabs a sudden hold of Victor’s wrist.
In an instant, memories he had long tried to forget flash before his eyes unbidden, and he relives them all in such rapid succession that he cannot even process it, not until it ends.

Memories of his father, hoisting him up onto his shoulders when he was a child.

His mother, tucking him into bed at night and pressing a kiss to his hair.

The three of them together, eating a warm meal on a cold winter’s day.

Wiping the sweat from his mother’s brow as she lay sick in bed.

Trying to stem the bleeding from the sword wound in his father’s side.

Burying them, first his father, then his mother soon after—

“Oh,” Love gasps, and Victor doesn’t realize he has sunk to his knees until Love lowers himself down to Victor’s level, hands clinging to Victor’s shoulders. “I’m so sorry; they loved you very much.”

The ache in his chest is familiar yet hurts more than it used to when he revisited these memories, like an old scar carved open to bleed as it did when it first happened. He stares into Love’s eyes and opens his mouth but he cannot speak, the sound stuck in the back of his throat from grief and awe both, and he can’t look away.

As Love gently wipes away the tears that trail down his cheeks something within Victor quakes, its tremors resonating throughout his entire being like a deafening echo.

He is in the arms of a god.

A sudden instinct that must be something primeval, something born out of self-preservation and survival, tells him that he should be throwing himself at Love’s feet in worship.

But as it is, he can’t even bring himself to speak a single word.

“You’ve gone very quiet,” Love remarks worriedly. “Was it too much?”

Victor manages to close his eyes, taking a deep, slow breath to calm the pounding of his heart that slams against his ribcage like a hummingbird trying to escape. Love’s hands cupping his cheeks are making his head go fuzzy, the mere skin-on-skin contact enough to start melting away his sense of awareness, to try and coax him into surrendering himself to feeling instead of thought.

“Victor?”

Even his voice, the soft utterance of Victor’s name hanging between them, sounds like something trying to persuade him into a sense of wanting, desiring, indulgence.

Bracing himself, trying to focus on anything but the god in front of him, Victor finally manages a word.

“Why?” Love’s hands leave Victor’s face and settle down in his lap, and Victor says, stronger this time, “Why me?”

While it makes sense now for Sara to have asked Love to visit him, seeing as how she is the high priestess at the temple of Eros, it doesn’t explain why he’s here. Why a god—or whatever he is—would listen to a prayer and come down to earth, just to see Victor.
There must be millions of people who pray for love every day, millions of people who suffer in heartache, millions of people whose hearts were carved out by the absence of it, or even people who have never known it.

So why him?

“Because you were lonely,” Love says, repeats, and it isn’t any clearer from the first time he gave Victor that answer. “Also, I like Sara very much, and it’s not every day she asks me for a favor.”

Victor finds himself speechless in what appears to be becoming a disturbing habit. This is leaving aside the fact that Sara might die of a heart attack if Victor ever tells her that she has the power to summon a god, so he resolves to never mention a word to her about it. Assuming that this isn’t all just a ridiculous dream.

Speaking of gods.

“You said… your name…” Victor pauses, not yet entirely convinced that this isn’t just some bizarrely vivid hallucination he’s having, before forging on. “What are you, exactly?”

“I am Love,” Love replies infuriatingly, and Victor manages not to sigh.

“Yes, but what are you?” When Love simply stares at him, Victor clarifies. “Are you Eros?”

“If that is what you see me as.”

Gods help him.

“Should I call you Eros, or simply Love?” Victor asks, starting to develop the theory that he has, in fact, gone mad from loneliness and has created a fictional entity inside his mind in the form of the god of love, which probably says many things about the state of his psyche at the moment. “Do you need a title attached to that? Such as Lord, or… well, I’m not sure what to call a god, to be frank.”

Love gives him a bemused look that after a moment tapers off into exasperation. “You don’t need to bother with any of that,” he says with a shake of the head. “I’m confused as to why you worship me at all! All these temples and rites and offerings—treat me as you would your loved ones.”

“But you glow,” Victor points out.

“Yes, I glow.” Love cocks his head slightly. “Would you prefer it if I didn’t?”

Victor frowns. “You can stop glowing?”

It’s like watching the flame of a candle shrink—within seconds the dazzling light on Love’s skin retracts into him, leaving nothing but a simple man sitting in front of him. The haziness creeping in on his thoughts has vanished with it, Victor notices a moment later. He no longer feels like he’s going slightly insane, mind overwhelmed by trying to comprehend the mere existence in front of him.

“That makes everything a lot easier, thank you,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck and only just finding that he’s been sweating rather heavily. “Though I still don’t quite understand why you thought it worth your time to help me, or what that entails. Even if a high priestess asked you to, there must be plenty of those all over the world asking you for things every day.”

Love looks down at his knees, and suddenly rises to his feet. Victor can’t be certain since the notion seems absurd as it occurs to him, but Love looks nervous.
“I…” Love hesitates. “I’ve been watching you for a while, for a few months now—not, not obsessively! I mean, just from a distance, every now and then. Humans weren’t made to be alone, after all, so I was curious at first, thought you just might be an exception—some people love solitude—but you seemed so… so miserable.”

Victor’s mind blanks.

“You were watching me?”

Love gives him a despairing look.

“I know very well that it isn’t as if you are the only one suffering,” he says, looking more and more frazzled the more he goes on. “And… and I know I shouldn’t be playing favorites but, but Sara told me what you did for her, and how long you’ve been hurting, and you are… you are so kind, and brave, and beautiful, and Victor, I know you don’t believe this but you deserve so much love, so much!”

Victor sucks in a breath, his chest burning, and Love grabs him by the shoulders again, the dark of his eyes shining with tears.

“I’ll help you,” Love swears. “I'll help you find it.”

And after a long pause, Victor says, “Oh,” because what else can he say to a god?

He doesn’t deserve it. He isn't worth it. He wishes he could refuse.

But Love stares into his eyes, and he cannot.
good intentions

When after three days Love still hasn’t disappeared yet and keeps being there when Victor wakes up in the mornings, he can only conclude that it is due to one of two things: either he has lost his mind completely, or the god of love is really here and has chosen to help him.

He is inclined to believe the former.

“Don’t you have more important things to attend to?” Victor asks him on the third day, sitting at his table in his modest little cabin, barely big enough to comfortably fit two people. “Surely a god has better things to do than coddle some mortal?”

Love, leaning back against the ledge of a window across from Victor, gives him a disapproving look. “You are not just some mortal,” he insists, the sunlight giving the edges of his hair a brown tint with its honey glow. “Besides, what other things would I have to attend to?”

“Whatever it is gods do,” Victor says with a vague hand gesture, sipping his tea. “Answering prayers, making miracles happen, things like that.”

Love squints at him. “That’s not really what I do.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t make people do things,” Love answers with some emphasis. “You can pray for months on end for someone to fall in love with you, or for someone you love to reciprocate, but I can’t force that to happen. I’m not here to play a match-maker, I simply am.”

Curious, Victor gives Love a probing look. “Are you hearing prayers right now?”

“Yes.” Love furrows his brows, eyes turning upward for a moment, before glancing back down to Victor. “There are many.”

“You’re hearing it all at the same time?”

Love shrugs, which seems a bizarrely human gesture. “If it were you, you’d probably die under the pressure. It’s not the same for me; I am not just this body, it’s merely my focal point. Beyond that, I’m…” Love pauses. “I’m sort of like water. I exist in everyone, I’m a part of everyone.”

“Naturally,” Victor says, and if this is actually just the onset of a psychotic break then he is at the very least impressed by the depths of his own subconscious to be dreaming up such a complicated hallucination. “But if that’s the case, why even have a body?”

Love smiles, awkwardly.

Victor raises his brows. “You don’t want to tell me, do you?”

“Not really.”

Hardly a surprise—when Victor asked yesterday about the existence of other gods and goddesses, Love was rather tight-lipped as well, and when he asked the day before that if the age-old story about man being created from clay and fire was true, Love blatantly changed the subject by commenting on how wonderfully shiny Victor’s belt-buckle was.

Suffice to say there are things Love is keeping a secret. Had Victor been the existential sort, he
might’ve been ripping the hair out of his head from frustration, but he went through life just fine not knowing these things before, so he should hardly think the answers matter that much to him now.

“I apologize if I’ve been asking too many questions,” Victor offers, the tip of his finger tracing the rim of his cup. “It’s just not every day I get to have a conversation with a god. I imagine you must be getting sick of me.”

“Victor, I’m here to help,” Love says with some distress, pushing off the window ledge and approaching the table. “Which I can’t do if you insist on never talking about—”

“No!” Victor interrupts loudly, abruptly getting up from his chair and quickly walking towards the door leading to his garden. “There is nothing to talk about! Nothing at all!”

“Victor—”

“Would you look at that!” Victor yells, standing in the open doorway and staring outside with a smile so forced it’s making his cheeks hurt. “My turnips are coming along quite nicely!”

Love sighs behind him. “Would you at least consider going out to town for a day?”

“Oh dear, are those weeds?”

“Victor!” He hears footsteps before a hand tugs on his shoulder, spinning him around to face Love’s very concerned and very annoyed frown. “You can’t keep running away from everything forever.”

Victor stares Love in the eye, and says, “Watch me.”

He tells himself he’s fine as he walks out the door, closing it shut behind him.

It’s not the first time he lies to himself.

---

After those first three days, Love starts coming and going on what seems to be a whim, but his visits are always underlined with the press of urgency—though he never uses his divinity to persuade Victor.

Instead, he uses more mortal means.

Such as nagging.

“Please? You don’t even have to talk to anyone!” Love follows Victor about the forest as he checks his traps.

“No,” he replies evenly, bending down to check one he hid under some leaves, noting it hasn’t been sprung yet and deciding to leave it out a while longer, adding a few slices of apples and carrots. Rabbit isn’t his first choice for food, but going out on a hunt doesn’t exactly guarantee success either. It’s best to have as many options as possible.

“We can just walk through the streets,” Love tries valiantly. “Soak in the atmosphere, maybe even visit some shops if—”

Victor lets out a perhaps slightly over-dramatic sigh as he stands up again, the back of his hand coming up to rest against his forehead with a flourish. “How many more times do I have to say no?”

“So, what, you’re just going to live in the forest as a hermit for the rest of your life?”
He considers his answer. “Yes.” And he continues walking, ignoring Love’s incredulous stare.

When nagging doesn’t work, Love actually tries for deception, which might have even worked were it not for the fact that Love doesn’t have a single devious bone in his body.

“What are you doing?”

Love freezes in the middle of the room, arms filled with bottles of spices, slowly turning to look at a bleary-eyed Victor who has just woken up from a fitful night’s rest.

“Uh, just,” Love’s eyes dart about the room frantically, “rearranging them for you!”

Victor says nothing, merely crossing his arms and staring expectantly at his otherworldly visitor.

“I’ll go put them back,” Love mutters, shoulders drooping in defeat.

Victor thinks that after several days of incessant whining, and multiple attempts at destroying or doing away with valuable or otherwise indispensable items (such as his bow, his hunting knives, his traps, the metals he uses for his arrows heads, and so forth) that the worst is over with when one day Love leaves and doesn’t reappear for more than three days and counting.

It’s a bittersweet feeling—or so he tells himself, since in actuality it only tastes bitter even though he should know better and be relieved that this delusion is coming to an end.

So, he moves on, returns to his routines, and does not miss having Love at his back chattering away cheerfully whatsoever.

Until Love shows up at his doorstep again seven days later, and Victor discovers his final means of persuading him back into human society.

Seduction.

In truth, Victor senses almost instantly that something is—not off, exactly, but different the moment he opens the door and finds Love looking as if he’d just tumbled out of bed.

His hair looks messier, like he’d simply put a hand through it and let the dark tresses fall where they may. The cloak is absent as well, and the tunic is loose around his shoulders, a deep cut down his chest, revealing sharp collarbone and lean muscle, smooth skin peeking out like a flirtatious invitation.

Suffice to say, Victor is entranced.

“Hello again, Victor,” Love all but purrs, and Victor doesn’t realize his mouth his hanging open until Love reaches up a finger and brushes over his jaw.

Mortified, he quickly snaps his mouth shut, swallowing thickly. His eyes keep wandering down the cut of Love’s tunic, hand squeezing the doorknob so hard he’s certain the wood is going to shatter, but he can’t stop himself from looking, can’t tear his gaze away and he hates it.

He hates himself for it.

“You,” Victor starts, finding that his voice is hoarse and unable to look away from the shine in Love’s eyes as he forces the words out. “You’re back. You seem a bit different.”

“Am I?” Love teases, voice low and smooth like the hum of a harp. The change in him is a subtle one; the cheeriness that was usually the cause for Love’s smiles has been replaced by something that
burns much hotter.

It’s not an act, not exactly—it’s obvious why he’s doing it, but this part of Love is just as genuine as his more innocent side, if now handled as a weapon.

And what a weapon it is.

“I don’t think…” Victor says and stops saying in the same breath, his thought trailing off into oblivion when Love leans into his space, peering up at him through dark lashes.

“Aren’t you going to let me in, love?”

A hand settles on Victor’s chest and suddenly it’s hard to breathe, his eyes wide and pupils dilated, trying to drink in as much of the beautiful sight before him as he can while at the same time abhorrence coils deep into his gut.

“That’s alright,” Love continues easily, not having noticed the twist in Victor’s expression. “We could go outside instead? Maybe even have a trip out of the forest, see the world together—”

The hand on Victor’s chest trails down and he reacts with a flinch, snatching the wrist and pulling it away from him, holding it at a distance as if it were a snake ready to bite. “Don’t.”

Love winces in surprise, glancing down at the fingers clenched around his wrist. “Victor?” he asks softly and it melts into his ears, part of him wanting to bask in the feeling, drown himself in it. The other part hisses in disgust.

He takes a deep breath, head bending down as he forces himself to close his eyes, locks of his long hair falling in front of his face. “Don’t,” he begs, quietly, “don’t try this again.”

There’s a silence that feels far too long, and Victor tenses for a moment, wondering if Love is going to look into his head once more, if he’s going to search through his memories—not those, please not those—but nothing happens. Not until Love speaks again.

“I don’t understand,” Love says, bewildered. “Why are you fighting it?”

“Why don’t you just look into my head, like you did before?” Victor can’t help but ask, feeling scared of the answer as he opens his eyes again, noting to his relief that Love has put a bit of distance between them, wearing a worried frown instead of a smoldering half-lidded gaze.

“I can sense that you really do not want me to look, so I won’t,” Love answers, concern only seeming to increase. “But I’d like to understand. Why are you pushing back so hard?”

Victor counts his breaths, not saying a word until he’s certain his voice won’t be shaking when he finally answers. “If Sara’s prayers are what brought you here, then I’m sure you also know about my ailment.”

“Your ailment?” Love asks, confusion painted on his face before something dawns in his eyes and his expression shifts to one of horror. “Oh, Victor. I didn’t think….”

“Please, enough.” Victor releases Love’s wrist and quickly takes a step back, feet edged onto the brink of falling into that black hole he barely clawed his way out of last time. He isn’t so sure he’ll make it if it happens again. “I already know; it’s not right and I’ve tried to change, but—”

“Stop!”
Victor glances at Love hesitantly, seeing nothing but sadness and anger warring on his face, alternating as Love looks back at him, and then says,

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Victor.”

For the longest time, Victor can do nothing but stare.

He must’ve heard wrong.

“What?”

Love sighs, so deeply and wearily that he suddenly seems far older than a passing glance would tell, the weight of centuries bearing down in his eyes which—Victor truly realizes for the first time—must have seen so, so much.

“Let’s go inside,” Love says with a sorrowful smile. “I’ll explain everything.”
Victor is eighteen when he first visits the temple.

It has been looming over the village for as long as he can remember—sitting at the top of the hill just outside of town, its marble white columns make it appear much bigger than it actually is. Lately, the younger boys have been raving about how they can’t wait to be old enough to bring their own offerings to the shrine dedicated to the god Eros within.

While Victor knows that Eros is supposed to be the god of love, he’s often rather bemused at the enthusiasm of his male peers. Typically, it’s the girls in the village that blather on and on in excitement at gaining Eros’ favor and finding the husband of their fantasies, not the boys.

“They don’t care about making an offering,” Georgi, a boy two years his junior, explains when Victor asks him what the others are getting so worked up over every time the topic of the temple is brought up. “It’s just that Eros’ priestesses are renowned for their beauty, and being that this is Eros we’re talking about, there’s all sorts of weird rumours about what kind of blessings the priestesses give men they deem worthy.”

Victor finds himself rather unimpressed, an indifferent hum sounding in the back of his throat as he turns his head to peer towards the temple in the distance, long ponytail fluttering with a sudden breeze. The sun sets behind it, casting it as a dark silhouette against the array of warm colors glowing in the sky.

He looks back at Georgi. “You’re not interested?”

“Of course not,” Georgi replies matter-of-factly. “The only blessing I want is Anya’s.”

“You understand her parents have already arranged a match for her?”

“She hasn’t even met her betrothed yet, I still have time!”

Victor smiles sympathetically, patting Georgi on the shoulder who seems to be trying to convince himself more than Victor.

“What about you, Victor?” Georgi asks then, giving him a curious look. “Aren’t you interested? You might not get another chance, you know, what with the situation in the north.”

In the end, it’s what Georgi said then that convinces him to head up the hill the very next day. The northern border is turning into the perfect breeding ground for a war, two nations at each other’s throats—an age-old argument over the rights to territory, nothing Victor ever paid attention to.

Not until a formal message arrived, anyway, instructing all able men from age seventeen and up to report to the royal army for military duty. Georgi is lucky that he fell just outside the age-range. Victor? Not so much.

He wakes up at the crack of dawn the next morning, not wanting to be seen by his friends lest they tease him for it. In truth Victor has very little interest in both the temple and the priestesses, and believes the wine, apples and roses would be much more useful to him as an offering to the god of war, though he doubts Ares would appreciate flowers.

The closer he comes to the temple as he goes up the hill, the better he can make out the details carved in its walls, reliefs of Eros in various forms on display. Victor almost pauses to admire them; his eyes
linger particularly on the ones flaunting the god in all his naked glory. It takes Victor a moment to
gather himself, clenching his jaw and scolding himself for it in his head while he moves on.

As he arrives near the entrance just as the sun rises, right outside the temple he sees a large statue of
the gold-winged god, standing over a large altar meant for animal sacrifices.

Victor shakes his head at the fresh bloodstains as he passes the altar and heads towards the entrance
of the temple itself—what a waste of food.

Inside is quiet, and dark. Victor squints at the shadows, carefully moving forward into the huge
room. Are the priestesses still asleep?

“Hello,” a quiet voice speaks, and Victor blinks, turning to his right to find a young girl dressed in
soft pink robe standing a few feet away, near a lit torch hanging off the wall. Her clothing appears
positively ancient to him—the priestesses apparently haven’t changed their style of dress with the
times like the rest of them. “Are you here to make an offering?”

Victor raises the jug of wine he brought with him, the apples and roses sitting inside a basket held by
his other hand. “Thought I might share a drink with the god of love before I go off to war. I hope
he’s not averse to peasant’s wine?”

The girl smiles. “Any offering, however small, is worthy so long as it is sincere,” she says, and
Victor raises his brows slightly. As young as she is, though, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that a
priestess (or one in training as she seems to be) is well-spoken.

She raises her hand to her left, gesturing further into the temple, and only with the sun rising and the
shadows gradually fading does Victor spot the shrine casting a massive shadow in the center. While
the statue outside is raised on a small platform, it’s still man-sized—this other statue, of Eros pointing
to the entrance with a bow and arrow, easily dwarfs it. Around its feet are various empty bowls, and
Victor glances at the young priestess.

“What **do** you people do with the offerings afterwards, anyway?” he asks as he approaches the
shrine, the priestess following him a step behind.

“We grant them to the needy and the poor,” she replies as Victor kneels right in front of the huge
statue, taking the cap off his jug.

“Is it alright if I just pour it in? I kind of need this jug,” he asks, and the priestess giggles.

“Of course, just put it in one of the bowls.”

Victor sets his basket aside first, and pours most of the contents of his jug into one of the large bowls.
It doesn’t even fill half of it, but he figures it’s the thought that counts. Raising his jug to the statue,
he swallows down the rest, the bitter taste of grape flooding his mouth.

“Would you like to offer a prayer?” the priestess asks.

“No, that’s not necessary,” he responds as he sets the empty jug aside and begins loading out the
apples he plucked from his basket into a separate, smaller bowl. “Unless Eros could pass it onto Ares
for me.”

When he glances at the priestess, she seems sad for a moment before perking up again. “You must be
very fortunate in love, then.”

“Not at all.” Victor continues with the roses, arranging them with some thought in-between the
apples. “I’ve had some involvements before, but they never went anywhere.”

“But you have known love before?”

Victor considers the question, pausing in his floral arrangements. “The love of my family and friends, yes. Beyond that, no.”

The priestess gives him a wondering look. “Wouldn’t you like to?”

He remains silent for a long time, not speaking again until he finishes placing his roses and rises from the ground, staring up at Eros’ handsome face.

“Maybe I’m not being entirely honest,” he mutters, more to himself than to her.

The priestess comes to stand next to him, looking up at him curiously. Feeling doubt, he considers just walking out the temple and leaving the matter behind him, but if he is to die in war, he wants to die free of sin.

“Something I can help with?” the priestess asks kindly, and Victor takes a deep breath.

“Can I confess something?”

The kind smile on her face fades, and she looks at once grave. He supposes there must be more who come to beg forgiveness from the god of love for their transgressions, and now he finds himself among them.

“Of course,” she says softly, and Victor looks down at his offerings. Suddenly his voice feels like lead in his mouth, and for a single terrifying moment he thinks the statue must be glaring down at him but when he raises his head to look, Eros’ eyes are still aimed at the entrance. It was a ridiculous, paranoid thought, anyway.

“Some time ago, I…. ” He swallows thickly, hands flexing into fists, before relaxing again. “A travelling merchant passed through the village about three months back. He… he had a son, about my age. We spent a night together, and I know we shouldn’t have, I know that—”

He nearly flinches at the hand pressing on his arm, spine tense as he keeps his gaze firmly fixed on his offerings, Eros’ towering statue now feeling much like a mountain bearing down on him, about to crush him at any moment.

“I understand,” the priestess says gently. Victor waits for her to—he isn’t sure what, maybe lecture him or tell him to beg for forgiveness or absolve him of his sin, but instead she remains silent.

Working up the nerve to look at her, he notices her staring down at his offerings just as he has been, a troubled wrinkle between her brows.

“Priestess?”

She looks almost startled, glancing at his face. “Oh, sorry. I just had a thought.” Composing herself, she reaches out a hand to him with a smile. “Would you like my blessings?”

Victor slowly opens his mouth, but it takes him a while to find his words. “Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

“I heard,” she says, still smiling.

“Then how could you possibly bless me after hearing that?” Victor stares down at the hand still
extended to him, the transparent pink shawl wrapped around her shoulders and arms reaching her wrist where it’s connected to a thick, golden bracelet. Her hand looks so slight compared to his—she can’t be older than fifteen.

“I’ve always been taught that love is like a single soul inhabiting two bodies,” she says. “My teacher surely meant a man and woman when she talked about those two bodies, but no one knows the will of the gods, however much we try to speak for them.”

Her hand is still outstretched to him, waiting, and for a moment he’s tempted, but in the end, he shakes his head. The priestess’ hand slowly droops back down to her side.

“I am undeserving,” he says, and her eyes widen before that sullen expression overtakes her again.

“Some other day, perhaps?” she tries. “Will you return and accept my blessings then?”

Victor inclines his head. “When I am worthy.”

She smiles sadly and replies, “You already are.”

That is the first time he meets Sara.

On the edge of a riverbank in the Great Forest, there grows a single wild daffodil.

“Where have you gone, Love?”

A pale hand reaches down, and plucks it.

Victor wakes up from a memory, or a dream—maybe both—and finds his pillow still moist from tears he shed before. His eyes feel swollen, his face puffy, joints protesting in ache as he shifts to push himself from his bed.

Love isn’t here.

His cottage feels cold and empty as he moves to the main room, finding it just as deserted as his bedroom.

“There is nothing wrong with you, Victor.”

Thinking about it now still feels a little bit unreal, as if the entirety of the conversation from last night was just part of the dream-memory he just had. Shouldn’t he feel overjoyed? Relieved? All these feelings he bottled up inside him until now aren’t a sin, aren’t impure as he thought them to be, won’t condemn him in the afterlife.

Then why does he feel so exhausted?

(Why does he still doubt?)

He rubs his face with both hands, brushing one through his hair when his fingers get caught up in a knot and he sighs, trying to untangle the mess of hair. Maybe he should start thinking about cutting it.

What kind of irresponsible deity reveals something so utterly reality-shattering and then leaves again the second Victor’s back is turned, anyway? Or rather, when he falls asleep after crying his heart out.

“What you felt for that boy was never a sin.”
Victor sighs and looks around for his comb, finding it sitting on the edge of the table.

Maybe the reason he feels so weary is because it doesn’t matter if he alone knows the truth.

“You believe me, don’t you?”

Everyone else still doesn’t.

There’s a knock on his door, and Victor assumes it’s probably Love. Rather good timing, though he still needs to have breakfast before heading out. That was the promise he made yesterday after all, however much he regrets it now.

“Please, just for a few days.”

They won’t be going to his hometown, of course, since that’s out of the question what with the ordeal that happened a year ago. If he shows his face anywhere near those parts again, he’ll be as good as dead.

Instead they’ll head towards one of the villages further away—the journey will be longer, but at least this way Love will finally stop whining to him about human interaction being a necessity to the health of his spirits or other nonsense. Not to mention that the whole point of Love being here is to help him find… well, love. That’s rather hard to do with him isolating himself in a giant forest.

Having finally combed out his hair, Victor wanders over to the door, opening it and expecting to see Love’s cheerful face. Instead, there’s no one there. Not a soul to be found.

“Hello?” he calls warily, looking around but not managing to find a single trace that a person was ever there. When his gaze flits over the ground to look for potential tracks, he finds a single wild daffodil left on his doorstep instead, looking to be freshly plucked.

Curious, he bends down and picks it up, feeling something nagging at his memory. Something about a daffodil he’s seen before.

“The river?” he mumbles, remembering seeing it there, right before he met Love. Did Love pick this for him? But then why would he wander off again?

Shaking his head, Victor retreats back inside, setting the daffodil down on a windowsill and pushing the matter from his mind as he looks for some bread to have breakfast with.

He doesn’t notice the slender silhouette that passes by his window.
By the time Love does arrive, the matter of the daffodil on his doorstep has already slipped Victor’s mind as he occupies himself with gathering some things they may need on their short journey.

“Sorry I’m late!” Love apologizes profusely as soon as he bursts through the front door. “I got caught up in something along the way—did you have to wait long?”

He looks so concerned that Victor can’t help but soften and offer him a faint smile, having just been tying up his travel bag. “Don’t worry about it.”

The bag is filled mostly with extra clothes, food and water, and necessities like bandages and salves. His coin purse Victor keeps on his person, hidden underneath his cloak together with a sword and a knife. The village of Pheme is a six-hour journey away, and he knows the path well, but it never hurts to be prepared.

“How have you been?” Love asks softly, lingering near the doorway as if he can’t decide whether to come inside or not.

Hoisting the bag up and swinging it over his shoulder, Victor turns to face him, regarding the worried wrinkle between Love’s brows, uncertainty sinking into his stomach though he keeps his face from betraying him.

“Just fine,” he replies, the smile that came so naturally before now forced into his lips.

Love’s worried look only deepens.

“Mostly fine,” Victor amends. “I need a while longer to—think, I suppose. Shall we get going? I’d prefer to get to town before sundown.”

Though that seems unavoidable at the moment, what with the sun having nearly reached its highest point in the sky. Luckily, they’ll have plenty of shade from the trees as they walk, and the cool breeze of spring will go quite a long way to make it an easy enough journey if a long one.

Love shifts out of the doorway to let Victor through, a pause hanging between them for a long moment as Victor shuts the door behind him, feeling Love’s eyes still caught on his face until they start walking and Love’s usual friendly disposition returns to him.

“How have you been to Pheme often?” he inquires, walking on Victor’s left.

“A few times, though I’ve never stayed for longer than a day.”

“I’ve never been,” Love says, sighing. The sound has something wistful to it, but before Victor can ask he gets another question. “What’s it like?”

“It lies by a great road that was built for use of the royal army,” he answers, allowing himself to be distracted as he remembers the sound of a thousand men marching, crushed stone crunching underneath their boots. “But seeing as how we are living in peace times, nowadays it’s mostly used by traders and merchants—messengers come and go regularly from what I understand, especially whenever the king feels like issuing a royal edict. If you want to keep an ear to the ground, Pheme is an excellent place to start.”

Love listens so attentively as Victor speaks that he forgets to watch where he’s walking as they pass...
through a narrow path between the trees. “Do you—oh!”

He gets his cloak tangled up in the branches of a rosebush, nearly ripping through the thin fabric before Victor stops him with a hand on his shoulder.

Beinding down to pull it loose, a bright blue butterfly that had been sitting on one of the roses flutters by Victor's face at the sudden movement, and he feels it briefly touch on his cheek before it flies away and disappears between the trees. He manages to get Love's cloak out of the bush, but he doesn’t rise so quickly, instead taking a moment to look at the wild roses.

“Funny,” he muses, Love giving him a curious look. “Aren’t roses your flowers?”

“I’m not averse to them,” Love replies, but he seems mostly indifferent nonetheless. Another thing the priests have gotten wrong, then. “In fact, I really like the ones you gave me.”

Victor arches his brows. “When did I give you roses?”

Watching Love’s reaction is an experience—his eyes slowly go wide in some sort of realization, and Victor can see the red flush of his skin building up in his neck and starting to spread to his face. “I, uh… you… you offered them to me?”

His mind works at a snail's pace as he tries to remember any such occasion, and Victor ends up looking at Love for quite a while in complete cluelessness until Love colors so deeply that he all but erupts.

“At the shrine!” he blurts, covering his face in his hands. “You offered them to me at my… at the shrine of Eros!”

Victor barely manages to keep his mouth from falling open, staring in disbelief. “That was five years ago.”

“I know,” Love mutters into his palms.

“You said you’ve only been watching me for a few months,” Victor continues, feeling like the part of his mind that regulates emotions has stopped working properly.

Love slowly lowers his hands from his face, eyes aimed at the ground with his cheeks still burning red. “Yes, but I’ve known about you for much longer than that,” he answers timidly—it’s such a stark contrast from the Love Victor saw before, the one who made his insides flip with a flutter of his pretty lashes. “When you returned from the war I… I really was listening all that time, you see, and the more I listened to you the more I wanted to help you, so when you left, and Sara asked, I…”

It’s a rather difficult thing to comprehend, finding out that you’ve had the ear of a god for several years on end. Victor knows better than to ask, why me, because it’s a question he has asked many times before now and never gotten a clear answer on, though he is resolved to get the full story eventually.

Instead he asks, “Why did you listen?”

“Because you didn’t ask me for anything,” Love answers truthfully, and Victor tilts his head, bemused. “I hear so many people praying all the time, and I’m aware of all of them in the back of my mind, but you were silent. I felt you there, but you said nothing. It was so much louder than the prayers.”

Victor watches Love’s face, watches his dark eyes shining softly in stray rays of light slipping
through the trees, aimed down towards the ground. An urge to raise his chin twitches in Victor’s hand, to push his shoulders straight and curl around his spine—he shouldn’t look so small.

“Thank you for listening,” he says instead, and it works just as well.

Love glances up at him and when meeting the sincerity in his gaze it’s just like watching a flower bloom, posture straightening as a tender smile graces Love’s handsome face and pours right into Victor’s heart—it flutters and skips, and Victor loses a breath.

Something flashes in Love’s eyes but it’s too fast for him to catch. “We should keep moving, shouldn’t we?” Love says, all but startling Victor out of his daze.

“We should,” he agrees quietly, finding his mind drifting to a boy he met five years ago whose hair smelled like straw—he can’t even remember the name, being that they only had that single night together.

As they continue walking, Love soon picking up his questions again about the general area, Victor feels a knot growing in his stomach as he shoots his friend glances from the corner of his eyes.

It’s only natural—there is nothing wrong with you, Victor—and this is the god of love. Frankly, there’d be something off with him if he didn’t feel attraction of any kind, yet it took the merchant’s son the better part of a night to make his breath hitch, while Love manages it with the simplest of smiles.

During a lull in the conversation Victor stares up at the clear sky once they find the open road, taking a deep breath, holding it for a moment, and slowly letting it slip from him again when his chest feels near to bursting. He wishes it would rain if only to cool his head down.

“How long are we staying for?” Love asks then, shaking him out of his thoughts. Victor watches him kick a small rock down the road, Love’s eyes tracing the meadows and fields surrounding them.

“A little while,” Victor says, amused at the frown he gets and can’t help but tease. “You’re the god of love, no? You should be able to find me love in no time at all.”

“I already told you—”

“Yes, yes, I know; it doesn’t work like that.” Victor ponders the weight of his bag on his back, wondering whether they should take a break or not; he is getting a tad bit thirsty. “By the way, how are you planning on helping me to begin with?”

“First, you’d have to start meeting new people,” Love says without missing a beat, as if he’d been waiting for Victor to bring the topic up. “Preferably as many people as possible.”

Victor hums in consideration. “I hope you have a better introduction in mind than simply stating, I am Love—it wouldn’t go over well.”

“Introduce myself?” Love asks, looking somewhat puzzled. “Ah, no, I think it best if I stay unseen.”

“I really don’t think—”

“Don’t tell me you’re too shy?”
“I can do just fine!” Love protests.

“Good.” Victor grins. “What should I call you in public, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t exactly go by Love; you need a human name.”

Love’s brows furrow and he looks away, humming quietly. “A human name?”

He seems awfully aloof for a moment—nostalgic, maybe, almost sad. Victor observes him silently, wondering what he’s thinking about. A human name can’t be that difficult to come up with, can it? Is he remembering something?

“Love?” Victor says, realizing belatedly it’s the first time he’s actually called him that out-loud just as Love blinks and looks up at him, appearing slightly apologetic. “Do you have a name in mind?”

Love shifts his gaze, and at first Victor thinks he must be looking on ahead towards where Pheme is, but there’s something very distant in his eyes, as if he’s staring at something long gone.

“Yuuri.”

A child plays by the river, uncaring of his mother’s warnings as he chases a bright blue butterfly that flits between the flowers that surround the riverbank. It only takes a moment of inattention as he gets too close to the edge—a slip, a fall, and he’s gone.

The lone butterfly continues to flutter over the water toward an old man standing across the river, staring down at the surface of the water where the boy disappeared.

He reaches out a finger to the butterfly as it flits closer to him, gently tapping a finger to the tip of its wing.

The butterfly drops to the ground, settling at the man’s feet, lifeless.

Something behind the man moves then—the silhouette of another figure that speaks quietly, hidden in the shadows of the trees.

“I found him.”

The old man sighs, the dark robes wrapped around his entire body moving in the breeze, his hands linked behind his back as he looks down at the butterfly at his feet.

“How much longer will you indulge in this obsession?”

“It’s not an obsession,” the figure behind him bites, pacing up and down like a restless predator. “He’s breaking the rules this time, prancing about with some mortal, revealing himself—”

“Then call for a Gathering.” At his companion’s silence and sudden lack of movement, the old man smiles to himself, feeling the anger burning through the air. “What’s the matter? You do not want to see him judged?”

“Fine, be difficult! If you will not take the mortal from him—”

“You know full well that I cannot take just any life I want,” the old man replies calmly. “Time decides who and when.”
“I’m not asking her,” the figure scoffs. “I suppose I’ll just have to take care of this myself.”

The old man turns around at this, eyebrows raised high. “You would break the rules, just to punish Love?”

Cold, blue-green eyes shine through the shadows.

“I am War, aren’t I?”
Pheme is a small town of a couple of hundred people, originally meant to be a settlement for veteran soldiers as built by the king decades ago. Situated along Enyo’s Road (the main route between the capital and the north) and located within the fertile valley of the river Lethe, it’s quickly becoming an important center of commerce in the northern province.

It’s certainly busier than Victor remembers it typically being from his last visit, but he supposes a single day wasn’t enough to properly judge it by. Getting inside, however, is just as troublesome as it was the last time.

When they approach the town gates just as the sun has set, they are quickly accosted by one of the guards, who demands to know the reason of their visit. They’ve not been appointed here by the lord of the region, of course; they’re merely veterans from the town itself, having been unable to lay down their arms. It’s one of the reasons the town is also quite attractive for merchants, seeing that it enjoys some security. In comparison Victor’s village was and likely remains entirely unprotected.

“State your business,” the guard says, covered head to toe in heavy armor, and Victor doesn’t hesitate to fish out a golden coin from his purse. He tosses it the guard’s way who catches it and nods, stepping aside to let them pass.

Love watches all this with some confusion as they walk through the gates. “You didn’t answer his question.”

“Bribery is the best answer,” Victor replies nonchalantly, eyeing the vendors at the edges of the busy road and keeping his hand near his coin purse as they pass by several people ostensibly perusing the many wares—pick-pockets are inevitable in such a crowded place. “Try to stay close to me, okay?”

“Oh okay,” Love says, and grabs Victor’s cloak.

Curious, Victor twists his head to look at Love right behind him, who has apparently decided to use him as a human shield to get through the busy street. “Not that I mind, but what exactly are you doing?”

Love gives him a rather doe-eyed look. “Staying close to you, like you said.”

Staring blankly, Victor feels the rather strong urge to do something entirely unwise like holding Love’s hand, until the thought actually catches up to him and he quickly faces forward again, feeling flushed.

“Victor?” Love asks when they escape the busy main road into a smaller road branching off to the left. “Where are we going?”

“An inn,” Victor responds, pretending to look at the bare bones of architecture from small houses built of crude stone and wood now that there isn’t a whole pack of people in the way. “We should arrange somewhere to stay for the next few days before going anywhere else. Wouldn’t want to end up camping outside of town.”

“Camping sounds nice,” Love argues.
Victor gives him an unconvinced look. “Clearly you’ve never camped before; it’s dirty and cold and there are bugs everywhere. It’s awful. I’ve never had a single good night’s rest while camping.”

“Oh, that wouldn’t be a problem,” Love says brightly. “I don’t really need sleep.”

It shouldn’t surprise him since it makes sense—what would a god need sleep for, after all—but it’s still unexpected. Victor breathes a slightly disbelieving laugh, shaking his head.

“I suppose it’s the same with eating and drinking?”

Love ponders this. “I can if I want to, but usually I just forget about it unless I see something that looks delicious.”

“Did you drink the wine I offered you?”

“No.” Love’s eyes flit away from Victor and to the side, voice lowering to a mutter. “I try to avoid drinking.”

“Don’t like the taste, or can’t hold your liquor?” Victor teases, Love coloring slightly to his delight. “Now we have to share a drink.”

“A-anyway, let’s just get to the inn!” Love says loudly, very obviously pretending not to have heard as he gives Victor a push to walk faster, making him laugh.

The inn they go to is a modest building with only a dozen rooms or so called The Swan’s Dive. It’s a cheap shack Victor has been to only once before and remembers little of except for how terrible the ale was and the large, dark stain he noticed on a wall inside his small room.

He hopes this time will be better, though the creaky floorboards as they walk towards the bar gives him little expectation of it. It’s starting to get quite busy as well, shady figures crowding the tables, a group of raucous men playing cards in a corner, while a bard walking in-between the tables lazily plucks the strings of his small harp, occasionally getting a copper for his half-hearted efforts.

It’s dark, oddly damp, cramped and the smell of piss permeates the air together with cheap drink. All in all, Victor is considering walking out and finding another place when Love suddenly shoves him forward and he all but falls against the edge of the bar.

He turns to look at Love with a frown, wondering what he’d done to deserve that one, when he’s addressed by the barkeep.

“Alright there?”

Victor straightens up and looks at the man who seems around his age, tall and blond with scruffy facial hair. It’s not the innkeeper, he doesn’t think—from what he can vaguely remember about his last stay here the innkeeper was an old woman, though it’s possible she has retired.

“Sorry, I tripped,” he says in good humor, leaning against the bar with his forearm in a more easy-going pose. It comes as naturally to him as breathing, and a part of him that had been clenched up for months on end suddenly releases, as if it had been bottled up all this time. “Any rooms open for the next week or so?”

The man gives him a long look, hazel eyes framed by long lashes staring for a while, making Victor wonder if he’s said something funny or made some sort of faux pas. He hasn’t been isolated for that long, has he?
“Something the matter?” he prompts when the barkeep continues staring, and the man blinks before offering him a wan smile, shaking his head.

Now that Victor looks a bit closer, there is something oddly familiar about him, though he can’t quite place him. They seem about the same age, but he’s sure he would’ve remembered someone so distinct looking, particularly his eyes.

“Nothing at all,” the barkeep says, turning around to a rack of keys hanging off the wall next to shelves filled with bottles and mugs in various sizes. “A room for two?”

Victor raises his eyebrows sharply at the assumption. “Two single rooms.”

“Ah, pardon me,” the barkeep replies, though he doesn’t sound remotely embarrassed about the mistake, fishing for two keys instead of one. It’s a rather dangerous assumption to make—had it been anyone else, they might have even gotten violent. “That’s about fifteen pieces.”

“You’re not from around these parts, are you?” Victor inquires as he pulls out his coin purse, the barkeep sliding the two keys forward on the counter. The north, particularly small towns like these, tend to be the most religious and the most rigid about such implications. He knows other parts of the kingdom are less strict about it, even have customs surrounding it, but up here is a different story.

Meanwhile, the tune of the harp played by the bard behind him seems to have improved substantially after a brief pause, he notes, but he doesn’t bother turning around to look.

“Is it that easy to tell?” The barkeep sighs. “I’m from a city in the eastern province—Caerus, don’t know if you’ve heard of it.”

“The City of Jewels,” Victor says with a nod. Laying tucked in the mountains, known for its rich minerals and mining. “The king has a castle near there, no?”

“Yes, not that he ever uses it.”

Victor hums, letting the calming music of the harp fill in the brief silence. Even the ruckus from the unruliest customers has died down a little, just to listen to it. “So, what’s an easterner doing all the way up north?”

The barkeep gives him a bit of a glum smile. “You really don’t remember me, do you?”

“We’ve met?” Victor puts a finger to his lips. He knew there was something familiar about the man, but he still can’t quite recall… it’s something about that blond hair.

“I don’t blame you, since I used to be a runt when we were kids,” the barkeep says, pausing for a moment, and amending a moment later, “Ah, when I was a kid, I mean. You were around nineteen, I think.”

Thick, blond hair, bit shorter—

Victor’s eyes widen. “Christophe?”

“Oh, so you remembered after all,” Christophe says, smirking widely, but he looks so different from the kid Victor met during the war.

Christophe had run away to the northern border to join the army, managing to slip into the ranks despite being underage—had been chasing an infatuation of his, a man several years older than him and a lieutenant in the ranks.
Victor had watched out for him a few times, when the other soldiers used to pick on him or tried worse, but the two of them only talked once or twice beyond that. There hadn’t been time nor opportunity for a deeper friendship, and near the end of the war they’d lost sight of each other.

Before he can ask anything else, a table calls for more drinks, and Christophe gives him an apologetic look. “We’ll talk another time.”

“Alright,” Victor agrees, taking the keys and about to turn away when Christophe stops him.

“By the way,” he says as he reaches for some mugs from the shelves behind him, “your companion is quite accomplished.”

“Hmm?” Victor turns to look at Love, assuming he’s just been beside him this whole time.

He’s not.

A brief flash of alarm jolts up his spine and he thinks for one horrified moment that Love has wandered off and gotten lost, or even worse, was taken away when Victor wasn’t looking. He’s all but ready to storm out the inn to look for him, a hand already gripping the hilt of his sword.

That is, until he spots the wayward god sitting on a stool in the center of the room, the people around him enraptured by the gentle tune he strings on the small harp—even the bard that owns it is sitting nearby, mesmerized.

As Victor watches, dumbstruck, he realizes that while Love is playing the harp masterfully and would’ve no doubt garnered attention for that alone, it’s not only that which has everyone in a trance. It’s watching him play, watching deft fingers pluck on the strings and the serene expression on his face that’s truly captivating.

Even if he’s done away with his golden glow and appears to be an ordinary man, it seems his divinity still seeps into certain aspects regardless.

Victor doesn’t even notice his feet carrying him closer until Love looks up at him and the melody stops abruptly, and it’s like a bubble has popped, various people looking around as if they’d just startled awake from a dream.

“Done?” Love asks him, and when Victor nods he stands up, handing the harp back to its dazed owner. “Thank you for letting me borrow it.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Oh, come on!” someone in the back yells. “Play another song!”

“Right, right! Another one!”

“I’ll pay you three pieces!”

“I’ll pay you five!”

“Hey, it’s my harp!” the bard protests, inciting the ire of several men and women who’d been calling for Love to continue.

Love takes a step back, looking slightly overwhelmed by the sudden commotion, and Victor can’t help but chuckle, putting a hand on his shoulder and guiding him towards the stairs to their rooms while the crowd is distracted.
“I didn’t know you could play,” he remarks as they go up the steps, Love looking slightly red-faced.

“I prefer the lyre, but the harp is not so bad either.”

“Maybe you should take it up as your profession?”

“Well, I do like playing, but all the attention afterwards makes me nervous,” Love admits, and he does appear a tad bit uncomfortable, shoulders drawn inwards. Victor squeezes one in sympathy, before releasing the shoulder again.

“You’re no good under pressure, huh?”

“I suppose not.”

Victor stops in front of one of their rooms, noting they’re fortunately adjacent. He wouldn’t exactly be comfortable being separated from Love, not that a god would need his protection, but Love seems rather ignorant of many aspects of human life, including its many dangers. He can’t help but feel naturally protective, as little sense as that makes. Love doesn’t exactly cut the most imposing figure, after all.

“You know,” Victor starts, staring at Love intently, “you’re really nothing like the statues.”

Love sputters at the sudden comment, seeming caught between being offended and embarrassed.

“Wha-what do you mean?”

“I’d say I look more like the statues than you do,” Victor continues, amused as he unlocks the door to his room which is the one closer to the stairs and handing Love the other key. “You’re too short, for one, and your hair isn’t curly at all. Do you at least have wings?”

Love frowns. “What would I have wings for? I’m not a bird, and I’m not that short!” Victor merely laughs, pulling out a few coins from his pocket and handing them to Love, who stares quizzically at the gold pieces. “What are these for?”

“An allowance,” Victor says simply. “Spend it however you want—if you feel like eating, just tell the barkeep and he’ll bring up some food for you. Just don’t go outside without me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Sleep.” Victor enters his room, giving Love a small wave. On top of the six-hour walk, finding himself surrounded by so many people and so much noise when he’s gone months without has worn him out. “Good night.”

He hears a softly muttered good night in reply as he closes the door behind him. It occurs to him when he feels the slight decrease in weight of his coin purse that spending all his savings in a week probably isn’t a good idea, but if worst comes to worst he can just hunt and sell some meat, maybe furs. They won’t catch as good a price around this time of year since winter has already passed, but it’s better than nothing.

Looking about his small room Victor finds to his relief it seems mostly clean, save for some minor scratches and cracks in the walls and furniture. At least no suspected blood stains this time. The candle on the nightstand is unlit, but he doesn’t mind the darkness since the moonlight provides enough illumination to make out the general area.

He sets his bag down on the small table in the corner, taking off his cloak and taking the sword off his belt, leaning it against the wall beside his narrow bed. Maybe a bit paranoid, but it’s a habit he’s
never been able to shake ever since he enlisted in the army.

“A lyre, huh,” he mutters as he lets himself drop down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

He supposes some myths about Eros are true after all.

Love is kind enough to drag him out of bed the next morning—at the crack of dawn.

“Is this necessary?” Victor mumbles blearily, sitting on the edge of the mattress and barely reacting as Love throws a change of clothes on his lap. The ones he went to sleep with are worn and dusty from the journey; he’ll have to find a place to wash them later, possibly the river nearby.

“I’ve been waiting up for you all night,” Love huffs, his expression bordering on a pout.

“For someone who’s immortal you’re awfully impatient,” Victor mumbles, rubbing his eyes out and unable to suppress a yawn, stretching his arms high above his head.

Love looks slightly dejected. “Sorry, I just really want to see the town.”

“Yes, I know.” Victor pushes himself off the bed, clothes in hand. “Just give me a moment to change.”

“Okay,” Love says with a nod, but doesn’t move, standing there with his arms crossed and staring at Victor expectantly.

Victor stares back. “Were you… going to watch me change?”

Love furrows his brows, puzzled. “I’m guessing that’s a problem?”

“In human society, yes.”


Victor covers his face with a hand.

“Victor?” Silence. “Did I say something wrong?”

"Please wait outside."

He doesn’t look until Love has left, the shutting of the door announcing his departure. From how hot his face feels he’s certain he’s flushed. It’s silly, of course—Love clearly had nothing lewd in mind, but naturally that’s the first place his mind jumps to.

The repulsion twisting in his stomach is a reflex, one he’s yet to learn to grow out of. He has to forcibly repeat Love’s words in his head like a mantra before the sensation disappears and he feels clear-headed again. Or, as clear-headed he can be during this frankly ungodly hour while struggling with the uneasy knowledge of being attracted to a deity. If there ever was a more hopeless, complicated scenario.

“Why did I agree to this,” Victor mutters to himself with a drawn-out sigh, pushing the matter from his mind and getting to changing his clothes.

When he’s done readying himself, irritably having thrown his messy hair in a ponytail, he finds Love waiting right outside his door, beaming up at him when Victor appears in the doorway.
“There you are!” Love smiles widely and Victor feels his temper mellowing out already. “Ready to go?”

“I still need to eat,” Victor reminds him gently.

“Right, sorry.”

They descend the stairs, and the inn looks almost entirely deserted downstairs. The sun has only barely come up, after all, so he figures the other patrons will start waking up soon. Christophe is behind the bar bright and early, though, and greets them with a smile.

“Hello again,” he says, speaking primarily to Victor though he takes a moment to eye Love as well. “Had a good night’s rest?”

“It felt much too short,” Victor admits, settling down at a stool, Love taking place next to him as he looks between them but does not look surprised that they know each other. Victor glances at him, finding him looking rather pleased, and narrows his eyes slightly in suspicion.

Did Love know that Christophe and he knew each other? It would explain the shove from last night just as Victor had been about to turn around and leave, but how could he have know that? Then again, he hears constant prayers in his head, so Victor supposes it wouldn’t be so farfetched. He’ll have to ask about it later.

“So, who is your talented companion?” Christophe says, drawing his attention back.

“This is Yuuri,” Victor says when Love does not reply immediately, and for some reason gets a surprised look from Love. He must have forgotten about his alias, which is odd, since he is the one who picked it. “I’m just showing him around the area—he’s from across the sea.”

He’s thought about it for a while, since Love doesn’t exactly look like he’s from around these parts, and there are plenty of merchants and traders who visit the kingdom and originate from across the sea to make it a plausible story. Some even settle down here permanently, seeing as how there’s good coin to make.

“Hmm, I thought so,” Christophe says, turning his full gaze to Love. “You were playing quite beautifully the other night.”

“Oh, um.” Love glances at Victor, looking slightly flustered. “Thank you?”

Victor can’t help but smile—he’s just too endearing.

“So, where will you two be heading first?” Christophe asks, pulling Victor’s eyes away and towards him.

“I’m not sure; I’ve only been here twice before, and didn’t explore much.”

“Why not start at the Temple of Ancients?” Christophe suggests. “It’s practically in the center of town.”

“Ancients?”

“You know, the primordial gods.” At Victor’s blank stare, Christophe sighs. “Gaia, Helios, Chronos?”

“Ah,” Victor says, because he doesn’t know what else to say, giving Love a furtive glance whose
expression seems a bit bemused. He must not recognize those names—humans were the ones to give it to them, after all.

Like Love, the other deities must similarly simply call themselves what they are; the Earth, the Sun, and… well, whatever Chronos stands for. Victor isn’t exactly the most knowledgeable on religion, and can’t recall ever hearing a story about Chronos. He’s far more familiar with the gods that came to be after humanity, such as Love himself.

“It’s more of a library than a temple, really, and a lot less grand than the name implies. It has a collection of stories and statues of various gods and goddesses, so it might be an interesting place to start.” Christophe pauses. “Unless you’re not the religious sort, I suppose.”

“I take it that you are?”

“You could say that,” Christophe replies with a shrug. “I make the monthly offerings and such, but I’ve never had much interest in the Ancients.”

“Which god do you worship, then?” Love inquires, and Christophe smirks, leaning forward with his elbow on the counter and his head on his palm with half-lidded eyes.

“Why, Eros, of course.”

Love stares at him for a moment, then breathes, “Oh.”

“Well!” Victor yells, slapping his palms on the counter and startling both Christophe and Love. “I think it’s time we start the tour, Yuuri!”

Love shifts his stare from Christophe to him, appearing slightly bewildered at first. “But you haven’t had anything to—”

“Splendid!” Victor all but hauls Love along, realizing belatedly that he’ll have to pay for a meal somewhere else instead of eating it for free at the inn, but something inside him recoiled harshly at seeing the odd connection being established between Love and Christophe.

He turns to Love when they’re outside, more curious than anything else as they walk through the mostly empty street, though some merchants are already setting up their stalls and others are opening up their shops. “What was that about?”

“Nothing much, just,” Love hesitates. “I happened to hear some of his thoughts. His idea of worshipping me is very…um…”

“You don’t need to finish that sentence,” Victor replies, slightly annoyed and baffled at the same time. Apparently that cute kid that was always getting picked on in the army grew up into a raging pervert. “And you nearly forgot your alias, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t forget,” Love says quietly, gaze aimed at the ground, the slightest wrinkle between his eyes. “It’s just been a…” He freezes, looking slightly panicked.

“Been a?” Victor prods.

“Been a…been a long day!” Love finished, laughing nervously. “That’s right, it’s been a long day and I guess it did slip my mind—say, why don’t we go get you something to eat? Humans need food, right? We’ll visit the temple after that!”

They get a weird look from a peddler they pass by who happens to overhear Love, and Victor
decides to let the matter go since it’s difficult to talk about in public without looking like lunatics.

“Alright,” Victor acquiesces, deciding to keep the matter in the back of his mind for the moment. It’s clear that Love is hiding quite a lot of things from him, though not for long, if Victor has any say in the matter. “Let’s go have a bite.”

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by stormcakes
“Did you know?” Victor asks Love while they make their way to the temple in the heart of town, the streets mostly quiet as the sun starts its daily ascent.

“Know what?”

“About Christophe and me.”

Love adjusts his cloak, wrapping it more closely around himself to keep it from flapping when a sudden breeze howls through the streets, whereas Victor lets his cloak flutter freely. The sky is starting to turn grey, clouds gathering overhead—one vendor curses and fusses over her wares as they pass by, the various colorful cloths she has for sale tangling in the restless wind.

“Of course,” Love says, shifting closer to Victor as the wind picks up. “I was listening to you these past five years, wasn’t I?”

Victor gives him an incredulous look. “The entire time? Even during the war?”

“Especially during the war!” Love seems so offended that Victor would think otherwise that he nearly misses the turn they need to make into a street on their left, Victor pulling him along by his arm. “How else would I know whether you were safe or not?”

“So you were…” Victor hesitates to continue, but the discomfort weighs heavily in his stomach and he can’t help it. “You’ve been listening to my thoughts?”

Love looks genuinely confused, giving him a slight tilt of his head. “Yes, I thought that was obvious?”

Lips thinning into something almost resembling a grimace, Victor turns his head away from Love and focuses on the route to the temple. When Love mentioned listening to Victor before, he thought it was along the lines of listening to him speaking aloud as opposed to what was in his head. Evidently, that was naïve.

The sudden silence from Victor’s end is rather jarring, though, and soon he sees Love giving him anxious looks from the corner of his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

He clearly doesn’t understand, and why would he? He can do whatever he wants; Victor is just a human, after all. “Nothing.”

Love remains silent, but is still staring at him, looking on the verge of speaking but hesitant to open his mouth and worrying his lower lip with his teeth. When the quiet continues, Victor thinks the subject has been dropped until he suddenly feels Love yanking at the sleeve of his tunic.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he exclaims, and Victor stops in his tracks, bemused. “I didn’t know it would bother this much—you should’ve just said so.”

Victor shifts his weight onto his other foot, folding his arms underneath his cloak. “Did you just read my thoughts?”

“I wanted to know what was bothering you,” Love replies, awkwardly scratching the back of his
neck while his gaze flits away from Victor’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. It’s just… I’m so used to it, that I thought… or I didn’t think…”

Love trails off and it’s so easy to just think of him as a person when he’s like this. He stammers, and flusters, and apologizes, tries to be considerate and when he fails he feels guilty like anyone else. Victor can’t even find it in himself to get angry with Love, even if it might have been his right.

No, instead of being angry he rather feels perplexed that a being who has lived for centuries seems to have not only fixated on him, but is trying his best to be considerate of his human tendencies. Perplexed, but most of all, curious.

Are all gods so human, or is Love an exception?

Was he always like this?

“Don’t worry about it,” Victor says, startling Love who seems to have been expecting a scolding. “If you say you won’t do it again, then I forgive you.”

Love, still clinging to his sleeve, looks slightly unsure as he finally glances up to peek at Victor’s face. “Really?”

“It’s not like I can tell when you’re reading my thoughts, but even so…” Victor pauses, giving Love a long look. He doesn’t know why, maybe because Love’s intent was only ever to make sure he was safe, but he can’t fault a god for doing something that’s in his nature. “I think I’ll choose to trust you anyway.”

It’s a stupid idea, and he ought to know better, but he can’t bring himself to push Love away.

The tension seeps out of Love’s shoulders and his eyes light up. “Thank you.”

Victor says nothing, only inclines his head the slightest bit and they continue walking. “Out of curiosity, how did you manage to keep track of me for so long?”

“Once I become aware of someone it’s fairly easy.” Victor steers Love out of the way of a cart of hay pulled by two horses heading their direction, Love’s eyes glued to the creatures as they pass before he blinks back to attention and continues. “Everyone has love in their hearts for someone or something. In a way, I’m already connected to all of you; it’s just a matter of seeking out the person.”

“Have you done this before?” Victor asks, noting the street is growing gradually more crowded.

The noise of chatter from the townspeople, the shouts of vendors trying to attract patrons to their wares, the pleasant scent of foreign spices and balms and incenses on sale mixing with the grimy odor of sweat and dirt and waste. Love looks wide-eyed and dazed, trying to catch it all with his eyes, head turning side to side as every little noise sidetracks him.

“Yuuri?” Victor says with a tap to his shoulder, and Love looks up, briefly flustered.

“Sorry, what?”

“Have you done this before?”

Love frowns slightly. “Visiting a temple?”

“No, I mean… well, helping someone like me.”

Victor waits patiently for a response and Love looks very reluctant to answer, eyes quickly dancing
away again—are his ears turning red?

“Yuuri—”

“Oh, look!” Love cries, yanking on Victor’s arm. “There it is!”

Victor is dragged away before he can even get a good look at the building centered right in front of the town square where a market place has already been set up, and he has to apologize to several people as Love practically pushes his way through the throng gathered around various stalls.

The space directly in front of the temple is mostly empty save for a few children, the town's water-well located off to the right with an old man hauling in the rope to fetch his bucket. In comparison to the ragged houses and shops that look like a mismatched patch of stone and wood, the temple is pristine.

It’s twice the size of the one in Victor’s village, which makes him wonder how big the temples in Christophe’s city must be for him to consider this “a lot less grand”.

The stone columns are decorated with swirling lines instead of the more typical straight ones, spiraling upwards, where between the columns glyphs display various gods with intricate detail. The tops of each columns, as opposed to being simple stone blocks supporting the roof of the temple, are etched into curved necks arching down into delicately carved spirals.

All sides of this temple are lined with the pillars as well, as opposed to the temple of Eros where it was only the front. Whoever oversaw its construction was certainly dedicated to their craft, and the temple seems similarly well-maintained from the outside. Where the temple of Eros found wear and tear from the rain and wind on top of that hill, this one has not a single bit of stone missing.

“Is it okay to just walk inside?” Victor muses, but Love seems to already have his mind set, releasing Victor’s arm and going up the stone steps without a second thought. Victor sighs as he follows along; he really should have a talk with Love about just barging into places.

He finds Love standing still by the open entrance, staring into the temple. “It’s so big.”

“I should hope so, being that it’s dedicated to multiple gods,” Victor replies, amused at Love’s awestruck look until he gazes into the temple himself.

It’s nothing like the temple of Eros, where the statue was the center and the main room seemed dedicated to the offerings. Instead, this temple is lined with shelves upon shelves of books and tomes, a few people sitting at the various tables and reading quietly while others admire the many statues of the Ancients on display.

To say that he’s shocked is putting it lightly—so much so that he doesn’t even notice the robed figure approaching them until the old man speaks.

“I bid you welcome,” he says, giving them a gap-toothed smile. “From your surprised faces I take it this is your first time?”

Victor glances at Love beside him, who’s thumbing something underneath his cloak with a distracted look on his face, a necklace of some sort.

“Ah, yes,” Victor answers for them, turning back to the man. “I’ve never seen so many books in one place before. Where are the shrines?”

“Within the innermost sanctum, further inside,” the priest replies, seeming to be amused more than
anything else by Victor’s confused reaction. “This temple is a place of learning first and foremost—
prayer and offerings are only second to that, for what could please our makers more than preserving
knowledge of them?”

“I see what you mean,” Victor says thoughtfully. “Not many people worship the Ancients anymore,
nowadays. At least they didn’t in my village.”

The priest shakes his head sadly. “Right you are, which is why it always warms my heart to see
young ones like you paying their respects to the Old Ones.”

Victor raises his brows slightly—he supposes that must be another name for them. “So we can just
walk inside and read whatever we want?”

“Of course!” The priest smiles widely, though Victor suspects they must have some measure of
guarding against thieves. Sorcery seems the most likely answer; magic wards are often used in such
places. “Please, do come in! So long as you steal nothing you’re welcome to peruse at your leisure.
Might I suggest you begin with the Theogonies? There are some volumes missing and parts of the
translations are incomplete, but they are the best place to start.”

The priest points them to the shelves at the very front of the temple, though as they walk further
inside Love seems somewhat distracted by the twin-statue—one of a man facing the entrance,
standing tall, while the other is of a woman, facing inwards into the temple, the two sculptures
standing back to back.

Love walks right past the man and stands in front of the woman, squinting up at it.

“Ah.” The priest smiles knowingly. “Do you recognize her?”

Victor comes to stand beside Love in front of the statue. Her eyes are closed and her arms are
outstretched, as if inviting an embrace, clad in a thin green robe and brown hair falling past her hips.
Victor thinks while it is a beautiful carving, it looks fairly typical of what you’d expect for a goddess,
but Love seems fixated on it, a deep frown on his face as he stares at the statue’s tranquil expression,
and then his eyes widen.

“Earth?” He looks rather bewildered, which makes Victor wonder—somewhat ridiculously—what
the real Mother Earth is like if this statue is so far off from reality.

The priest chuckles. “Quite right; Gaia and Ouranos, Earth and Heaven.”

“Heaven?” Love exclaims incredulously, doing a double-take of the male statue, muscular and
entirely nude, a stern expression on his face contrasting the soft one of his partner.

“Yes.” The priest looks slightly puzzled now, and the few people nearby who’d been reading or
examining the other statues further along look over at the noise. “Were you expecting something
different?”

“Uh, no, just… um… never mind.” Love mutters, seeming slightly embarrassed as he turns away
from the statues and points to the nearest books. “I suppose we’ll just start here, then?”

The priest nods. “I’ll leave you two to it—if you have any questions, I’ll be in the chamber to the
left,” he says, pointing to a hallway branching off to another part of the temple, walking along shortly
after.

Love shuffles over towards the shelves, seeming to be trying to hide behind them as Victor joins him,
amused.
“Do they look so different?”

“Earth is vaguely similar,” Love mutters quietly, glancing over uncertainly towards the twin statue, “but Heaven doesn’t look like that at all. The chin is much too small, for one.”

Trying very hard to get over the absurdity and sheer enormous weight of Love talking casually about the mother of all creation and the god of the heavens—who apparently has a big chin—Victor can’t do anything but laugh, though it comes out a little weak.

“Maybe we should just get to reading?” he suggests faintly.

“If you want to.”

Love’s disinterest does not escape his notice, but for the moment, he doesn’t respond to it, instead looking over the nearest shelf and trying to find something he can actually read. Most of the books here look nearly ancient—fitting—and although Victor was taught to read by his mother, he’s hardly on the level these books require.

It’s not as if he has a particular interest in the Ancients, either. His gaze wanders over to Love, who’s still staring at the statue of Gaia, seeming lost in thought.

More than anything else, he wants to know where Love came from.

After some searching, Victor finally finds something that looks a little more recent. It’s a thin, green book, hardly like the heavy tomes it was squeezed between, and Victor curiously flips through its pages, landing on a passage that catches his eye as he reads it aloud:

“And Earth first bare starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding place for the blessed gods.”

He turns his head to catch Love’s reaction, who has a rather complicated look on his face, as if he can’t decide what to feel.

“Not how it went?”

Love opens his mouth to answer but then catches himself, snapping his lips shut, appearing conflicted. “In truth, I’m not sure. It was so long ago, and I’ve never heard any of them speak of it.”

It seems not even he knows how the Ancients came to be, then. Victor accepts the admission without much of a fuss, and continues to turn the pages in search of any mention of humanity or the human gods that spawned from them. He mostly finds what he’s looking for towards the end of the book, at the top of another page:

“When man came from vast Earth she bid them to worship her, for she was their mother and they were her children, their flesh born from her soil.
But the glowing Sun grew dismayed, for without its light Earth would be barren, and yet he was not held in equal reverence.

And so the High One said:
‘Creatures of mud that dwell below me,
I gaze down upon you and fill your days with Light;
I give you warmth when Wind should stir;
I give you Life where none would grow.
Build me too the temples you have devoted to Earth.’

But man looked upon the Sun, and, as Earth commanded, turned away. ‘We have only one maker.’ So said ungrateful man, and the radiant Sun became at once resentful of the Earth and her lowly creatures.

‘Then so it shall be, a curse upon your kind: in your hearts shall burn an unquenchable flame, all-consuming and never satisfied. You will yearn always for that which you cannot reach, and will know peace only in Death.’

Earth grew enraged at his curse, turning away from the Sun, and so Night and Day were born. As for man, this heart’s flame burned in want of things it could not have, the curse eternal upon all of mankind. As Earth’s creatures struggled with their nature, from their troubled hearts spawned War.

Victor turns the page, but finds it blank. It seems this is one of the books left incomplete. An interesting story, certainly; not one he’s heard before, as his parents were never the religious sort. Instead his father, a veteran soldier, often told him stories of great heroes throughout the ages, conquerors of beasts and victors in war, likely hoping to inspire him to follow in his footsteps rather than waste his time daydreaming about old myths.

As such, Victor wonders about the accuracy of it all, being that it was written by the hands of another human being. He slips the thin book back where he took it from, continuing the search for another, and the god’s silence doesn’t go unnoticed.

“I take it you won’t be telling me whether these stories have any truth to them?” Victor ventures as he carefully pulls out another book from its shelf—much thicker and older than the one he just read. He doesn’t hear a response from Love, which is a response in and of itself.

Turning his attention to the red-colored book, he carefully flips it open, its spine creaking like an old door. A glance at the first page has him already losing interest; a story told in an old poem, and Victor has never been the type to read much poetry. From what he can make out this one is about the origin of the human gods, but he has neither the time nor the patience to decipher the lines.

He might have been educated to read and write, but he’s never laid an eye on texts like these, let alone studied them—this is beyond him.

“I suppose a simple retelling was too much to hope for,” he mutters, snapping the book shut again and pushing it back into the gap in the shelf, Love lingering behind him, still staring at the statue of Gaia. “Yuuri, help me out here? Where do you suppose I could find a simple book about the human gods?”

Love glances at him over his shoulder, eyeing him dubiously. “Any god in particular you want to know about?”

“The god of love seems a good place to start,” Victor teases, but something in Love’s expression
freezes over, and he shifts his gaze towards the statue of Gaia again. Silence passes in five heartbeats and Victor grows concerned. "Yuuri?"

“If it’s the stories you want to hear, then I’ll tell you,” Love says, back still turned to him for the span of a breath, until he finally turns around to face him. His eyes are devoid of any of the usual brightness, instead appearing as dark as they were when they first met, cloaked in shadow.

Suddenly he looks far more like the sculptures of Eros—beautiful and far beyond the reach of Victor’s mortal hands that want to cup his cheeks and smooth his expression back out into that familiar, happy smile.

“I’ll tell you,” Love repeats, “but only one story, and for a price.”

Victor stills completely, staring at Love’s silhouette cast against the sunlight falling over the statue of Gaia looming behind him, her outstretched arms almost appearing to envelop him in an embrace.

Sometimes it’s easy to forget what Love is.

“It would only be what I’ve heard from humans; you’ll have to decide for yourself whether you believe it or not,” Love continues at his silence, eyes steady and betraying nothing.

Victor takes a breath, and nods. “Name your price.”

He doesn’t think Love would ask something unreasonable from him, but the aloof expression on his face makes Victor anxious—not enough to deter him, however. If there’s any way he can even gleam a hint of truth from the stories, it might be worth it just to learn more about Love.

The silence continues for a while longer, earthy brown eyes burrowing into his own, and Victor begins to doubt the wisdom in his decision until the tension snaps with the curve of Love’s lips.

“Buy me a gift.”

Victor stares. “What?”

“Consider it an offering on your part.”

That’s certainly reasonable enough, though Victor wouldn’t exactly know where to start. “Any gift?”

“So long as it’s sincere,” Love says with a smile, and he’s briefly reminded of the first time he met Sara. “Anything will do.”

“If that’s all, then sure, I’ll get you a gift,” Victor agrees readily and Love motions for him to follow with a hand, turning to the right—he leads them to an empty table between the right-most wall and a bookshelf, not a person in sight, the light falling in from the tall window beside them illuminating bits of dust floating in the air.

They sit down across from each other, and Love speaks first. “Which story do you want to hear?”

“Yours,” Victor answers without hesitation, and Love stares at him, eyes slowly going wide before he quickly looks down to his hands folded on the table, fingers squeezing.

“There are many different versions of my story, but all of them agree I was born right after humanity—sometimes from man’s love for their gods, sometimes from man’s love for each other.”

“Which is true?”
Love looks up at him, gaze impenetrable. “Which do you think?”

They stare at each other for a moment, and as Victor watches the sun gleam in Love’s dark, dark eyes, he can’t help but want to reach closer. Love suddenly flinches, leaning back into his chair and away from Victor, guilt flickering across his face as he averts his head to the side.

“Is there a reason why you can’t tell me?” Victor asks quietly, and Love’s expression shifts briefly, so quickly he almost misses the sad twitch of his mouth.

“When you asked me earlier, whether I’ve ever helped someone before—the answer is no,” he says instead, and it seems entirely disconnected from Victor’s question. Love glances at him with a look of resignation, and shakes his head. “I’ll tell you another story. Not mine, but not entirely unrelated, either.”

He suspects it’s the best he’s going to get. “Alright.”

Love begins:

“Many ages ago, in a time only the gods still remember, Earth shaped the first humans and breathed life into them—Death watched, biding his time until the day came where he could lay his claim on them.

“There was one that caught his eye: the firstborn man was strong and proud, as well as extraordinarily lucky. Again and again he managed to evade Death, escaping lethal injuries and surviving illnesses that would have killed a lesser being.

“One day, however, the man’s daughter fell ill, and could not recover. Her condition worsened, and though the man begged and pleaded Earth to help his daughter, the goddess refused, and cautioned him against trying to save her for her time had already come, and nature’s laws should not be violated.

“But the man was not ready to part from his daughter, and Death saw in this opportunity, and so went to the man, telling him that in exchange for a certain flower that grew by a river located deep within the forest, he would spare his daughter’s life. This flower was considered sacred, as it was said to be the first flower to have ever grown on Earth, but Death did not tell him this and made him believe it to be a mere trifle.

“His daughter pleaded with him not to go, knowing it would go against Earth’s wishes and not trusting Death to be fair, but her father did not listen, and agreed to the deal. He went in search for the flower, overcoming many a trial to reach the river. Exhausted by his long journey yet still searching, the man finally found the flower growing on the edge of the riverbank, but when he went to pluck it the earth crumbled underneath his feet and he drowned.

"The flower remained, untouched, and Death claimed its first human life."

When Love finishes telling his tale, Victor still feels his curiosity hardly sated; if anything, it has only grown.

“A rather glum story,” he says, wondering how it could possibly connect to Love himself. “It seems the gods can do whatever they please.”

“The Ancients were often fond of toying with mortals at their whim,” Love admits, appearing somber but staring intently at Victor. “But it’s the price you pay when you break the rules.”

He’s missing something, Victor thinks as he stares back at Love who seems to be trying to tell him
something, unable to say it and instead going about it in this incredibly roundabout way. Is Victor breaking the rules? What does Love’s story mean, and what does it have to do with Love?

“It hardly seems fair,” Victor decides. “First Earth tells humans to not worship anyone but her, angering the Sun who, instead of taking it out on Earth curses humans instead. Then Death decides to coax the firstborn man into a deal that would break the rules, and again a human is punished for it.”

Love looks very attentive at this, almost hopeful, as if Victor is close to guessing what he’s trying to say without saying it. “Humans are powerless, at the mercy of their makers. Because of that, they are easy to blame; even if a god breaks the rules, humans tend to feel the brunt of it.”

There’s something in his words, something in the way he says it that makes Victor hesitate—

It dawns on him.

“Are you breaking the rules?”

Love’s folded hands squeeze into a white-knuckled grip.

“Some of them.”

Victor inhales sharply. “Is it because of me?”

“No,” Love says quickly. “No, it’s because… it’s because I’m selfish, but Victor, you’re not making it very easy. I can get away with this much, but if it goes any further….”

“If what goes any further?”

His question seems to change Love’s mind, and suddenly he’s shaking his head, as if shaking his previous worries off. “Never mind; I don’t think it’ll come to that after all.”

There’s something hopeless and empty in his smile, something that makes Victor’s insides curl unpleasantly, and without even thinking about it he reaches out and brushes his fingers over Love’s, who looks at him and Victor swears he sees—

Love yanks his hands away like he’s been burned, bolting up from his chair and nearly knocking it over with how quickly he stands. “I… I’m… I’m going back to the inn!”

Before Victor can get another word out, Love has already darted out the temple in a full sprint, long cloak trailing behind him and disappearing around the corner when he leaves through the entrance, nearly knocking over a woman who’d just been walking in.

Victor stares down at his fingers, the skin of his pads still remembering Love’s warmth against them.

He wonders what he’s done wrong when all he saw in Love’s eyes was yearning.
There was a time—long forgotten by the fickleness of human memory—where gods were more than age-old stories sung about in quiet hymns before their blood-stained altars, and where their temples were not meant to be a place of rite for worshippers, but a seat of power for its masters.

It was a period that spanned no more than the length of a candle within the annals of Earth’s history before its flame flickered and dispersed, and it was a period that Love… that Yuuri prefers to remember above all others, because it was the only moment in his long life where he was not alone.

The quiet storm clouds that gathered overhead earlier in the day have now reached Pheme’s outermost edges, the wind howling through the streets and whipping across his cheeks like wolves snapping at his skin as he runs, and runs, and runs.

What is he doing?

It isn’t until the first drops of rain catch him that he stops, out of breath more so due to panic than exhaustion, finding himself in the middle of an unfamiliar street in an unfamiliar place where everyone around him, for one long and terrible moment, seems a complete stranger.

He thought, or perhaps misled himself, into believing that it would be easy.

Centuries too many to count he has been alone, unable to leave the earth because he belonged to humanity, but unable to join them because it was the price he had to pay in exchange for their freedom. And so he wandered.

He found no companions within the other gods, because he had not been born one and his heart longed for the sound of boisterous laughter found among the noise of a crowd of people—not the overwhelming force of Heaven’s voice booming in his head like a thunderclap, telling him he was always meant to be this.

Fate has never been his friend.

“What am I doing?” he says to the rain, pouring down on him like a cold trail dripping from his hair, slipping down his face and neck and soaking through his clothes, pressing into the heat of his body.

Merchants are closing their stalls around him, children screeching with laughter as they run to find cover, scolded by an old woman nearly knocked over by their play as she hurries home, but it’s all meaningless noise that fades into the downpour around him. Before long, the streets are empty, save for him.

He has been in love for the past five years, and it wasn’t until Victor touched his hand and made his heart flutter that he realized it.

“I am such an IDIOT!” Yuuri yells at the clouds and the air and the rain and nothing and no one and himself, fingers slipping into his hair and gripping it as hard as he can.

Before this, before Victor, Yuuri walked the world unseen and would have long gone mad from loneliness were it not for time passing by much more quickly than it would for a mortal man. Cut off from humanity he had no perception of it, did not bother to count the days.

It wasn’t until he reached his lowest point, a husk dwelling lands untouched by man in an exile of sorts, that Earth finally succumbed to her compassion and offered him opportunity.
“Only for a while.”

And what does he do with it? He goes and falls in love with a mortal man and forgets himself completely as if he’d learned absolutely nothing from his punishment. As if he doesn’t know the inevitability of consequence.

He was never meant to fixate on one person like this, he was meant to help as many people as possible in the time he’d been allotted by Earth—but then Victor walked into his temple and he was powerless to stop himself from falling.

The rain keeps coming down mercilessly and Yuuri takes a deep, shuddering breath, wrapping his arms tight around himself as he forces his feet to move forward aimlessly, no destination in mind.

He still vividly remembers the exact moment he first became aware of the odd silence in his head. It had been such a small thing, but just like watching a needle drop and anticipating that distinct ring from its metal, Yuuri could not help but be drawn to him.

Drawn to that silence right before the ringing, to the unassuming stillness, to the sound of wine pouring, to the scent of roses, to the shine of ripe red apples reflected in blue, blue, blue—his mind turned and twisted and rearranged itself instantly to find this man that had stepped into his temple and yet asked nothing of him.

So Yuuri listened, and his heart broke.

Victor was not the first and would doubtlessly not be the last, but he was beautiful and lonely and quiet—and the quiet didn’t fit him, shouldn’t be there at all, should be filled with lively laughter and a teasing tongue and a wicked smile. Yuuri wanted to hear the needle drop, but it was suspended in mid-air and Victor wasn’t what he could have been, should have been, would have been were it not for this world he’d been born in.

When Victor departed from his temple that day, instead of leaving him be as Yuuri usually tended to do, he followed. He kept listening until Victor’s thoughts finally cracked through the silence. Until the needle finally dropped.

And it rang.

‘I should start packing. Where did I leave my gloves? Inside the chest? Oh, they’re on the table.’

‘Should I say goodbye to anyone when I leave? What if that makes it harder to go?’

‘If I die—’

‘I’m not going to die.’

‘But what if—’

‘I won’t. But I don’t know that. How can I know that? I don’t want to die. But I might. I could.’

‘Would it matter if I did? Would anyone remember me? Would anyone bury me? Would anyone cry for me?’

A sharp inhale.

‘I don’t want to die alone.’

‘I can’t die alone.’
‘Please don’t let me die alone.’

Victor—who was surrounded by people every day, who had more friends than he knew what to do with, who was the heart’s desire of many a woman and the envy of many a man—was alone.

Just like how Yuuri—who was worshipped, adored, revered, desired by hundreds, thousands, millions all around the world—was alone.

Unbeknownst to Victor his plea had not gone unheard, even if he might’ve forgotten all about it, even if he might’ve pushed it aside and hid it underneath the dull shine of armor and the tip of an arrow and a brave smile. Yuuri did not and would never forget that moment, because in that single instant where he heard that softest wisp of fear he was not Love, who felt obligated, but he was Yuuri, who was aching for another who reminded him of a young boy all those years ago—his human self.

Victor will likely never know this, but somehow, somehow he reached across thousands of voices and found not Love, but Yuuri.

Reckless, irresponsible, desperate, selfish Yuuri who would condemn a man despite knowing better.

But he’s in love, and love never knows better.

Yuuri continues to trudge through the rain, and what began as a thin sheet quickly turns into cold pellets storming down like a hail of arrows. The wind roars into his ears and he regrets staying outside as he keeps his cloak wrapped around him, though little good it does.

It’s not as terrible as it seems—were he mortal he imagines he would be feeling the cold far more harshly than he does now, when it’s nothing more than a brush of feathers. Still, even for a god having his clothes soaked from top to bottom forms a bit of a hindrance for his movement.

“Hey, you!”

Yuuri startles at the sudden a shout, raising his hand in front of his eyes to shield them for the rain as he turns his head to his left. The door of a blacksmith’s shop is held wide-open by a man in armor staring right at him.

“Are you insane, walking around in this weather?” the soldier calls. “Get inside!”

Feeling only a moment’s hesitation, Yuuri retreats inside the shop, the door the soldier had been holding open slamming shut the moment he releases it by a gust of harsh wind. There are more people inside, taking shelter, most of them congregated near the entrance and now staring at his dripping form.

“Are you alright?” a young girl clutching her shawl asks him, appearing worried on his behalf. “You should take those clothes off before you catch a cold!”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” Yuuri is quick to reassure her, glancing with some embarrassment at the other men and women standing around, apparently having decided to wait out the storm here. Turning to the soldier who’d held the door open for him, Yuuri opens his mouth to thank him, but then all speech leaves him when he sees the most distinct, violet eyes gazing back at him.

At his prolonged silence, the soldier gives him a weird look. “What’s the matter with you?”

Suddenly a memory not his own flashes before Yuuri’s eyes, leaving him breathless—the edge of a sword pressed against a pale neck, a lock of long gray hair draped over its steel, a sad smile and a
“You’re Michele,” Yuuri says eventually after steadying himself, surprise flashing over the soldier’s face. “I know your sister, Sara.”

“You do?”

Yuuri manages a smile. “You look a lot alike—you’re twins, right?”

“Yes, we are,” Michele says slowly, eyes narrowing as they flit over Yuuri’s form. “And how, exactly, do you know my sister?”

Protective as ever; Yuuri’s smile turns strained. It was in part that protectiveness that ended up condemning Victor to a life of solitude. As much as Michele loves his sister and Love sympathizes with him for it, Yuuri does not. Even though it's all in the past now, the damage has already been done, and Victor won't be able to return to his hometown ever again.

“I’m an old friend of hers,” Yuuri replies neutral enough, shrugging off his cloak and trying to ignore the glare he gets from the old blacksmith sitting in the back of his shop as water drips all over the floorboards. “How is she doing?”

“Fine,” Michele says a bit tersely, still appearing suspicious as he shifts a bit, shoulders straightening out further as if trying to intimidate him, not that it’s remotely successful. “What did you say your name was, again?”

Yuuri’s eyes are drawn to the glint off one of Michele’s shoulder guards, and then the fact that Michele is a soldier in the king’s army by profession sinks in fully, settling in the center of his chest like fingers burrowing into it.

“What are you doing in Pheme?” Yuuri asks, still staring at Michele’s shoulder guard.

“I’m here with my captain,” Michele replies, thrown off by the sudden if not blunt question. “We’re looking for willing recruits.”

“Don’t tell me there’s another war coming?” an older man holding a small child groans, the boy in his arms shivering underneath a blanket.

“It’s just a precaution,” Michele says quickly as murmurs spread through the shop, the townspeople starting to look at him with skeptical eyes. “There has been some tension along the border as of late —”

“When isn’t there tension along the godsforsaken border?”

“My uncle died in the last war, you know—I don't want to go through that again.”

“It hasn’t even been three years!”

The feeling of foreboding lingers as Michele finds himself under interrogation and unable to escape the townspeople’s fearful and worried questions, the storm outside still blowing fiercely.

It might just be coincidence, Yuuri thinks. Like the old man from before said, there’s always been tension along the northern border; this might just be another case of mortals posturing and being territorial. It might even be nothing, just a precaution as Michele said.

Yuuri shakes his head, turning to look outside through one of the small windows.
He might have even less time with Victor than he first thought.
Victor all but stumbles into the inn, soaked and freezing. He’s hardly the only one; *The Swan’s Dive* is filled with people miserable from the cold and rain who are only there for temporary shelter.

At the very least he’s got his own room to undress in as opposed to standing around in wet clothes and waiting for it to dry while hoping not to catch something in the process. He pushes through the small crowd, slipping in between several people and managing to find a small spot open at the bar. Christophe is darting back and forth like a dancer on his feet, too busy with serving out drinks and responding to the calls of other customers to notice him.

Victor entertains some patience as he waits, absently twisting a wayward strand of hair between his thumb and index finger as he listens to the chatter of the people surrounding him.

“You hear about Agatha’s poor boy?”

“Haven’t seen him in a while—something happen to him?”

“Disappeared a few nights ago.”

“Playing near that cursed river again, I bet.” A deep sigh. “I keep telling those kids not to go near it, maybe now they’ll finally listen. Ah, but poor Agatha! Hadrian was so young.”

“Excuse me,” Victor interrupts, tapping on the shoulder of the woman who just bemoaned the fate of the missing child to her friend. “What was that about a cursed river?”

The two women exchange brief glances, before the one he asked the question to responds in an almost pitying tone. “You must be from out of town, huh? Haven’t you heard about the river Lethe?”

Victor cocks his head to the side, curiosity flickering like a growing flame. “I have, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard about it being cursed.”

It’s the very same river that runs through the forest and passes by his cottage, originating from mountains across the border. If that river is cursed, then his soul must be damned a hundred times over—he gets all his water from it and bathes in it frequently.

“You best stay away from it,” the woman cautions. “Nothing good ever happens to those that walk along the river.”

Before Victor can question them any further the sudden snap of fingers near his ear makes him wince and he turns to find Christophe’s tired eyes glittering with amusement.

“What’ll it be?”

“Preferably something that doesn’t taste disgusting,” Victor says, recovering smoothly from the brief fumble and earning a grin from Christophe who turns to reach for another glass without hesitating.

“Where’s your friend?” Christophe asks conversationally as he takes a large bottle off the shelf, Victor ogling the drink with some trepidation. Still, mild disgust is more tolerable than the terrible cold and the concern starting to chew at him at the mention of Love, and it’s the quickest way to
warm up.

“He’s out.” Victor answers, combing back a lock of hair that got plastered against his cheek behind his ear, shivering lightly when someone briefly brushes against him from behind as they walk past.

“Hope he found some shelter, then,” Christophe replies as he fills the drink and slides the mug over the counter to him. “The storm’s looking like it might only get worse.”

A cold sensation that has nothing to do with his soaked clothes digs in-between the spaces of his ribs as he takes the glass, nodding in thanks to Christophe who quickly turns away to help the next patron. Victor manages to slip through the crowd without spilling his drink and reaches the stairs, though he pauses on the first step and glances back towards the entrance.

He’s being silly, of course; Love is a god, and he should hardly think a measly storm would be enough to cause him any sort of harm. But what if it is? Victor hesitates, one foot still resting on the stairs.

A man going down the steps snaps him out of his thoughts, however, and it isn’t until he moves to the side that he notices he’s been clenching his jaw. Victor sighs, ending up leaning against the wall with his mug clased firmly in his hand, staring into his drink.

An hour. He’ll go look after an hour, storm or no.

“Are you breaking the rules?”

Taking a swig from his ale, Victor manages to keep a grimace off his face at the extraordinarily bitter taste, though he can’t deny the trail of sharp heat it leaves down his throat and into his stomach, skin prickling with goosebumps.

“Some of them.”

What did Love mean? He was talking about something going too far, but for the life of him Victor can’t figure out what. In fact, Victor should think he’s the primary culprit of taking things too far considering what happened in the temple.

He looks down at his right hand, fingers curled around the mug, and frowns at himself. It was just the slightest touch, meant to be reassurance, but now he sees how it could’ve been taken as something entirely different. It makes him doubt—were his intentions impure from the start?

‘Not impure,’ he corrects himself a moment later, but he can’t help but feel like he’s done something wrong, and even though Love told him otherwise, what else is Victor supposed to think when he not only pulls away but runs on top of that?

Letting out a sigh, Victor shoves his drink into the hands of a woman who passes him down the stairs, heading up himself and barely catching the surprised thank you he gets in reply. His appetite for both food and drink has left him completely.

All he wants to do is to get dry, curl up underneath his sheets, and forget about the storm for a little while.

When half an hour has passed and there’s still no sign of Love as the storm rages on outside, Victor finds himself pacing up and down his small room with the agitation of a caged tiger. His plans to nap were discarded as soon as his head hit the pillow, his mind forcefully supplying him with every sort of nightmarish scenario about Love being in danger until he couldn’t take it anymore.
It hasn’t even been an hour yet, and certainly the chance that Love is just waiting out the storm inside a shop somewhere is far more probable, but somehow, some way, Victor finds his reason completely overridden.

He keeps pacing, footsteps sounding sharper against the creaky floorboards with each one that follows, moist hair whipping with the force of his turns as he picks at the matter like a scab starting to itch on the surface of his skin.

It’s likely Love has simply found shelter and doesn’t fancy walking out into the storm, but likely doesn’t mean *definitely*. There’s still a chance, however small, that something else is the cause of his staying away from the inn, and that something could be a slip on the wet soil into a deadly fall, falling into a supposedly cursed river and disappearing without a trace, unseemly figures trying to take advantage of him whether it be trying to rob him or possibly abduct him—

A sudden, loud knocking coming from the floor startles Victor out of his increasingly frantic thoughts, feeling something hard slam into the bottom of his feet.

“Piss off outside if you need to walk that badly!” his neighbor yells impatiently through the boards separating them.

“Sorry,” Victor calls back, hearing a faint grumbling in turn, but at least the broom-bashing has stopped. He sighs, sinking down onto the edge of the bed.

What’s gotten into him? He can’t remember feeling this worried about anyone before, not since his mother fell ill all those years ago. Then again, he didn’t know the hollow ache of loneliness back when he was just a boy, and the thought of going back to *that* is frightening enough on its own. Part of it must be some sort of selfish cowardice of his; the desire not to be abandoned even though *he* was the one who chose this life for himself.

He didn’t have to forsake society altogether, that was something he decided to do out of not only revulsion towards himself, but fear as well. After all, what if he built a new life in a different place and got found out again anyway? He didn’t want to deal with the possibility of losing it all a second time; the prospect was far too painful, so he settled on seclusion for the rest of his days.

And then, when he least expected it, Love crashed into his life like a falling star and he allowed himself to grow attached. As if the brightness of Love’s stubborn flame lighting up his dark weren’t enough, on top of that he was offered redemption in the assurance that it wasn’t *him* there was something wrong with, but rather with the society that discarded him and he discarded in turn.

So, when Love ran away from him in the temple, when he left and took the warmth of the sun with him, Victor could’ve sworn for a moment that he *felt* a fracture splitting his heart like a thin crack in cold porcelain.

And in that crack that peers into the darkest corner of himself where all his nightmares hide, Victor tucks away the truth before covering it with cheap paint; he is deathly afraid that when Love leaves, everything will turn back the way it was, and he will be alone.

But as human as that self-interest is, would it be delusional to wonder if there’s something else to all that worry of his? That it isn’t just fear driving his urge to brave the icy rain and howling wind to look for Love, and that there’s something more to him than just a coward?

Is he capable of that kind of selflessness?

Victor almost smiles at himself when he realizes he already made his decision half an hour ago,
standing up from his bed and picking up the much thicker, warmer cloak he traded for the thinner, drenched one when changing his clothes into something dry.

Leaving his room, he finds the inn is still rather busy, though not as noisy as before when the storm had just set in. It seems everyone has settled down for the most part, either drinking downstairs, hanging about in the corridors and hallways, or holed up in their rooms.

Victor steps up to the entrance, the double doors shut tight against the wailing gusts of wind sweeping against the windows, making sure the front of his cloak is tied properly and pulling down his hood before opening one.

The few patrons hanging about near the entrance curse and yelp at the chilly breeze that dashes into the inn, Victor stepping outside with a shudder that wracks him from head to toe as the cold almost immediately settles in his feet and creeps into his bones.

“Close the damned door!”

He obliges with a firm push of his forearm, and turns to look around outside. While looking for Love in theory is very gallant of him, it might have been wise to consider where he should look before beginning this little quest of his—his face is already wet, splattered with raindrops and he’s barely been out the door for longer than a moment.

Considering the temple is at the center of town, and Love appeared rather panicked when he ran out, Victor can only assume he headed straight down the street and didn’t meander about or get lost.

Probably.

Maybe.

_Hopefully._

Otherwise he’s going to feel quite the idiot.

“I’m an idiot,” Victor says to himself an hour later when he’s found no trace of Love and only managed to get himself soaked and miserable, sheltering in an old peddler’s shop that’s all but abandoned save for him and the very tiny man that owns the place.

“At least you’re aware of it,” said tiny man comments cheerfully, and Victor’s forehead hits the glass of the window he’s been staring out of with a _thunk_. Rain patters against it like fingernails tapping in a cacophony, and for the moment at least the wind is still. “But while you’re here anyway, why not peruse some of my wares, Ser Idiot?”

As if failing to find Love wasn’t mortifying enough, he’s now being made fun of by a complete stranger. Amazing. Can this day get _any_ worse?

“Fine,” he decides with a sigh, since it’s not as if he has anything better to do with his time. “You’re a craftsman, no? I don’t suppose you have any bows for sale?”

The tiny man shakes his head—though he’s not all _that_ tiny, but being that he barely reaches Victor’s chest and he has no idea what the man’s name is, tiny man seems as good a designation as any.

“Unfortunately not, no,” the tiny man answers from behind his counter, sitting on a chair with a cup of something warm that he did not even _bother_ offering to Victor. “But, I have plenty of other finely crafted items, many of which are antiques I might add!”
“Hmm.” Victor opts to ignore the tiny man for now as he walks through the small shop, shelves filled with all sorts of wooden duds, most of which seem mainly intended for decoration. Little wooden statues and carvings of deities and famous mortals alike, mainly, some tools scattered throughout as well as—

Victor’s eyes get caught on one instrument sitting at the very end of a shelf, covered in dust.

When the storm has died and he has resumed his search in more manageable weather, he finds Love giving away all the allowance Victor handed him the other day to an old beggar who, as it appears, was caught up in the rain and couldn’t find any shelter.

“This should at least get you a warm meal for the next few days,” Love says, kneeling in the dirt next to the poor man whose eyes are the size of saucers at the amount of gold he’s being handed.

“I-I… I thank you, kind ser, but I couldn’t… couldn’t pos-possibly—”

“Please take it,” Love insists, pressing the coins into the man’s palm before touching on his arm. “I’ve no use for it, so I’d rather you have it.”

He looks a saint, and of course he is, because it is in his nature, but nothing about him appears with the inhuman grace that Victor first saw when they met. His dark hair sticks to his forehead, damp and messy, the edges of his cloak and his boots caked in mud, his nose red from the cold and his face a shade paler.

Perhaps he is doing it out of duty, but all Victor sees in that moment is one man showing kindness to another.

The beggar bows his head, shoulders trembling slightly as he clutches the hand fisted around the coins against his chest. “Th-thank you, thank you!”

Victor eyes the scene and feels oddly conflicted, both amazed by Love’s graciousness and wondering how he could ever feel truly worthy of standing beside someone like this—even more so when Love turns his head and his reaction upon seeing Victor is, for the first time, not a smile.

Slowly pushing himself up off the ground, Love turns and walks toward him, a frown forming between his brows the more he nears.

Victor attempts a grin in greeting, but it feels forced on his face, like fingers pulling at his cheeks. “Aren’t you happy to see me?”

Love stops when he’s just a few feet removed, and then the wrinkle turns into a scowl. “Were you looking for me out in the storm?”

“Ah, yes,” Victor says, feeling slightly nervous under Love’s glare, which is probably what prompts him to reveal the cloth-wrapped item he was hiding underneath his cloak. “Look, I got you a gift, just as agreed! I think you might like—”

“What were you thinking?” Love all but yells at him, and Victor flinches back. “What if you catch something with this weather? Look at you, you’re soaked!”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Victor tries to say but Love has already grabbed him by the arm and is hauling him along with surprising strength—Victor may as well have been a rag doll. “I was just worried about you.”
Love halts so suddenly that Victor all but crashes into his back, which feels like the equivalent of running into a wall. After recovering from having the air knocked out of him and stepping away, Victor eyes the back of Love’s head and the tense line of his shoulders with concern.

“Will you at least take my gift?” he asks carefully when no response is offered. “I weathered a storm for it, you see.”

He waits, and waits, and waits, and the silence seems to pass between them like the heartbeats of an entirely separate, unseen entity until finally Love’s shoulders lower into something softer and the tension seems to drain out of him.

When he turns around, his expression is less stern. Not quite the carefree brightness Victor has come to expect, but better than the strained twist of his mouth.

“I suppose I can’t refuse it then, can I?” Love says, and stretches out a hand with an ease that’s so natural as to surpass the arrogance of expectation and instead imply mere habit. Not the grabby fingers of a beggar, but the quiet acceptance of a god.

From the glint in dark eyes, however, Victor can tell he already knows what the gift is from the shape of it so his surprise is ruined, but he hands it over without a fuss.

“It’s rather old, I should warn you,” he says as Love takes the lyre, a finger trailing over the rim of its body.

“How expensive was it?”

Victor shuffles his feet, his considerably lighter coin purse somehow feeling heavier than when it was filled. “I may have gone overboard. Slightly.”

Love sighs, a ring of fondness to his breath that makes Victor’s ears perk up and he almost dreads how susceptible he’s become to it because he shouldn’t be, but he’s always been so horrible about resisting his impulses.

“Thank you,” Love says tenderly, looking at the wrapped lyre as if it were a precious stone in the palm of his hand yet does not even glance at him, and Victor doesn’t know what he’s done to deserve such distant gentleness when mere hours ago Love was running from him, but he knows better than to ask about the change even if it is far more painful than an outright rejection.

There’s a distance growing between their feet and Victor finds himself at an utter and sudden loss on where it came from.

“Shall we return to the inn?” he suggests instead. “Perhaps you can make some coin by entertaining the guests.”

Love smiles kindly at his attempt. “Let’s.”

Within the Kingdom of Hestia, patrols along the border are nothing more than routine for the men serving in the royal army. They try not to interact with the enemy on the other side, as even mere looks exchanged from across a distance would be enough to spur on conflict, and usually, the Hestian soldiers manage to ignore being provoked in turn as well.

Today, however, something is different.

Everyone feels it—a tension in the atmosphere, the air charged with something restless, as if Ouranos
himself is holding his breath in anticipation.

No one quite knows what it is or where it came from, only that it has put them all on edge. Some sharpen their weapons, others tend to their armor, and a few engage in spars at the border camp to work off the excess energy.

One soldier in particular walking down the wide meadow that has still not entirely recovered the bloody battle that took place two years hence finds that it’s becoming more and more difficult to focus on his task.

He is lacking a companion; an unusual occurrence, as they typically patrol in twos or threes, but his partner looked all but ready to jump out of his armor at any moment and so recused himself for a brief respite.

Now the young man is all alone, and trying desperately not to glance over at the other side.

He doesn’t know why, but he feels frustrated. Day in, day out, it’s the same routine—they walk, watch, stay silent and tolerate the sneers from the other side.

They’re laughing at you.

The man stops in his tracks, the hiss crawling down his spine, making him as rigid as a statue. Anger starts boiling in his blood, skin heating and heart pounding in his ears as his head slowly turns and his eyes graze the border to find two enemy soldiers parading about on the other side.

They’re laughing at him.

Why are you always the ones to concede?

Treaty after treaty after treaty, broken one after another.

The only way to end it is to wipe them all out, one by one.

They’ll never keep to their word.

How many of your brothers have they killed?

Peace between their nations is a child’s fanciful dream.

How many more will it take?

They can never live in harmony.

If you strike now—

—they won’t expect it.

He has loosened an arrow from his hand before he can even realize what he’s just done, and he watches it soar as his blood screams triumphantly in his veins, a lust for battle so thick that it clouds his eyes and hides the breath of Thanatos exhaled within its mist.

Had anyone been there to witness it, they would’ve seen the sun-haired youth with a hand curled around the soldier’s arm, hissing poison into his ear.

As it is, the slender boy slinks back the moment the arrow soars, and disappears as if he had never been at all.
“You should dry off,” Love advises him when they arrive at the inn, less crowded than when Victor left which makes it thankfully a lot easier to maneuver without squeezing in between strangers.

“I don’t think that’s—”

“Oh, it’s you!”

Victor blinks at the interruption, turning to his left to find a young woman with red hair eyeing him curiously. She looks somewhat familiar. “Yes?”

“You gave me your drink earlier,” she says, seeming to be completely ignoring Love as she smiles at him. “Mind if I return the favor?”

Victor glances towards his companion uncertainly, but finds Love’s expression inscrutable. “Ah, I was just about to head upstairs with my friend, actually. As you can see, I’m rather drenched.”

“Young friend?” the woman asks, raising an eyebrow. “Where?”

“He’s right…” Victor trails off as he points to Love with a finger, finding the woman’s eyes staring exactly at the spot where Love is standing, but looking as if she can’t see him at all.

Has Love made himself invisible?

“Never mind,” he says after the moment of bewilderment passes, suddenly feeling rather uncomfortable. Why hide himself?

“You should probably get a change of clothes first, of course,” the woman continues, appearing unperturbed by his slight stumble. “But you’re more than welcome to join my companions and I at our table. Feel free to invite your friend as well, if you see him—the more the merrier, right?”

Victor’s mouth works slowly as he tries to form coherent words. “Right,” he manages, the woman giving him a pleased grin.

“Mila, by the way,” she introduces herself, bowing with the exaggerated flourish of her hand. “And you?”

He takes a soundless breath through a slight gap between his lips as he forces himself to relax, smoothing over his composure into something far less clumsy. It comes as naturally as breathing to him. “I am Victor, as well as pleased to make your acquaintance.”

She chuckles, a light, airy sound. “A handsome name for a handsome face—well, I won’t keep you from getting dry. Feel free to drop by whenever you like, we’ll be here all evening.”

“I’d be delighted, Mila.”

He can’t escape from her soon enough. Not that she’s not friendly, and were he at any other stage in his life he might have even enjoyed her easy company, but the fact that Love decided to disappear from the sight of other human eyes and essentially leave him alone is making his chest feel heavy.

Heading up the stairs, Victor doesn’t speak a single word to Love who trails his footsteps, not until they’re inside his room and the door has been shut. Victor’s hand lingers on the handle, and he inhales once more in an attempt to gather some calm before finally turning to Love, who has started to unwrap his old lyre.

Victor opens his mouth to speak but Love isn’t meeting his eyes and seems to shield himself with the
silence, the gap between their feet growing ever bigger into a distance Victor doesn’t think he can possibly jump at this point.

He wants to ask why, but he’s afraid of the answer, so he doesn’t.

Cowardice has become too comfortable a habit.

“Aren’t you going to change?” Love asks after a while, adjusting the strings on the lyre—the ones that aren’t missing, at least. He’s still not looking at Victor.

“In a bit,” Victor replies at length, fingers hesitating briefly around the doorknob before he pulls his hand away and walks over to his bag, sitting beside his bed. He kneels in front of it, busy with searching for a change of clothes that aren’t wet, the continuing quiet curling inside his gut like a ball of anxiety swallowing up his insides, stretching.

And stretching.

And stretching.

And a hand on his shoulder.

Victor halts all movement—fingers squeeze, shift, a thumb skidding across the crook of his neck and he all but quakes at the trail of heat it leaves on him. The hand pauses briefly, and makes to move away, but Victor’s arm moves in reflex, catching it in his own and pressing the palm against the thumping pulse point on his throat. He hears a sharp inhale behind him and his muscles tense, heartbeat throbbing through his entire body like a deafening drum. He feels too raw and too exposed and yet part of him exhaled in sheer relief.

“Will you come with me?” he asks, not daring to turn around and meet dark eyes the gaze of which he can feel pressing into the spot between his shoulder blades.

Love says nothing for the longest time and his hand burns on Victor’s skin like it burns in his heart, and he might as well have dug his fingernails into Victor’s veins and torn them open—Victor would not have stopped him, had he done so.

“Yuuri?” Victor says, reflexively because he’s been calling him that ever since they arrived here, and then he hears the floorboards behind him creak with Love’s shifting weight.

Something warm touches on the crown of his head, through his hair, fingers carting through his long locks and the air in his lungs catches in his throat when he feels a warm breath ghosting over his gray tresses and realizes what it is.

Love’s kiss is over before he can catch it and he’s sure his heart is going to beat itself to death against his ribs, wanting so much to curl into himself and at the same time turn around and pull Love into his arms and keep him there just for a little while, just to soak in his warmth.

“You’ll be fine,” Love says, and pulls away completely to leave him in an abrupt cold, quiet footsteps resounding through the room like ghosts, the creak of the door echoing through his ears before it shuts with a quiet click and Victor touches the top of his head with the tips of his fingers.

Victor sits there for who knows how long after Love has already left and blinks only to awareness when his knees begin to hurt. Whatever just happened, whatever Love just offered, tastes like a nectar far too sweet to be meant for a mortal tongue and his stomach churns because this isn’t right but it is and his head is a mess of things he can’t even begin to untangle. In the warring of want and should and need he is unable to reconcile anything, feeling desperately lost with his one
guiding light being completely and utterly out of his reach.

Contrary to Love's assurance, Victor really doubts he'll be fine.

The morose thought rings especially true when, after spending far too long changing while the touch of Love’s lips lingers in his mind like a beautiful scar, the first face he sees when he finally brings himself to go downstairs is one he never thought he'd see again.

Michele stares up at him from the bottom of the stairs in pure shock, and Victor can do nothing but stare back as he barely smothers the urge to scream.

Apparently, this day *can* get worse.

“Victor?”

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by stormcakes

Note that while Mila and Victor have a pretty huge age gap in canon (9 years I believe), here she is still 18 while Victor is 23.
old ghosts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Victor is twenty-two when he comes home from the war.

His eyes are weary with things he’s seen and his hands burn with things he’s done, but he is lucky all the same because it could have gone on for much longer than it did. It was only due to Hestia’s crown prince securing a marriage to another nation’s princess and enter an alliance that made the enemy wary of provoking them any further; it would’ve been nothing less than suicide to engage in a two-front war.

Still, that endless battlefield spanning a horizon of blood-soaked earth and nameless graves could’ve been his final resting place, and yet here he is, lungs still drawing breath and feet still taking steps.

He is not the only one to have made it back from the village, but he is the one to receive a hero’s welcome. Victor was generally well-liked by everyone before, but surviving the war has elevated him into the status of royalty to these people who wait for him with open arms.

These people who celebrate him for being a murderer.

Of course, he’ll tell anyone who asks that it wasn’t as if he had a choice. Such is the nature of war; kill or be killed. But he can’t—refuses to—delude himself into believing what he did wasn’t murder, not like other men who will brag about the number of enemies they’ve slaughtered as if they weren’t human beings with their own hopes and dreams and fears and loved ones and memories.

His principles come with a hefty price.

Where others find comfort in denial, he finds pain in truth, and sometimes he wakes up in the middle of the night with his fingers trembling as they remember the phantom feeling of thrusting steel through flesh and sinew and bone and the sound of a last gasping breath and he can’t stop shaking and the night terrors haunt him with quiet hands wrapping around his throat until he chokes and chokes and chokes.

Sometimes he wishes he could pretend as well, because he understands the need for it better than anyone.

Victor isn’t alone in his predicament, as he isn’t the only one from his village to return, but the two others that accompany him go their separate ways as soon as they arrive; one to join the king’s guard in the capital after a recommendation, the other to become a travelling merchant wishing to see more of his own country after several near-death experiences.

Victor remains home, and tolerates the brash questions of innocent youth all by himself.

“What was it like on the battlefield?”

“How many did you kill?”

“Did you take any prisoners?”

“What did you do with them?”
To them he is now a war veteran, and though some of the questions he receives are from boys barely a few years younger than him, he feels the weight of his experiences in the stress lines underneath his eyes and suddenly they are no more than children and he envies them to the point of nausea—why him, why him, why him.

Before his father died and left Victor with his sword, a family heirloom passed down from countless generations, Victor would often catch him awake in the middle of the night. His father used to be a soldier, had seen his fair share of battle, but rarely spoke of his experiences beyond what an honor it had been to serve his king and country. When he did, Victor never quite understood.

On one such occasion, Victor—eight years old and woken up by a scary noise from outside—caught him sitting in his usual chair by a window near the fireplace, staring outside until Victor shuffled closer and caught his eye. His father said nothing, simply sat there and looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

“Can’t sleep,” Victor said after a lengthy silence, and his father motioned for him to come closer, patting his head when he was in reach. The faint starlight falling in through the window only seemed to highlight the deep lines on his father’s face, the blue of his eyes dulled. “Did the scary noise wake you up too?”

His father pulled his hand out of Victor’s hair, trying to smile but his cheeks strained with the effort. “I just had a nightmare.”

“About monsters?”

“Of a kind,” his father said, gaze glazing over as if it was passing over Victor and aimed at something his son couldn’t see.

“I sometimes have nightmares about monsters too,” Victor said, tugging at his father’s sleeve to get his attention until his reddened eyes shifted back to his son’s worried face. “Just yell at them and they’ll go away!”

His father sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t think we dream about the same kinds of monsters, son.”

“We don’t?” Victor replied quizzically, tilting his head. “Mine are really, really big, and have a lotta hair, and big claws—what do yours look like?”

“Men,” his father said, and he hadn’t understood it at the time; how could he? He was just a child, ignorant of what monsters really were, having never laid eyes on a real one before.

Now that he knew, he couldn’t stop seeing them.

“Oh, come on, Victor,” Georgi says to him one day after he declines yet again an invitation to visit the tavern with the other… with the boys. He can no longer count himself as one of them, after all. “You never go out with us anymore!”

Victor sits at his chair and stares at the dull glint of sunlight reflected off the sheath of his sword hanging off his father’s old weapon rack. “Sorry, Georgi; I’m just too tired.”

“Then go to bed earlier and maybe you’ll be able to join us next time,” Georgi says with an exasperated motion of his hand, and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

If it weren’t for the faces of men he has killed blinking through the dark of his eyelids every time he tries to go to sleep, Victor might have even taken Georgi’s advice. As it is, the night terrors show no signs of abating.
To escape them he often finds himself wandering outside in the dead of night, not walking through the village or even to the temple, but instead drawn to the forest and its quiet river. The sound of rushing water always glides over him like a soothing song as he lies down by the riverbank, staring up through the gaps in the leaves to the stars dotting the night sky.

Victor doesn’t know why, but it’s the only place he experiences even a little bit of peace. Sometimes when he closes his eyes long enough, his body relaxing into a state of near sleep while his mind remains awake, he can almost see images of a different life. Glimpses of memories never made, possibilities of happier days that were never realized.

He is often melancholy on these outings to the river, but there is peace in the solitude. Alone in the forest he can contemplate the past few years without feeling like he’s drowning in guilt or suffocating among monsters hiding in the skin of people. Instead he lets his thoughts roam free, and then leaves them to get washed away by the currents of the river, mercifully forgotten.

It’s on one of these nights that he’s finally found.

“You haven’t been to the temple since you returned.”

Victor closes his eyes, the sharp outline of a crescent moon pressed into the back of his lids briefly replacing the distinct image of blood pouring out of the mouth of a corpse. “Someone like me has no business in a holy place.”

There’s a hesitant pause broken only by the soft footsteps rustling through the grass, followed by more rustling, and when Sara speaks again he hears her sitting right beside him, her voice lingering somewhere above him.

“I like to think he would understand,” she offers, but he can only find it naïve.

“Would he?”

She says nothing for a while in response, and neither does he.

The hollow echo of the wind roams through the forest, filling the empty quiet between them, and the leaves bristle in its wake as Victor’s eyes slowly slide open to stare at dark clouds obscuring the moonlight.

“They said my aim was so true I must’ve been blessed by the gods themselves.” Sara says nothing, and when he glances at her from the corner of his eyes she still looks so young even though she has matured into a woman, her arms curled around her knees. “It was more difficult with my sword, which is odd in hindsight; the end-result is still the same, whether by arrow or by steel.”

“You didn’t have a choice.”

“I could’ve left,” Victor points out, as if he were speaking not of himself but someone else. “Fled the village, ignored the draft. But I didn’t. I wanted to make a dead man proud.”

“Whatever you may be feeling now,” Sara says, looking down at him with neither pity nor compassion but absolute certainty, “just know that he still loves you.”

“Because he is the god of love?”

“Because you are worthy of it.”

Victor laughs, the sound dying as soon as it leaves his mouth. “I wish I could believe that.”
“Someday you will.”

This isn’t their last meeting. Victor refuses to go to the temple, so instead Sara always leaves to find him by the river instead. They never exchange more than a few words, but the silence between them is comfortable.

For a while, Sara doesn’t have to be a priestess, and Victor doesn’t have to be a war hero.

“Why did you decide to serve Eros?” he asks her one night.

“It was either that or an arranged marriage; our family might not be royalty, but we are still part of the upper class,” Sara replies truthfully, lying beside him and staring up at the sky. “My brother was the one who begged me to become a priestess. He couldn’t stand the thought of me being given away to a stranger, so I suppose being given away to a deity was the better choice.”

“Given away to a deity?” Victor questions, turning his head to the side to look at Sara, whose brows arch in surprise.

“You don’t know?” At the shake of his head, she gives him a befuddled look. “Haven’t you ever wondered why Eros only has priestesses, when he is a male god?”

“Not particularly, no.”

She bites her lip, looking back up at the night sky again. “We are not allowed relations with any men because we are expected to save ourselves for him once we pass on into the afterlife. It’s why only women can serve him.”

“Well, that seems…” Victor doesn’t finish his sentence, but from the wry smile on Sara’s face, he doesn’t need to.

“I don’t think there’s much truth to it.” Sara sighs. “I don’t know when it became tradition, but it used to be that both men and women could serve him, and I’ve never seen any mentions of marriage in any texts we have in the temple. Still, it would be an honor to be his bride.”

“Do you really believe that, or is that something you tell yourself to feel better?”

Sara purses her lips, scowling up at the sky. “You are very rude,” she says, opting not to give him even a single glance.

Victor turns his head away to look back up to the stars. “I apologize; it was an honest question.”

“A blunt question.”

“You don’t have to answer it.”

There’s a short pause, and the wind is still, leaving only a choir of crickets chirping, the soft hoot of an owl flying overhead briefly accompanying it. A few bushes nearby rustle briefly, probably a deer or a rabbit, and then the sudden buzz of a mosquito hums close to his ear, Victor swatting at it until it disappears.

“It’s because of my brother,” Sara says then, her voice so quiet it’s almost drowned out by the river. “Or rather, for my brother that I did it. I don’t know if it would’ve been better to accept the idea of an arranged marriage instead, so there’s no use in regretting it, but I really do believe that I am privileged to have been chosen as one of the servants of Eros.”
“Servant, bride—can’t you think of anything else you would’ve rather done with your life?”

“Such as becoming a soldier?”

Victor winces. “That was a low blow, priestess.”

“He’ll be coming to visit me soon, you know,” Sara continues, ignoring his whining. “My brother, that is.”

“Where are you from, anyway, if you weren’t born in the village?”

“From the city of Zelos, near the western border,” she explains. “It’s known for its extravagance, and only the wealthy can afford residence there. In this village, I may be considered part of the elite, but back in Zelos my family was considered lower class in comparison. Our bloodline is not as old and therefore not as prestigious as many of the other families that live there.”

“Isn’t that city notorious for its assassins?” Victor remarks curiously, having heard something of that nature back when he was in the army—a fellow archer who claimed to be part of the assassin’s guild in Zelos.

“I suppose to outsiders, yes,” Sara responds thoughtfully. “To us it was hardly unusual. Here in Apheleia if you hear about someone disparaging your character behind your back you might confront them in person and possibly end up in a fist-fight. In Zelos, the fist would be an assassin. It’s different only in that the nobles can afford to do more, and they are very fond of excess.”

“And you would have been betrothed to someone from Zelos?” Victor surmises as his eyes drift over the blanket of stars above him. “Well, I suppose I can understand why your brother was against the idea, though he seems a tad bit—”

“Overprotective, yes.” He hears Sara shift beside him and when he looks at her she is lying on her side, facing him. “Don’t tell this to anyone, but to be honest I’m… I’m glad I got to be away from him for a while. I miss him, of course, but I felt so smothered by him sometimes.”

“Don’t worry, I am an excellent keeper of secrets, since I tend to forget about them as soon as I’ve heard them,” Victor replies. “And gods forbid you show up in the afterlife with your honor besmirched by such a scandalous confession; I am sure Eros and his three thousand other wives would be heartbroken.”

Sara gives him a flustered look that lasts only two heartbeats before she breaks out into uncontrollable giggling, and Victor stares at her in bewilderment. Was it that funny?

“I’m sorry,” she breathes once she’s finally done laughing. “I just… I didn’t expect that, coming from you. Usually you’re always so serious.”

“I admit, I was a lot more fun to be around when I was younger,” Victor concedes. More fun, more carefree, more uninhibited. It was why he’d been so popular in the village in the first place, but then his parents died and he didn’t quite feel like being so cheerful anymore, because what reason was there to laugh?

The war only escalated that. Whatever well-mannered demeanor he puts on nowadays is just an act, one that devolved into a mere habit when it stopped being genuine. No one wants to be around a lifeless husk.

“You can still be fun if you just let yourself go a little,” Sara says, starting to pluck at the grass.
Victor hums in a noncommittal way, and they fall into silence for a while longer as he ponders Sara’s situation in favor of ignoring his own, when another question occurs to him.

“Sara,” he starts, catching her eyes. “Is there any particular reason why the temple of Eros was built atop that hill?”

“Mm, well…” Sara stays silent for a while as she thinks. “They say it’s because of the flowers. Have you heard of them?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“It’s not a very well-known fact since not even the priestesses talk about it a lot, but here’s a small room beyond the shrine only the high priestess can enter,” she elaborates. “The room doesn’t have a floor like the rest of the temple, and in its center it has a patch of flowers that’s said to be sacred, put there by Lord Eros himself, which is why the temple was built around it. No one knows why or what it’s there for, but it’s the duty of the high priestess to maintain it.”

“Strange.” Victor wonders why anyone would worship something they don’t even know the true purpose of. For all they know it could’ve just been a random flowerbed on top of a hill. “Have you ever seen it?”

“The high priestess let me see the flowers once, yes,” Sara answers, a hint of pride glowing in her voice. “She’s quite old already, and she’s chosen me as her successor. I’ll have to tend to them once she’s gone. Personally, I think…it seems sort of like a grave for someone. There’s something very sad about the air there.”

“What kind of flowers are they?” Victor asks out of curiosity.

Sara smiles.

“The most beautiful golden daffodils.”

The memory flits by as soon as he thinks to catch it, snippets and bits lost over the years—Victor remembers details of it, the sound of the river, the cool midnight air on his face, the sound of Sara’s laughter, the feeling of the walls of his bedroom closing in on him every time he woke up from another nightmare, the lonely sensation of being in a crowd.

“How is Sara?”

The inn is mercifully quiet for once, and if Michele refuses to meet his eyes then Victor pretends he doesn’t notice.

“She’s doing well,” Michele mumbles to the floorboards, head bowed slightly.

“Good,” Victor says coolly, and moves to leave, starting to take a few steps towards the bar and passing Michele. “Well then, nice seeing you. Say hello to your sister for me.”

“Wait!”

He bites back a curse as he halts in place, not bothering to turn around, and he hears Michele shift about on his feet, the floorboards creaking underneath his boots.

“I never…” Michele clears his throat. “What happened back in Apheleia, I didn’t know… I’d like to apologize.”
“That won't be necessary.”

“But I’m the reason they exiled you!” Michele protests so loudly it attracts the attention of the patrons at the tables in the other room. “Aren’t you angry about that?”

Victor slowly turns around, the tension flexing in his jaw. He breathes in deep, the heat throbbing in his hands easing slightly and Michele takes a small step back, posture rigid. “I don’t want your apology.”

“But I—”

“Clearly your apology is for your own sake, not for mine,” Victor responds coldly, feeling the anger thrum in his skull. “If you seek forgiveness go beg the gods for it; you’ll find none here.”

With that he leaves Michele behind, walking over to the bar with a lingering bad taste in his mouth as he sits himself down at a stool and glares down at the counter. The sheer nerve.

“You look upset.”

Victor glances up at Christophe casually drying dishes with a large cloth behind the bar. “You heard that, did you?”

“I think the entirety of Pheme did.”

He sighs. “I need a drink.”

“Put it on my tab,” another voice chimes in, and Victor turns to his left to find Mila sitting down next to him with a cheerful smile. “Hello again, handsome.”

“Mila,” Victor manages, feeling tired now that the tension has drained out of him, and she gives him a sympathetic look.

“I didn’t know you had a past with Michele,” she says as Christophe hands them their drinks. “Though I’m not surprised; he can be a real pest when it comes to his sister. Poor Sara.”

“You know Michele and Sara?”

“Yes,” Mila says easily, taking her mug to her lips. “Michele and I serve under the same captain with some others. I’m the second-in-command.”

Victor blinks. “You’re not dressed much like a soldier,” he notes at the complete lack of armor and the dress, saying nothing of how uncommon female soldiers are, and Mila grins.

“I know, my captain hounds me for it all the time.” The grin disappears from her face a moment later. “Though with this thing between you and Michele, I don’t suppose you’d be in for a round of cards with us?”

He remembers the sound of Love’s footsteps retreating from the room, and feels a sharp sensation shoot through his chest, the hand resting on his leg balling into a fist.

“I’ll have to pass for now,” Victor replies with a polite smile, and Mila pouts a bit.

“That’s too bad, the boys really wanted to meet you.”

“How so?” he asks, though he supposes he already knows the answer.
“Well, you’re the Victor, right? With the arrows that never miss?” she prods, smiling smugly. “I haven’t been in the army for that long, but they still circulate stories about you. They say during the war you single-handedly took out five enemy commanders all in a single battle. Is it true you took their heads as trophies?”

Christophe snorts as Victor suppresses a sigh. “You’ve been here just a few days and already you’ve got a bunch of admirers.”

“No, Mila, I didn’t take any heads as trophies.” He might be a murderer, but he's not a barbarian.

“Still, you have to come meet the boys at the very least!” Mila insists, getting off her stool and grabbing him by the arm, trying to drag him away towards a table near the front, crowded with three other soldiers who are staring at them in a mixture of mortification (at Mila) and excitement (at Victor).

Victor looks at the young faces of fresh recruits who have likely not seen a single real battle as he allows Mila to pull him towards the table, and pushes away the dread of confronting a past he thought he buried. It’s been haunting him for years anyway.

He might as well look it in the eye, this time.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart by jotadepes
Victor is twenty-two when he comes home from the war, and Yuuri can do nothing to help him.

He watches through the eyes of others, nudging them to approach Victor, to try and bond with him and to not allow him to retreat into himself. Implanting subtle compulsions in the people closest to Victor, he steers as many of them as he can in Victor’s path.

From there they all try to connect with him, but none of them succeed, their words all bouncing off the armor Victor is still wearing even when he isn’t. With each rejection Yuuri feels his heart sink, feeling helpless and hopeless because he is the only one who sees the edge Victor is teetering on, and his feet are growing wearier and wearier of balancing it every day.

Yet Yuuri can do nothing to help, not directly. Were he to do so anyway it would mean violating an oath centuries old, an oath of his own making, and what kind of hypocrite would that make him? The most he can do is leave small influences inside the minds of others, tiny impulses left there by him like seeds to grow on their own. Anything more would draw attention.

Still, Victor needs help, support that he is too proud to ask for and he’s slipping away, sinking further and deeper and if Yuuri doesn’t do something—

But it never comes to that, because a young girl with violet eyes finds Victor without any of Yuuri’s prompting, without any of his influence, and extends Victor a helping hand all by herself. The strain on Yuuri’s heart eases slightly as he watches her, so saddened by the burden put on her—his temples have become a mockery of what he truly is, shaped by greedy human hands, nothing more than prisons for women to be paraded about for the service of men.

If he could, he would help her too, but he is shackled to his oath just as she is to hers. All he can do is watch as she traces the footsteps in the dirt into the forest towards the river.

The first time Yuuri sees Victor there through Sara’s eyes—lying down in the grass with nothing but the stars above him reflected in eyes as brittle as cracked glass—his chest constricts.

He has seen Victor survive the past four years with nothing but his will to live keeping him on his feet until he became nothing more than a shell inside the armor, moving just for the sake of it, fighting just because he was told to, killing and killing and killing as with each cut of his sword and every draw of his bow the light in his eyes dimmed until there was nothing but a mirror.

All Yuuri could do then was tilt the arrows Victor shot in the right directions when needed and hope it would be enough. Looking back on it now it makes him feel sick; all his helping hand ever amounted to was to add to the pile of corpses, add to the nightmares haunting Victor’s eyes, playing the kind of favoritism he once fought so hard against.

Who is he to give one man’s life priority over hundreds of others?

He swore an oath, he gave his word, he is bound by blood.

What is he worth if he can’t even keep to his promise?

But then he listens to Victor scream and claw at his throat as another night terror takes a hold of him, and wants so desperately to do something, anything.

Yuuri closes his eyes that night and sees through Victor’s, staring up at the cracks littering his ceiling,
the faint light from the moon and stars falling in at an angle that makes it seem as if the shadows in
the corners of his room are moving.

The sound of his heartbeat and deep, frantic breaths fill Yuuri’s ears, and for a moment he can feel
the feverish heat on his own forehead and the cold sweat on his own back, the image of a soldier
with an arrow through his throat seared into his own memory like branding iron pressing into his
skin.

Suddenly the integrity of his oath means very little to him, and he can hardly remember why he cared
so much to begin with.

Part of him knows this is wrong, knows he has already crossed lines he shouldn’t have, but he can’t
possibly turn away. Years ago when he was still alone in the dark, Victor was the one to spark a light
in it, however unwittingly. His flame burned brighter than anyone’s ever did and gave Yuuri purpose
again.

Maybe this will end in disaster, and maybe it won’t, but all Yuuri knows is that he can’t abandon
Victor, not now.

From the endless plains of merciless desert, Yuuri soundlessly takes a single step across hundreds of
miles and right into Victor’s bedroom, space condensed into mere seconds as his form slips into the
shadows. Victor doesn’t notice him, and won’t be noticing him either since Yuuri has made his form
invisible to the human eye.

It’s the first time he sees Victor in person, however, and for a moment Yuuri forgets how to breathe.

Victor’s hair is spread over his pillows and sheets like delicate threads spun from silver, skin glowing
pale in the moonlight that seems to soften the blue of his eyes, lashes moist and untouched tear tracks
glistening off his cheeks.

Yuuri stands there and wants… he wants...

Victor takes a deep breath, eyes slowly slipping shut, a single thought resonating from his heart and
filling the cold air between them like the edge of a knife slipping into the empty space between
Yuuri’s ribs.

‘Maybe it would’ve been better if I had—’

Before he can finish it Yuuri has already crossed the distance between them and with a touch of his
trembling fingers to Victor’s temple lulls him into a sudden, dreamless sleep. He waits until Victor’s
breaths have slowed into a more peaceful rhythm and his hands have stopped shaking before he
carefully lowers himself onto the edge of the bed, aching so much, wanting so much.

He looks at Victor and his hand hovers only for a moment before he reaches down and gently
brushes a wayward strand of hair from Victor’s face, palm fitting against the side of his cheek as if it
were meant to be there, as if Yuuri has done this a hundred times before as the pad of his thumb
slides over the wetness on pale skin and wipes away a tear.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers desolately into the quiet of the room, and he bends down to press his lips
right above a delicate brow like a promise sealed with wax.

Leaving that night eats at him even long after Victor has woken up and feels bemused at how
refreshed he is, briefly touching his forehead in wonder before brushing the oddly peaceful sensation
aside and going about his day.
Yuuri watches, and wishes, and wants.

For a while, Victor seems to be tentatively improving even without his help, mainly thanks to Sara. She is his only tether, and their conversations that often last for several hours—sometimes even until dawn breaks—seem to soothe his troubled mind even if only for a moment.

That is why when Earth summons him to her realm to make a deal with him that he manages to tear himself away, hoping that when he comes back Victor will be even better. Time flows differently in the realm of gods, passing by much more slowly, so what might be the length of a single conversation there might be the passage of a whole month in the human world.

Earth’s domain seems less affected by the difference than other parts of the strange realm, as she is closest to humanity next to the human gods. It is a single palace, stretching out on verdant ground like a monolith, surrounded by waterfalls supported by nothing but clouds as water pools around its edges, the sun burning in the distance behind it like a looming guardian and the moon hovering in the sky before it like a sunset at sea.

The palace itself, made of grey stones and dark rocks, is covered in vines blooming flowers, built into straight, rough lines. Unpolished and raw, as if it rose out of the ground below it one day and sat there waiting for someone to inhabit it. The first time Yuuri visited as a child, he was awestruck. Now, he is only reminded of the distance between him and Victor.

Earth waits for him at the bottom of the stone steps of her palace, her sheer green robes flowing around her long legs and slim figure, spreading her arms to him in a wide smile as if welcoming him home. In a way, she is—once, this was his home.

As it so happens, Earth offers him her sympathy and announces that she has managed to wrestle an agreement from the others that he can aid humanity again in his capacity as Love, and Yuuri feels a conflict tearing through him, two opposing desires colliding into a cacophony of thoughts.

One is the desire that Victor won’t ever need his aid.

The other is that he will.

Earth emphasizes that he cannot focus on any single person—and he wonders if she knows, but how could she when he has transcended his humanity and she no longer can read his mind—before she reluctantly lets him go again with a tight hug and Yuuri’s heart pounds all the way back to earth.

He takes a single step back into the human realm, mind already scouring for Victor, and instantly feels something very, very wrong.

Victor is no longer in Apheleia.

Yuuri barely stops himself from going there to look for Victor in person, the redundant urge a silly human thing, a need for confirmation from his own two eyes. Before he can make a fool of himself, however, the flame of a young girl with robes too heavy on her slight frame fills his ears.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she whispers, knelt before the statue of Eros with tears in her eyes, hands clasped in prayer. “He did it to protect me.”

In an instant Yuuri sees it all flash through her memory.

Her brother—training to become a soldier now, he’s growing up without her just as she is without him and it’s scary the way he seems a stranger to her—coming to visit her, the tentative joy that is destroyed all but a day later when he finds her sneaking out of the temple in the dark of night to see
Victor.

The way she tries to explain, manages to placate him, pleading with him until he finally relents.

She didn’t know he continued following her anyway.

Just like he didn’t know he was being followed by one of his friends.

When he finds them together he erupts, accusations thrown around, a sword being drawn, the heat of fury in his eyes reflected into Victor’s cold and quiet ones.

She steps in between them and he immediately lowers his sword but he’s still fuming, does not accept her explanations and storms off, leaving her behind in heartache, and if only she could tell him that she has never and will never give her heart to a man, no, not to a man, but she is too afraid.

Victor’s hand on her shoulder, then his arms around her were a small comfort but it only made her cry because she realized that he has been more of a brother to her than her real one ever was.

She thought that would be the worst of it, but she was wrong, because then the rumors came.

Michele did not spread them, but his friend did, and the other priestesses began doubting her one after another; did she forsake her vows, was her honor disgraced, her chastity violated? She could not possibly serve at the temple if she was impure.

The high priestess still believed her, but the villagers didn’t.

They came to the temple in a crowd of at least a dozen, and she was terrified—if they truly believed she had committed adultery, that meant she would’ve tainted the temple with her presence, and who knows the punishment they would make her suffer through. Women had been stoned for less.

But then Victor came, emerging from the crowd with a steely look in his eyes and her brother at his heels, not looking at her, not looking at anyone.

And Victor stood in front of her, stared down at the crowd, and announced that they could not possibly have committed adultery and that her honor was intact.

When asked how anyone could be sure of this, he said, “Because I only lie with men.”

It wasn’t true, not entirely; he had told her that he found himself attracted to both men and women equally, but what he said quelled any questions about her and focused all the scorn on him.

For her.

Had he been anyone else, he would’ve been killed. Michele took out his sword, pointed it at Victor’s neck and told him to leave and never come back—pretending, because he was the one who begged Victor to help. No one protested, no one said a word.

All for her.

“Please, help him.”

Yuuri wipes the tears off his face, inhales a deep breath and exhales it across the distance in a whisper that brushes against her ears and makes her eyes go wide in awe as they stare up at the silent statue of Eros before her:

“I will.”
He’s on his third drink when the question inevitably arises.

“What happened between you and Michele, if you don’t mind me asking?”

To Victor’s surprise, it’s not Mila who asks but one of her subordinates, Emil. He looks to be slightly more mature than his two peers who can’t be older than sixteen, one of whom is only on his second drink yet already tipping over in his seat.

Either the standards of the army have lowered in favor of more able bodies, or these two somehow managed to slip between the cracks and into recruitment—it’s not as far-fetched as it sounds, considering Christophe pulled it off as well. The king may still be on edge considering the uneasy truce that followed the brutal war of a year ago, and more willing to let those that bend the rules slip past even if they are too small for their armor.

One of the boys sitting next to Emil shifts in the brief silence and the glint of his unblemished shoulder guard flashes into Victor’s eyes, like the gleam of fire reflected off red-soaked steel, painted by the flesh of a rotting body and gone again the next moment when the flames die and dawn finally breaks. All he can see in the bright of sunlight shining from the horizon are a blend of colors stretched out over the battlefield, orange and brown and black and red and red and red and—

“Captain?”

His old rank is a snap of fingers and he blinks his memories away, too sudden and too vivid; he feels off-balance, and hides his discomposure with another swig from his drink. It doesn’t burn like it first did.

Swallowing down what’s left in his mouth, he turns to Emil, sitting across from him and waiting patiently for a reply.

“We had a falling out.”

“About Sara?” Mila goads, a careless stab at scar tissue.

Victor averts his gaze to the yellow-tinted liquid in his cup, remembers the way Michele ran into house that day, slamming the door open and nearly choking through his ragged breaths, “I didn’t know, you have to help her, I swear I didn’t know!”

It doesn’t matter if he didn’t. The way he turned on her, the look in her eyes when he walked away from her—Michele had no idea what it meant to lose family, and was far too ready to walk out on his own, to break her heart for his petty pride and leave its shards in the dirt.

To Victor, there had never been a single moment of hesitation when he discovered the plotting of the townspeople, all too eager to reap their righteousness from someone else’s suffering, to point the finger at another so their own depravities would not be noticed.

No, Michele asking him to throw himself onto the sword for Sara was not what had inspired his contempt, since Victor would’ve done that anyway.

It was his initial abandonment of her, the way he took her for granted, that he could not forgive.

“Bit of a touchy topic, huh?” Emil surmises, breaking through his thoughts.
“Way to bring the mood down, Emil,” the skinny, red-haired boy sitting next to him—Janus, if Victor recalls correctly—chides his friend with a nudge of his elbow before turning to Victor with a cheerful smile. “Why don’t you tell us about the battle at Vesta’s Gates, sir? You were there, right?”

Certainly, he’d been a part of it; his very first battle, in fact. By the time he arrived at the army’s main camp the enemy was already at their border, a full frontal assault that would’ve been reckless had it not caught Hestia off-guard. They were not a kingdom that prioritized military strength, but instead drew their power from natural resources, a country built on economy. It made the enemy’s strategy rather effective, and though they managed to hold the border down, it was still a bloodbath for both sides.

Victor considers the four eager faces sitting at the table with him. He could be honest, he could say that it had been complete and utter chaos from start to end, he could admit that till this day he hadn’t the faintest idea how the battle began or progressed or even ended.

But the old mask slips on easily, as if he never discarded it, and with a pull of his mouth and a jerk of his arm he smiles in mischief and leans forward onto the table with his elbow.

“Vesta’s Gates, you said?” A pensive look, a finger to lower lip, and they’re drawn in. “Compared to other battles I’ve seen it was hardly extraordinary—well, until we brought out the ballistae.”

“Woah, really?”

“I’ve never—”

“Did you use one?” Janus asks eagerly, cutting off the tall, lanky blond sitting beside him, Marius, who gives his friend an irritated look. “I always wanted to use one!”

“No, I was too valuable as an archer to waste manning one of those, not to mention I wasn’t trained for that purpose.”

“What were you trained for, sir?”

“Precision strikes.”

Janus’ eyes glitter and Emil and Marius lean forward onto the table while Mila, who sits next to him, tilts her head in his direction ever so slightly as she sips from her drink with faked nonchalance.

“Can you tell us about one of your best kills?”

Victor tips back his cup, tries to wash away the blood on his hands with the ale until his head starts swimming in it and he knows he’ll regret this in the morning but for tonight, he is just one soldier among many others, sharing stories and bragging as soldiers do.

Just for tonight, he will pretend to be one of them, as perhaps he should have been and was always meant to be.

He has been alone for far too long.

The sun sets before him, golden rays of light bursting through storm clouds that are slowly drifting apart and away to reveal glimpses of a sky teasing its brightest colors, right before it fades into dark.

Yuuri wonders at the horizon in front of him as he sits atop the old roof of The Swan’s Dive, alone and out of sight as Pheme’s villagers mill about on the streets around him, soft chatter and the
occasional shout or laughter breaking through the quiet dusk.

The most fleeting things are often the most compelling, the most memorable. Were a sunset to last forever, the world caught in perpetual twilight, he imagines its beauty would be quickly forgotten. Even the gods, high atop their gilded thrones, cannot help but admire humanity for it; each little life a spark in the void, just as bright and just as short.

Is that why he has become so fixated on Victor?

For the past two hours Yuuri has been trying to figure it out, trying to reflect upon the burning in his heart and why dying embers grew into flames. Perhaps once he discovers exactly what it is that has him so drawn to Victor, it’ll be easier to let him go.

Victor is already on the right path—Yuuri knows because he can hear the excited beat of young hearts, feel the pull of a smile on a face and the taste of liquor on a tongue. Boys who look up to him, a girl who’s taken a liking to him, his name being whispered through the crowded inn.

All he needed was a small push, and Yuuri gave him that push. By all rights he’s finished here; he knows that with just a bit more time Mila will attach herself to him easily enough and though it might not be there at first, love will come slowly nonetheless.

Yet to Yuuri, whose skies have always been grey for as long as he can remember, Victor is a sunset. A spark in his void, not meant for him—never meant for him—and too quick for him to catch, but he’ll reach for him anyway.

“Oh, Love,” a voice sighs from beside him and Yuuri nearly jumps, snapping his head to the side to look at the sudden new arrival when his eyes widen in disbelief at the familiar face. “You are hopeless.”

“Charity?”

His friend smiles widely, white teeth contrasting russet-brown skin with a golden glow smoothed over the surface, sunlight gleaming in even darker eyes. “The one and only.”

“What—why are you,” Yuuri tries, stammers as his hand reflexively reaches for the necklace lying across his chest underneath the layers of clothes, and Charity laughs almost gleefully, mouth open wide as the sound fills the air. “How did you find me?”

“I merely figured that if you were to return anywhere, you would make your debut here,” Charity says with cheer. “After that, all I had to do was listen for your name. You are rather predictable, you know.”

Yuuri smiles slightly, and though he’s surprised, he is also pleased to see his friend again. How long has it been? Centuries, at the very least. Charity was one of the few to visit him on occasion next to Earth and Heaven, when Yuuri was still trapped in solitude. Those visits were one of the few things keeping him sane.

Back then, even though Charity could not relate, he would always listen to whatever Yuuri had to tell him, engaging him as best he could. At their core they are fundamentally different, as Yuuri was born a human and not a god like Charity. Where the elder gods spawned from their respective elements, the gods of humanity were born from human wishes.

Charity came from a wish for generosity, hospitality, kindness, but he never did understand why Yuuri was so miserable by himself. Such creatures born from nature, ideas and feelings can easily spend up to centuries all alone in their realm surrounded by their own power without complaint.
The gods do not desire companionship; they simply are, and in their being, they are content.

As such, Charity will never grasp the concept of wanting to be among people, to have friends, to care and feel cared for, to be understood. His sole purpose is to give, and so he gave Yuuri his time and attention and company, but could not and cannot give him empathy. Their relationship feels oddly one-sided sometimes, but Charity always tries so hard, and for that Yuuri will always consider him his friend.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you, but why are you here?” Yuuri asks, glimpsing over the thin white robes Charity is wearing, draped loosely around him like an afterthought, his feet completely bare.

It is a simple sort of garb, modest and nonchalant—very unlike the intricate, green wrappings Earth wears like a dress, tight around her waist while flowing down wide from below her hips, hair decorated with flowers, ankles and wrists and earlobes and neck heavy with metals and precious stones, high-heeled, dark brown shoes wrapped up her long legs like the roots of a tree.

Charity never did care much for such status symbols; a waste, he always called them.

“Earth is starting to become worried,” he answers after a slight pause, the cheer slowly ebbing from his face as he looks at Yuuri with furrowed brows. “You’re spending an awful lot of time on a single human; that wasn’t part of the agreement.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you still here?”

Yuuri doesn’t have an answer that he wouldn’t be ashamed to give. He knows better than anyone that what he’s doing is unforgivable, a blatant violation of his oath, and so he slips into silence instead.

A heartbeat later he hears Charity sigh beside him in a deep, lengthy exhale, and Yuuri pulls his knees up to his chest, curling his arms around his legs.

“I hope he is worth it,” Charity says and Yuuri bites his lip, watching the sun slowly sink, dragging the colors in the sky down with it. “Is he worth it?”

“Worth what?” Yuuri replies, eyes catching as much of the light as they can before it disappears. “Ten lives? A hundred, a thousand? He shouldn’t be but I…”

He has already killed for Victor and he would do it again, without remorse. As human as he was when he was born, he was still raised by gods. If a few hundred men die in order for one man to live, then so be it; their souls will be received by Death, cleansed to be reborn again. It is no great loss in the grand scheme of things, but he can’t pretend that his choices haven’t caused suffering.

Somewhere across the border, a mother is still grieving her son, killed by the arrow that flew from Victor’s hand, the arrow Yuuri touched to ensure it would hit its mark.

Humans often speak of sin—if such a thing truly exists, then this would be his.

“That is not what I meant,” Charity speaks into the silence, and when Yuuri glances at him he sees only concern. “Is he worth the pain?”

“Yes,” Yuuri says without hesitation, without a single pause, almost surprised by his own answer even though he has always known, a truth bleeding from his heart into his veins.
Charity gives him a long look, eyes sharp and assessing as they sweep over Yuuri’s face, and when the sun has disappeared and there is only a rapidly darkening blue in the sky and the first stars begin to shine through the twilight, Charity averts his gaze, nodding to himself once before standing up.

“Are you leaving already?” Yuuri asks, unable to hide the disappointment from his tone, and Charity gifts him a soft look and a slight twitch of his lips before turning to look north, towards the border.

“I can’t stay for much longer without drawing notice,” Charity says, brows furrowing slightly, “but there is something you should know before I go.”

“What is it?”

“I am not the only one who went looking for you.” Yuuri stills, the slight breeze of the evening wind feeling like ice on his skin, and Charity flashes him an apologetic smile. “Death told him.”

“Has he—”

“He knows where you are,” Charity interrupts, meaning to be gentle, but the words still cut sharp. “I can’t say when he’ll get here, but eventually, he’ll come to take you back home.”

“Why…” His voice grates like sandpaper and Yuuri clears his throat. “Why hasn’t he come to me already, if he knows where I am?”

Charity looks away from him again, eyes far over the horizon. “He’s not strong enough to force you, so he picked an easier target, and since he can’t harm humans directly it seems he has chosen a more roundabout method.”

Yuuri’s blood runs cold, a quiet memory from that very same afternoon whispering in his ear.

“Don’t tell me there’s another war coming?”

There is only pity reflected in Charity’s dark eyes, and his friend turns away from him, robes fluttering in the wind.

“For your own sake and for his,” he says as his form begins to fade, turning thinner and thinner with every passing heartbeat until he’s but a shade of color, nearly completely see-through, “let Victor go, Yuuri.”

When Charity has long gone and only the night sky above is left to keep him company, for the first time in his life Yuuri starts counting his sins, and with a silent prayer that disappears into the void between the stars, asks for forgiveness for the ones he will commit.
Dawn has just risen when Victor wakes to a shadow falling over his eyes, blocking out the morning light. He blinks slowly, then turns his head to look towards his window to find Love’s silhouette cut against the sunrise, sitting on the windowsill with one leg dangling off the side and the other pulled up on the ledge.

At first sight it appears as if he’s lost in thought, but his eyes are dim and his gaze is downturned, shoulders hunched. He has his elbow resting on his knee, and the hand attached to it is balled in a fist —his posture is tense, pulled taut like a bowstring and yet curling in on itself at the same time.

He watches Love for a while like this, gaze drifting to the wayward strand of hair that hangs down his forehead and into the wrinkle between his brows, swaying slightly in a soft breeze before settling down again. Victor’s bed is close enough to the window that if he leaned over and stretched his arm out that he’d be able to touch Love, and the urge is there, but it would do nothing to bridge the distance between them.

Pheme is quiet, most of its inhabitants probably still asleep at this hour. The birds fill up the lack of chatter, briefly reminding Victor of his home in the forest, though the rustling of leaves and the sound of rushing water is absent—as is Love’s happy “good morning” that Victor got used to hearing whenever he woke up.

Now, he’s only greeted with silence.

“Love?”

Victor watches him flinch, his dark eyes widening minutely as they flit over to where Victor lays tangled in his sheets. What follows next is almost too quick to catch, would’ve been for most others but Victor knows the signs well: Love’s expression shuts, then softens a moment later, but his smile is too hesitant and his eyes still haven’t regained their usual brightness.

“Good morning, Victor,” he says, and it sounds just as forced. “Did you have fun last night?”

The question hangs in the air between them like a thick curtain, and there’s a finality to the tone of it that puts Victor on edge.

“If I did, then I don’t remember,” he responds at length as he pushes himself upright, noting he’s still wearing the shirt from yesterday and his hair has gotten rather greasy. His eyes sting, and a sniff of his armpit confirms the worst; a rank mixture of sweat and the alcohol dried in his clothes.

No headache, though—small mercies.

“Should I ask Christophe to prepare you a bath?”

Victor shoves the sheets off his legs and manages to stand without incident, concluding he is well and sober enough to go down the stairs. “Don’t bother, I’ll just bathe in the river.”

He gets no reply for that as he walks around his bed to where he dropped his bag on the other side. The wet clothes he put on the desk yesterday seem mostly dry, but still in need of some washing. Victor busies himself with searching for the last clean set of clothes he brought along with him as he
tries to ignore Love’s shadow cast over the floor of his small room.

What can he say? Nothing comes to mind, nothing that would close the distance, but it’s an arrogant and selfish thought to start with.

Victor is just a mortal man. He should be grateful he was chosen by a god at all, he should be thanking Love a thousand times over, and yet here he is wishing he could know the mind of a deity, wishing—wanting—even more than he’s already been given. Yet, he wonders.

Is it so insolent of him to want to look beyond what Love is and discover who he is? When he learned to play the lyre, and why he likes the sound more than the harp, what his fondest memories are, what scent he likes the most, what his hair would look like if it was let free—are these things so terrible of him to want to know?

“You seem quiet today,” Victor says once he’s found his cleanest clothes and can no longer think of something to do that would distract him from Love’s presence.

It might not be strange considering he was the one to drag Victor out of his isolation, but it doesn’t change the fact that Victor’s thoughts have been nearly singularly consumed by Love since the day they met. The few moments he hasn’t been thinking about Love he’s spent thinking about things he thought he locked away a long time ago.

Memories kept in the recesses of his mind, memories of loved ones that were once too painful to look at. Now he thinks of his mother’s patient smile while she braided his hair in the mornings and the sharp ache that would usually throb right underneath his heart has dulled, softened with fondness and warmth.

“I suppose I don’t have much to say,” Love hums, finally turning his head away from the quiet scenes of the outside and towards Victor who glances at him at the same time, their gazes meeting halfway across the room and locking in place like shards of something broken that once fit perfectly together.

The familiarity Victor has with those dark eyes peering into his shouldn’t be there, but he feels as if he’d be able to perfectly describe every speck of brown from memory if asked. There is something between them, something he can’t quite see but knows is there, and it’s so frustrating to have to look at Love’s face and recognize the war waging behind his eyes but not being able to do anything about it.

What can he say?

“I’ll be leaving you soon.”

The something that lingered between them a moment before shatters, pieces that almost fit falling apart all over again.

He knows that, Victor knows that, he has always known that from the moment Love walked into his view, because nothing good ever lingers in his life.

Yet why does he still want to collapse on his knees like a sinner begging his god for salvation, and plead for Love to stay? To stay right here where Victor can reach him, him and not the cold, grand statues of Eros who are silent and don’t call his name with a bright smile or a lovely flush of cheeks or dark, dark eyes that glisten at the sight of him.

Why does his chest still burn?
Victor stares at Love’s face and feels his heart beating at a throb, as if pulsing with an open wound, and when he finds his voice again all he can ask is, “Will you play a song for me, before you go?”

Love’s eyes slowly widen, mouth parting slightly, but no sound leaves his lips. For a moment, he looks on the brink of falling apart right then and there and Victor is terrified that he won’t be able to catch him, when Love presses his lips together again.

His jaw clenches, unclenches, and he tips his head forward, not quite a nod but an acquiescence nonetheless. One last thing he will do for Victor, before he leaves.

Victor watches him carefully as he slips off the ledge, floorboards creaking underneath his weight the moment his boots meet the old wood.

“In return,” he speaks into the distance between them, “will you spend the day with me?”

“You needn’t ask,” Victor replies without hesitation, and suddenly feels much closer than it should be. “Every day I have left is yours to take.”

Love turns his face away from Victor, fingers briefly squeezing into fists, eyes shutting for a while. Victor says nothing, waiting patiently, and is rewarded when all the tension ebbs out of Love’s expression with a deep, weary exhale.

When Love opens his eyes again to look at Victor, it is with a smile as bright and heavy as gold.

“Shall we go, then?”

Vesta’s Gates burn like giant torches in broad daylight with flames reaching for the clouds, below it soldiers crashing into their enemies as if waves against the rocks. Where once there was a campsite there is now a battlefield, the sound of men screaming fading into a storm at sea.

Miles away on Enyo’s Road, a lone messenger on horseback rides to the capital as if Cerberus were on his heels.

On Victor’s insistence, Love takes his lyre—repaired and fine-tuned as if it were newly crafted—with him when they leave the inn. Christophe tosses them some bread for on the way, waving cheerfully as they head out into the streets.

“I’d like to see the marketplace, if that’s alright,” Love says, keeping close to him as the streets fill with people once more.

Now that the storm of yesterday has passed over and the sky is clear, Pheme has returned to its usual business. All that’s left from the rain are puddles, scattered over the roads, some muddied and some deep enough to reflect the soft white clouds above with the clarity of unevenly shaped mirrors.

“We haven’t had a chance to explore it yet, have we?” Victor muses as they head towards the temple, the large square before it already crowded with merchants and vendors, some with stalls and some without, the poorest ones having laid out their trinkets on large swaths of cloth or simple rugs.

Walking through a market proves to be somewhat of a challenge, though at least the stone tiles make it easier to navigate than the muddy roads leading to it. Victor feels Love grab at his cloak again as they maneuver slowly through the small throng of people, and he feels a bit lost on where to look; shouts for sales are coming from nearly every side, the smell of raw fish hanging in the air when they turn around a corner and the scent of spices overpowers it.
The strangest thing is perhaps seeing the blatant disparity in quality among the vendors. Some sell goods that were obviously either looted or crafted cheaply, while others have far more expensive but also more desirable wares.

A young girl with curly red hair, selling the most colorful cloths Victor has ever seen, tries waving him over with a blue silk scarf wrapped in her hand, intricately patterned with silver embroidery.

She winks when she catches his eye, holding out the scarf in her hand: “This is just your color, handsome! Two for the price of one, straight from the Arsurian Empire!”

“I’m out of coin, I’m afraid,” Victor responds as he passes her by while keeping one eye on Love whose head is whipping around in an effort to look at everything at once, dazzled.

He doesn’t listen to her response, gaze already drifting further ahead to a mousy young man selling parchments of drawn maps that look older than he is, then away again to a very tall, older woman aggressively selling bracelets by all but shoving them in the faces of whoever passes by.

Further ahead a fortune teller sits on the corner, reading cards to a young couple, across from her a white-robed priest stuck in an argument with an angry man about the nature of divine intervention so fierce that they’ve drawn a crowd, while a hooded figure in the stall next to them sells what appears to be perfume but when a whiff of it makes Victor’s head go fuzzy he decides to stay far away from it.

Ordinarily he might have spent more time looking at everything on sale, or even decided to stop and take in the spectacle of the bustling marketplace, but today he finds he isn’t in the mood for it. The scenes pass him by as if they were paintings, and he a casual observer in a gallery—there is an anxiety curled thick into his chest, his eyes constantly drifting off to Love, and he finds himself unable to care about the goings-on of the rest of the world.

“See anything that catches your eye?” Victor asks over his shoulder to Love, glancing at him and noting he hasn’t even taken a single bite of his bread.

Victor reaches out a hand with a sigh, and Love seems glad to be rid of it as he hands the bread over.

“Everything?” Love replies unhelpfully.

“I don’t think I have enough coin to buy out the entire village, unfortunately,” Victor says, managing to come off light-hearted enough in spite of his dreary temper.

“Don’t worry about that; you already bought me a gift, remember?”

His heart jumps when Love releases his cloak, the anxiety in his chest swelling into fear until Love comes into view on his left, walking next to him. It’s perhaps not the wisest course of action, but even so Victor subtly reaches over and grabs the sleeve of Love’s cloak. It’s not as reassuring as he hoped it would be, but it eases some of the tension in his shoulders.

Love gives him a look he can’t read from the corner of his eyes but says nothing—as soon as they’ve entered a busier section of the market he inches closer, their arms brushing and Victor lets out a quiet breath, easing his tight grip on Love’s sleeve until it slips out of his fingers.

“I want to buy you something, this time.”

Victor snorts, lips curling upwards briefly before he takes a bite from Love’s bread. “With whose coin?”
“I don’t need coin,” Love asserts confidently. “Go ahead, pick something you like.”

He raises his eyebrows at Love’s tone, but does not comment, deciding to humor him instead.

“Alright,” he agrees, turning towards the stalls and finding his eyes lingering on a woman selling various ribbons.

Victor always makes use of string to tie his hair with, accustomed to the simple style since his parents never had money for such luxuries as ribbons, but he always wanted some of his own. He could merely never justify using his coin for it, what with already spending so much on spices for his food even if he only has a few small jars of it. They are very expensive, but there are few things he hates more than bland food.

“One of those, for my hair,” he tells Love who nods and approaches the stall, Victor a step behind him as they manage to weave their way through the seemingly never-ending stream of people.

The woman selling the ribbons looks as ordinary as any other woman Victor has seen so far, seeming only a few years older than him at most. The people surrounding her stall are other women as well, mainly younger girls, looking at brighter colors.

“One of those, for my hair,” he tells Love who nods and approaches the stall, Victor a step behind him as they manage to weave their way through the seemingly never-ending stream of people.

The woman selling the ribbons looks as ordinary as any other woman Victor has seen so far, seeming only a few years older than him at most. The people surrounding her stall are other women as well, mainly younger girls, looking at brighter colors.

“Are you sure you just want one?” Love asks him as he peruses the many ribbons laid out before them.

“I’d rather not carry a bag of ribbons around me all day, if you don’t mind,” Victor responds humorously, looking over Love’s shoulder. It isn’t long before they draw the attention of the woman selling the ribbons.

“You are looking for your friend, I take it?” she says eagerly to Love, eyeing Victor’s hair before quickly plucking a light blue ribbon off the table, each end of it embroidered with a silver diamond-pattern. “How about this one? It would match his eyes very nicely.”

“Oh, I like that one,” Love agrees brightly, taking the blue ribbon, stretching it out to its full length while Victor wonders how he’s going to buy it without any pieces to speak of. “It looks a bit expensive, though.”

“It is one of my finest, straight from the capital,” the woman explains proudly. “Five pieces, ser.”

If Victor hadn’t been watching Love like a hawk he would’ve missed it the very moment it happens; the change is almost instant. As soon as the price has left the woman’s mouth Love’s unassuming posture shifts, shoulders straightening, a soft curl of his lips, eyes darkening as he leans over the table.

It’s not a glow, not exactly, but something comes over him and at once it is impossible to look anywhere else. It’s not so much his appearance itself, but what it inspires within others. Something about his gaze, the way he moves with the grace of a dancer, pulls at desire. His eyes tempt a look, his skin tempts a touch, his lips tempt imagination.

Fortunately, Victor isn’t the focus of Love’s seduction which allows him to be aware of the effect, and unlike the time Love tried it on him before, he finds himself being able to appreciate it far more.

The poor woman who is the target this time around looks utterly transfixed, as do the other buyers. Whatever clarity they possessed has left them completely, and somewhere Victor thinks this kind of power is actually rather terrifying.

It’s at that moment that Love drapes himself across the table and all horrible imaginings of how this
ability could be misused leave Victor immediately. He has to force himself to look away from the curve of Love’s back as he feels heat spreading up his neck and into his face, down the pit of his abdomen into lower regions. It is neither the time nor place, but even with Love not focusing on him he cannot help but feel affected.

Meanwhile Love reaches out with a hand, fingers tangling playfully with a lock of the woman’s blond hair, twirling it. “Before I buy this and leave again, has anyone told you that you look beautiful today? Your husband is a very lucky man.”

“I… I… thank you,” the woman manages breathlessly, eyes glued to Love’s face like a snake charmed by a song, starting to gradually inch closer as she leans towards him over the table as well.

“I hope you don’t mind an alternative means of payment?”

“N-no-not—” She flushes deeply, finally averting her gaze, eyes flitting about nervously before she swallows and tries again. “Not at all!”

“Wonderful,” Love says, voice low and smooth as he takes her hand in his, and the moment his lips meet the back of it the woman stares at him wide-eyed and looks as if her legs might give out at any moment.

Victor’s eyes are glued to Love’s lips on her skin and a horrible pang of sheer loathing flashes through him—not towards himself, as might have been the case in the past, but towards the woman.

When Love withdraws he takes the ribbon to hand it over to Victor, and the moment he releases the woman’s hand the spell is broken, the woman blinking twice before her brows furrow in confusion.

Love simply smiles back at her. “My thanks.”

Victor has only a heartbeat to look down at the ribbon in his hand before Love grabs his arm and starts pulling him along, leaving the entire stall behind them still in a state of bewilderment.

It takes some effort for him to clear his mind from the haze that came over it a moment ago, and though being impressed might be the more suitable reaction to what just happened, all he feels is something weighty in his gut, like a bag of stones.

“Well?” Love prompts him when they’re some distance away and Victor still hasn’t said anything yet. “Do you like the ribbon?”

Victor opens his mouth, then closes it again as he looks down at the bit of shiny cloth in his hand. “Yes, thank you.”

Love is quiet for a moment, and Victor can feel him staring. “You don’t sound pleased.”

“How often do you do that?” The question is out of him before he can stop himself, hand closing tightly around the ribbon. He feels—he shouldn’t, but there’s disappointment in him. Silly, of course, thinking that he might be special. Childish, to have felt envious at all.

“Rarely, but…” Love trails off when Victor puts a small inch between them as they leave the marketplace, continuing on the road leading outside of town towards the forest. “I did it for you.”

It is not his place, but he can’t help himself, and he can’t smother the ugliness taking root in his foolish heart. “Even so, I’d rather you not do it again; it draws too much attention.”

Hiding behind excuses, like the coward he is.
“I understand,” Love says after a short pause, and they continue the rest of their walk through the village in silence, though not an entirely comfortable one.

There are words unsaid hanging like weights in the air between them, though Victor can’t tell how many of them are his and how many are Love’s. It’s such a waste of the time they have left to be afraid of rejection or even dismissal, but he hasn’t felt so attached to anyone since Sara, and because the nature of his attachment is so different this time he finds himself too scared to tread unknown depths.

Glancing at Love’s profile from the corner of his eyes, Victor wonders if he’s in love, and finds strangely enough that he isn’t. What’s strange about it is that he feels as if he should be, but he knows hardly anything about Love beyond what he is.

He could not truly give his love to a stranger—and there it is again, that odd feeling that persists that Love isn’t a stranger at all. Victor sighs, looking on ahead and briefly distracted by the sight of the forest a short distance away.

Where the northern part of Pheme was guarded, this southern part seems to be forgotten, left in dirt and dust that trails off into a quiet, windy meadow. The structures of buildings are not so quaint here, rotted wood and filth left in the streets, beggars dwelling nearly every corner as thin, small children dressed in rags chase after a rat with sticks. The wealth of the marketplace does not reach these parts.

“I wish I could do something for them,” Love mutters beside him, and the statement strikes Victor as more than just odd.

“Can’t you?” He gives Love a questioning look. “All you’d have to do is whisper in the king’s ear, and all this could go away.”

“You’d want to replace a mortal tyrant with an immortal one?”

“I can think of far worse things than to be ruled by Love,” Victor says, surprised Love should think so of himself. From all that he’s seen, Love has been nothing but kind and considerate, fair-minded and sensitive to the suffering of others. He would much rather serve a god like that than the whims of a greedy human king.

Love shakes his head, smiling sadly. “The most treacherous thing about love is that it always means well.”

It seems Love is no longer speaking of just himself, which is a curious thing considering he claimed to be one with his element the first time they met, yet he’s always been oddly aware of his own individuality. Another question comes to mind that Victor is not sure of how to ask, but curiosity—as it so often does—wins over decorum.

“Were you always Love?”

Blunt even to his own ears, he nevertheless doesn’t take it back in the pause that follows, instead choosing to wait for a reply.

When they’ve neared the edge of Pheme and Love has yet to say anything, Victor thinks he probably won’t be getting an answer until they’ve wandered into grass and flowers and Love says, very quietly, “No.”

Victor carefully avoids trampling a bed of wild daisies as he considers his next response, finding that the answer doesn’t surprise him. Somewhere he always knew there was more to Love than his title.
“I was born as Yuuri.”

He looks up towards Love—Yuuri, who has his gaze aimed down at the ground as he pushes through the tall grass, and though he should be taken aback at the clarification given without any prompting, he finds instead he only has more questions.

“How did you become Love?”

“Through necessity,” Yuuri responds, mouth curving into a wry, self-mocking smile. “Or, what I thought to be necessity. It was never my intention, just an unintended consequence.”

Victor hums, nodding to himself. To anyone else this might have been a huge revelation, and truthfully it is, but he has had his suspicions for a while now. He wonders what Sara would say to this, if she knew.

“Where did you learn how to play string?”

Yuuri—and the name fits so easily, as if it were always meant to be there—turns his head to look at Victor with wide eyes, flustered at the sudden change in topic. “I, uh, when I was younger I…” He pauses, and furrows his brows. “I can’t quite remember, but I think I taught myself for a friend, a long time ago.”

“Any family?”

“Yes.” Yuuri averts his eyes again, turning towards the forest nearing closer with every step, his gaze faraway. “Though they’re long gone, now.”

“Why do you like the lyre more than the harp?”

“The harp is too soft.” Yuuri gives him a curious look. “Why all these questions?”

“I want to know more about you.”

“Before I leave.”

“Before you leave,” Victor agrees, ignoring the throb in his chest. “It’s why you’re answering these questions at all, isn’t it? Usually you’d be much more tight-lipped.”

Yuuri says nothing to that, fixing his eyes straight ahead as they approach the forest, down an old, narrow road between the trees, the sound of streaming water near. The scenery is more familiar to Victor than the busy streets of Pheme, and he feels at once completely at home with the absence of other people, surrounded by nothing but nature.

“Why did you choose me?” he asks as they approach a pebble-covered riverbank sloping down into shallow waters, the currents gentle compared to its deeper parts up where Victor’s cabin is. The question is another one he decides not to expect a reply to, even with Yuuri being surprisingly forthcoming today, instead looking around for a place to hang his clothes.

Yuuri finds a spot by a tree to settle with his lyre in his lap, facing the length of the river as Victor approaches the edge and sets down his bag of clothes beside him, kicking off his boots to the side and pulling off his socks, undoing the laces on his cloak and letting it drop to the ground.

Just as Victor grabs the edges of his shirt and means to pull it off, he hears Yuuri speak behind him, voice barely above a mutter.
“I don’t know.”

The urge to turn around and look at him is a strong one, but Victor pushes it aside as he yanks his shirt off his head, tossing it to the side where his boots and socks lay on the cold pebbles pressing uncomfortably into the skin of his feet. A soft breeze brushes through the trees and against his back, making him shudder lightly as he hears Yuuri pluck a string, seeming to test out his new instrument.

“You’re a strange one,” Victor decides as his fingers pause only for a moment on the hem of his trousers, acutely aware of Yuuri’s presence behind him, but knowing better than to think he would leer. Taking a deep breath, he quickly yanks down the pants and his undergarments with it, not wasting a moment to step into the water, shoulders pulling up and spine arching reflexively from the cold touch.

“You’re far stranger than I am,” Yuuri comments quietly behind him, plucking another string of a higher note, letting it ring through the air. “I can’t imagine anyone else taking it all in stride like you do.”

Victor, still holding his breath as he slowly ventures into the deeper parts of the river until the water reaches his hips, smiles lightly and exhales. “It helps that you’re more human than you are god.”

“Is that a good thing?”

He submerges himself in a single dip, feeling refreshed when he emerges again with a gasp, drifting in the slow current below the top of his shoulders, his hair stretched out and floating over the surface of the water around him.

Risking a glance towards Yuuri, who is staring down at his lyre as he plucks its strings in an incoherent melody, Victor feels completely at ease where he expected to feel tense, maybe even uncomfortable.

“Is it blasphemy if I say yes?”

Yuuri’s fingers pause on the strings and he chuckles, a smile pulling at Victor’s lips as he turns away again and floats onto his back, staring up at the blue sky peeking out from between the trees above, the sun shining into his eyes so he closes them.

“Yuuri,” he calls, taking care not to let the river take him too far away, “will you play something for me?”

“What do you want to hear?” Yuuri calls back.

Victor pauses to think, but only for a heartbeat. “Play me your favorite song.”

He hears nothing in reply, not until the first strings are pulled and the sounds of the forest are at once drowned out by the melody. The notes ripple across the surface of the water like raindrops, and there is something unspeakably sad about the sound, but more than that, something incredibly familiar.

Victor knows this song. When or where he’s heard it before, he’s not sure—maybe it was in a dream—but he knows it by heart. He listens for a while longer, trying to remember, but whenever he thinks he has the memory it slips through his fingers again, carried away in the river.

Turning back towards Yuuri, he decides to watch him play instead, and the moment he does Yuuri glances up at him and their eyes lock, fingers freezing on the strings.

The silence is sudden and harsh, the absence of the music leaving a gaping hole in the air filled by
something else, and Yuuri looks at him as if caught in a trance. Victor cannot help but look back, wondering what it is that Yuuri is seeing in him when the wind blows and he shivers once more, which seems to startle Yuuri out of his staring.

“Sorry,” he mumbles as he quickly looks away, hands clenching around the arms of his lyre.

Victor doesn’t reply as he turns his attention to his hair, the cold of the water the only thing preventing him from heating up which he is rather grateful for.

“Have you played that song before?” he asks to ease the air as he tries combing his fingers through his hair, but it does nothing for his acute awareness of his own nudity, the vulnerability tensing in his spine. “In the inn, maybe?”

“You recognize it?”

“I do,” Victor says, struggling with a particularly stubborn knot and wishing he’d taken his comb with him. “It’s rather melancholy.”

“It’s not a happy song,” Yuuri confirms softly, back to plucking random strings again that sound like they could almost be a melody if arranged just a little bit differently. He seems unfocused.

“I wish I could play an instrument,” Victor laments with a sigh, if only to distract himself from that tune that keeps repeating in his head now. The quiet is uneasy, so he quickly changes the subject again to an even more painful one, hopefully painful enough to do away with the discomfort. “Say, since you’ve decided to leave so soon, I take it you believe I’ve found love?”

“Not yet,” Yuuri says, the words carefully measured out, “but you could if you wanted to.”

“You mean Mila.” Victor yanks at knot, ignoring the pain on his scalp as he finally manages to split it apart.

“It doesn’t have to be her, but she likes you already,” Yuuri explains, his voice as neutral as possible. “All you ever needed was to get out into society. Someone like you will never have trouble finding love, Victor.”

“Not the kind of love I want.”

The air holds his breath.

“What kind of love is that?”

Yours.

Victor stares down at the ripples in the water around him, dipping his hair into it again and threading his fingers through it until he has combed it out to satisfaction, grateful that his silence is being ignored. “Can you hand me something to dry off with?”

As he flips his hair back over his shoulder and turns towards Yuuri he finds him already standing at the edge of the riverbank, holding out a towel. Victor stills in the water, noting that Yuuri isn’t looking away or averting his gaze, instead staring directly at him.

He could ask for him to turn away, but he doesn’t. Instead he brushes his hair behind his ears, inhaling a soundless breath as he holds Yuuri’s stare and rises from the water, rivulets finding their paths down the dips and curves of his body and joining the river again where it pools right below his waist.
Yuuri does not look away from his face and Victor’s heart hammers in his chest as he takes a step forward, pushing through the soft current as it sinks down his hips, then his thighs and then his knees until he stands right in front of Yuuri ankle-deep.

Still, Yuuri does not look away from his face—not until Victor reaches out for the towel, and the moment his fingers grip the fabric he finds Yuuri’s gaze wandering down his face to his neck and chest and his heart skips, feeling it as if it were not a gaze at all but the touch of fingers instead.

He watches the dark eyes as they inch further down, Yuuri’s look grazing over his abdomen before dipping below his hips and setting his blood aflame when he sees soft lips part and hears a sharp inhale.

Victor has never been looked at like this, not by anyone, and it feels almost too intimate, too much until Yuuri suddenly yanks the towel out of his hands and throws it over his head. Victor stares with his heartbeat pounding in his ears as Yuuri leans in and starts drying his hair for him, just an inch between them.

“You’ll catch a cold if you don’t dry off quickly,” Yuuri murmurs and Victor watches his lips form the words, spotting a glimpse of pink tongue and feeling a soft breath on his cheek, every muscle in his body pulled taut like a statue. He dares not move, not trusting himself to.

When his hair isn’t dripping anymore Yuuri leaves the towel hanging down Victor’s shoulders and pulls away, Victor almost following him before he catches himself.

The thought that this is wrong occurs to him, and he almost confuses it with the familiar self-loathing until he realizes that this is wrong, but for another reason entirely.

He is a man, and Yuuri is a god.

One who will be leaving soon.

The guards at Pheme’s gates watch the horizon as they always do, though they do not expect to see anything out of the ordinary. It is a rather calm day, not many visitors asking to be let through to the village and no rumors of bandits to speak of.

It’s because of that same calm that they think nothing of it when they see a figure approaching on horseback, the sun at its highest point in the sky behind him.

Not until they realize how fast he’s going.

“You know the villagers say the river is cursed?” Victor remarks casually as they trek back through the meadow. “Whoever wanders near often meets their end, or so I was told. I must be extraordinarily lucky not to have drowned just now.”

“It is a superstition, nothing more,” Yuuri replies. “No god would be petty or foolish enough to curse any part of Earth, especially not that river.”

“You mean it is a literal part of her?”

“She is earth, and earth is her,” he says. “It would be like someone leaving a burn on your left hand, or your cheek.”

“I suppose it makes sense when you put it that way,” Victor muses. “As much as gods can make
sense, anyway.”

Yuuri breathes a laugh, though it sounds slightly forced. From the moment they left the river it seems as if his spirits are being drained out of him with every step, and Victor doesn’t know what to say, what he can say, so he blurts out the one thing he must ask before the chance passes him by forever:

“What have you ever been in love before?”

It brings Victor some measure of satisfaction to hear Yuuri sputter and stammer beside him, flailing for a response. “I don’t—why would you ask that?”

“I haven’t,” Victor continues. “Not once, but I’d like to be, some day.”

Yuuri says nothing and they keep walking, the sound of their footsteps and the wind brushing through the tall grass of the meadow around them filling the silence. Victor wishes he had the courage to turn and face Yuuri, to do something about this knot tangled in his heart, but the coward in him refuses.

“You will,” Yuuri says when they’ve neared the edge of the meadow, the sun already beginning its descent downwards above them.

Victor reaches back to touch his ponytail, the ribbon Yuuri gave him earlier like lead in his hair. “But not with you.”

The silence tenses, and when Yuuri releases it with a sigh it sounds so, so weary, like a gust of wind dwelling in a cavern, hollow and empty.

“No,” he says softly as they tread onto the dirt road, leaving the meadow behind them and stepping foot into the poorer parts of Pheme again. “Not with me.”

His feet halt in the middle of the road. Every step forward is another step closer to the moment Yuuri will leave him, and Victor can’t bring himself to walk any farther.

“Not even for a day?” he asks, voice unsteady as he glances up at Yuuri who has walked a few steps further ahead of him, back turned, head bowed slightly.

Victor hears a choked laugh. “Are you that eager to be heartbroken?”

“It wouldn’t be the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“I can’t.” Yuuri turns around to face him and Victor’s chest tightens at the shine of tears welling in dark eyes, barely held back as he shakes his head. “I can’t, I can’t.”

He already knew the answer, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“I can’t,” Yuuri repeats, “but I want to.”

His breath hitches in his throat and for once, Victor finds himself at a complete loss, mind filling until it feels ready to burst. Does that mean, does he dare hope, is Yuuri—

“Victor!”

Mila’s voice breaks through the moment like the sharp ring of a bell, and Victor whips his head around and spots her at the end of the street, but instead of an easygoing smile as he expected her brows are set in a frown and she has a grave look on her face, covered from head to toe in armor.
She’s walking right towards him with quick steps, but before Victor can respond to her, he feels a touch on his shoulder and turns to Yuuri, who looks at him with sad eyes.

“We have to leave by nightfall,” he says, and Victor frowns in confusion.

“Why?”

“Victor, there you are!” Mila cuts in again, having reached him now and looking slightly out of breath, if not harried.

“Mila.” It puts him on edge, a foreboding feeling tingling up his spine. “What’s going on?”

She takes a deep breath, pushing her hair out of her face before straightening her shoulders and taking on the familiar posture of a soldier, hands folded behind her back.

“We’ve received a message from the border camp,” she says, and Victor’s blood runs cold.

“What did it say?”

She tenses, her youth pressing through the worried wrinkle between her brows, her mouth set in a firm line but her wavering eyes betraying a fear he knows very well.

“We’re going to war.”

Chapter End Notes

The song Yuuri played.
He still remembers the first time he killed.

It was nothing so dramatic as single combat and a sword to the gut. War does not allow heroism, not when your life is on the line and the enemy on the other side is just as human as you.

Victor’s first kill was by arrow, from a long distance as the army across from them began to advance, marching through a quiet meadow with the sun high in the sky, flowers crushed underneath their boots. His arrow was among one of many; he can’t even be certain he hit someone the first time, but he’s sure he did either the second or the third.

He did not even see a face. It felt so simple, to nock an arrow, aim and release. Almost like hitting practice dummies, only these were moving and screaming across the field.

When his arrow hit its target, there was one man less to scream.

“It is but a day’s journey,” Victor says as he walks with Mila at a brisk pace. The streets are emptier than usual, and there are more guards around than he remembers seeing just an hour ago. Yuuri trails behind them, once more visible only to his eye. “I’ll procure a horse, gather my belongings and set out to the border camp. I know the route by heart.”

“Then we’ll meet you there.” Mila’s eyes are fixed ahead of her, and she says nothing else. Her tension is almost palpable; she has never seen a war, too young to have suffered the last one. Likely all she has faced thus far are common bandits and thieves, not the impossible chaos of a thousand soldiers crashing into each other in a cacophony of screams—some cries for war, and some the final throes of dying men.

Nothing Victor can say will truly prepare her for it, the platitudes resting on his tongue too heavy to lift.

“Where are you from, Mila?” he asks instead, and she glances at him from the corner of her eyes, brows twitching upwards briefly.

“Eirene,” she says, the straight line of her shoulders relaxing slightly, and Victor finds himself somewhat surprised.

This is the first time he has met anyone from the capital. Even when he was in the army he didn’t encounter a single soldier from Hestia’s crown city; it was too far removed from the war, most of the recruits hailing from regions near the northern border where the situation was quickly becoming dire.

Eirene’s citizens, on the other hand, were happy to remain in their delusions of peace.

“How did you end up joining the army?”

“It was either that or living the rest of my life in the Tower.”

Victor stares at her, eyes widening minutely. “You are a—”

“Sorcerer,” she responds stiffly when he pauses, unsure of whether to use the word. “One of the few permitted to leave.”

Victor has little to say to that, seeing as how he knows next to nothing about the rare few people
capable of casting magic, aside from the fact that they all reside in Eirene. “I did not think sorcerers wore armor.”

“It is far less draining than maintaining a barrier,” Mila replies practically. “Though I do so prefer my dress.”

“I see why you’d choose to leave, then; a quiet scholar’s life doesn’t suit you.”

“Neither does a soldier’s.”


She doesn’t reply immediately, averting her gaze to look out towards the inn that has just come into view on the corner of the street. They pass by three more shops before she takes a deep breath and finally says, “Did you know that the highest floors of the Tower all have barred windows?”

Victor does not look at her again as the implication hangs in the air, worrying that any glance might be taken for pity or condescension, knowing full well how it is to be on the receiving end of such looks. Instead they settle for silence, and while not an entirely comfortable one, it is tolerable enough to last them until they reach the inn.

“I’ll round up my boys and we’ll go at once,” she says to him by the entrance, loud sounds of chatter and shouting from the inn pressing through the thin wooden walls. “With luck, we’ll meet you at the main camp.”

“We will,” Victor says, staring at Mila’s face and wondering if he looked as young as she does the day he first went to war. “Take care, Mila.”

She manages to pull a shaky smile into her lips, putting her hand on his upper arm. “You too.”

Victor watches her turn away and leave, rushed footsteps heading towards the stables at the edge of town, her back retreating from his view and disappearing around a corner. When he turns back towards the entrance of the inn he finds Yuuri standing beside the double doors, lyre clutched under his arm, lips thinned and brows furrowed.

“Are you worried for me?” Victor does not look at him as he opens the door and goes inside, Yuuri trailing behind him. “Don’t be; I didn’t survive the last war just to roll over and die in this one.”

“Sometimes it’s not up to you,” Yuuri replies, voice strained while they go up the stairs, neither of them even glancing at the tavern packed with men yelling and riling each other up—most of them will be called on to enlist eventually. It reminds him of the rallying cries during a battle, the smoke of fire thick in his eyes and the horrid stench of corpses spread over the field like mist.

Victor still remembers the first time he killed with a sword, the blood on his fingers warm, the sound of war a hollow echo in his ears.

The man he killed had brown eyes, darker than earth.

After he survived that battle, he sat on the edge of the camp with his bloodied hands still holding onto his bloodied sword, shaking in the cold. He could feel the looks of his fellow soldiers on the back of his neck as he had declined their invitations to join them in celebrating the victory, and wondered if they thought him weak.

When much of the night had passed and most had already gone to sleep, an older man approached—Victor did not notice it then, but had he turned around and glimpsed at the man’s armor he would
have recognized him as his general.

The general said nothing at first, merely sat down next to him and passed him a bit of cloth.

Victor stared at it, hanging limply in his hand.

“It’ll rust if you don’t clean it,” the general spoke at length, pointing at the lower end of his blade still smeared in red. “A rusted sword will not last long in battle.”

When the silence continued he sighed, patting Victor’s shoulder and rose again to leave, gone as quickly as he came.

It was not until many battles later that Victor realized the general’s advice rang true for more than just his sword. It would not be the first time the general guided him—in truth it is in large part because of him that Victor survived at all—but it is the one instance he remembers the most.

“You’re not really going, are you?”

Victor frowns, throwing a glance at Yuuri over his shoulder as he pushes the door to his room open, stepping inside and beginning to gather all his belongings on his bed, starting with the clothes.

“Of course I’m going.” He feels Yuuri’s eyes follow him as he moves about the room, grabbing a shirt that somehow ended up on the ground.

“Why?”

“It is my duty to my country,” he answers without second thought, trying to fold the shirt as small as he can. He doesn’t realize he’s clenching his jaw until the pressure turns into a dull pain, exhaling a breath and easing the muscle.

“The same country that would see you hanged?”

Victor’s hands pause and hang in the air for a heartbeat, the stillness total before his fingers come back to life as he puts the folded shirt aside on the bed and yanks his bag open, eyes pinned on the task at hand. “I have to do this.”

He hears a footstep. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“I’m not going to stand by and watch the enemy overrun my home,” he replies as calmly as he can, his tone suppressed like a cork on a bottle as he stuffs the shirt inside the bag, then turns to a pair of trousers next.

“But why do you have to go?” He sees Yuuri shift in the corner of his eyes, standing by the desk and taking another step towards him. With every word, the bottle cracks. “Why can’t you just let the rest of them deal with it? The army won’t miss one man, no matter how skilled you are. Why do you have to—”

“I can’t do anything else!”

His trousers are crumpled in his hands that are squeezed around it in a white-knuckled grip, and Yuuri stares at him with wide eyes as the shout dies in the silence, leaving only the thrum of his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

As if he wants to go.

As if he wants to thicken the blood on his hands.
Victor turns away from him, paying no mind to his trembling fingers and the nausea twisting his stomach as he returns to folding his pants. He gives up halfway through, letting the trousers fall and settling down next to them on the bed with a sigh.

The quiet in the room feels stifling, and he feels the distance between them building, for as human as Yuuri is, it cannot help him understand what’s in Victor’s head, what’s in his heart, not without Victor explaining it to him.

This has been his entire life; ever since he was a child he was expected to be this. How can he falter now? Even with his father gone Victor feels the weight of that expectation chained to his ankles, dragging behind him with every step, and he does not know how to cut free.

But how does he put that feeling into words? That oppressive something burrowed in his chest, watching with dark eyes, sneering at every misstep, every failure—how does he explain that?

After a pause that has felt far too long the need to be understood presses into his tongue and he figures that he might as well attempt it; to have never tried would be a far greater regret than to have tried and failed.

Yuuri will be leaving him soon, after all.

“This is the only thing I can do,” he says, speaking an unspoken insecurity that has plagued him ever since he first held a sword, “the only thing I’m good at.”

“That’s not true.” Yuuri’s voice cracks on the last word like glass shards underneath the bottom of his feet, splinters digging into his skin. “You can’t believe that.”

“I don’t know anything else,” Victor continues, staring at his half-folded trousers and feeling like all the life has just drained out of his limbs, trying to ignore the glint off his sword’s sheath, leaned against the wall by the window. “My father served as a soldier, as did his father before him and his father as well. War runs in my family’s blood.”

“You don’t have to follow in their footsteps, Victor.”

The half-smothered chuckle that escapes him sounds desperate and empty, a parody of the real thing.

“What else would you have me do?” he mocks without bite, too tired to even shake his head. “Get married to some girl I barely know, have children I’ll resent, and grow old only to end up alone again anyway? I can’t lead that kind of life, Yuuri, I won’t. I would rather die—”

“Don’t say that!”

The floorboards creak and Victor still does not look at Yuuri, but he sees him from his peripheral vision standing at the end of the bed, fists balled by his sides.

He could take it back, he could say nothing and let it pass, but he doesn’t want to lie to Yuuri. Instead he sucks in a deep breath, looking up towards the window across from him and the rich golden light falling through it, wondering how many sunsets he has left as he continues.

“I would rather die on the battlefield tomorrow,” he says, “than live a hundred lifetimes filled with regret.”

Yuuri paces around the bed, boots sharp against the old wooden floor as he comes to stand in front of Victor and sinks down on his knees before him. Victor can’t avert his gaze from the dark eyes filling up his sight—he has seen them shed tears, he has seen them light up and he has seen them dim
down.

This is the first time he sees them burn.

“You’re not going to die,” Yuuri says to him, grabbing both his hands, warm skin a balm to his cold fingers. “I won’t let you.”

Had it been someone else telling Victor this he would’ve outright laughed, but what Yuuri is saying is no jest; he is a god, and were he to protect him, Victor is certain no mortal would ever be able to touch him.

“No.”

Yuuri’s mouth slackens, brows arching high. “I—I don’t… no?”

“No,” Victor repeats, sternly. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Yuuri’s grip on his hands tightens. “If it saves your life—”

“Why me?”

Yuuri averts his gaze, and Victor presses on.

“Why not stop the war altogether? Why not end all the misery in the world? How can you protect me and then stand by and watch everyone else suffer when you have the power to save them all?”

“It’s not the same thing—”

“You’re a hypocrite.”

It’s a harsh thing to say, but necessary. Victor can’t let Yuuri compromise himself just for his sake. Sara once told him that the gods were above morality as humanity knows it, but Yuuri isn’t, because he does understand, and he should know better.

“I am,” Yuuri answers quietly, staring down at their hands still clinging together on Victor’s lap.

“I know I’ve asked you this many times before,” Victor continues, softer this time, “but you’ve never had a clear answer and I need to know—why me and not someone else?”

Yuuri lifts his head to look up at him, the sunlight falling over the crown of his head, the shadows in his face reminding Victor of the first time they met. Slowly, Yuuri pulls his mouth into a watery smile that wobbles on his lips, holding onto Victor’s hands as if they were the only things grounding him to earth.

“Because you have my heart,” he says and the words feel slightly surreal, as if Victor were hearing them through a long-forgotten dream while Yuuri pulls his hand up, kissing the space between his knuckles and whispering against the skin, “right in the palm of your hand.”

Victor’s lips move in an effort to speak but no sound makes it past his throat, and he can scarcely believe that what he has just heard could possibly be true. When he made his own feelings clear earlier he did so with the assumption that they would never be reciprocated. How could they? He is just a man, and Yuuri is so much more.

And yet.

Yuuri looks back up to Victor’s face and his expression softens in fondness. “Are you really that
surprised?"

Victor does not know what to say, but he tries. “Does this mean that we—”

“No,” Yuuri says quickly, brows twitching into a furrow, lips twisting and he almost looks in pain. “We can’t.”

“You’re still going to leave?”

“I have to.”

Victor part his lips, sucking in a shaky breath. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Victor—”

“If you’re going to leave either way, then why tell me that at all?” he demands, his voice rising with every word, and he can feel his eyes starting to sting, vision growing blurry. “I would have been happier had I never known! How am I supposed to throw my life away now when there’s—”

He chokes on the words and turns his face away, wishing he’d let his hair down so his bangs could’ve hidden the tears sliding down his face. When Yuuri’s hand reaches up and his fingers wipe at the wet trail running down Victor does not resist, leaning against it when the palm cups his cheek and squeezes his eyes shut.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have said anything, but…” He hears Yuuri sigh, feels it brush over the wrist of his other hand. “I wanted you to understand that I would do almost anything for you, if it meant keeping you safe. When it comes to you, I lose sight of what is right and wrong. It used to be easier when I was… when I was more human, but I’ve lived for so long and now it all seems so insignificant.”

Victor opens his eyes again, wetness clinging to his lashes as he looks down at Yuuri and finds him with his head bowed. He doesn’t trust himself to speak—right now all he wants is to turn away from the rest of the world and hide his eyes in the crook of Yuuri’s neck, forget the war and everyone else. But he can’t. They can’t.

“It is better that I leave in the end,” Yuuri continues quietly. “If I were to love you any more than I do now, I would turn into a monster.”

“You could never—”

“I could,” he says, looking up at Victor and all softness in his face is gone; left are the eyes of a god who could make armies tremble at a mere whim. “I would, for you.”

Victor does not know what to do, what he can say, if there even is anything left to say. It still doesn’t feel real, not completely, but maybe part of him had always known on some level there had to be more to Yuuri picking him beyond pity or sympathy.

But what can the god of love possibly see in him, beyond the broken, battered man that he is?

“Will I…” Victor hesitates, afraid of the answer. “Will I ever see you again, once you leave?”

Yuuri is silent for a moment, before he stands up again, his fingers slipping out of Victor’s.

Distance.

“I don’t know.”
“Yuuri—”

“I need some air.”

Victor reaches out to grab his hand, lips parting to form his name, but then Yuuri is gone.

And all his fingers catch is dust.

Yuuri forgot how much it hurt to do the right thing sometimes, and the reminder is no less painful. Even with the weight of the truth off his chest it still burns, both for him and for Victor. Perhaps if he had not been human he would not suffer as he does, but then neither would he have fallen in love. Somehow that seems a far worse fate.

Beyond the hurt, though, there is something far more frustrating. It's a feeling of complete helplessness; he doesn’t know why this is happening, why War would go to these lengths just so Yuuri would return to his isolation. He knows that they haven't always gotten along, as when War was first born Yuuri did everything in his power to stop him, to spare humanity the misery, but in the end nature took its course. He never blamed War for it, as he couldn’t help what he was.

War himself never seemed overly fond of Yuuri either, though in spite of their tense first meeting he seemed to tolerate him more and more as time passed. It doesn’t make sense for him to go on what is essentially a rampage in the human world and break the most important rule without any heed. After all, War was always combative and ruthless, but he was never one for tormenting others without good reason.

Yuuri leans his back against the wall and takes a deep breath. He has found a quiet spot in a small alley beside the inn, and though the sound of chatter, laughter and music is still loud as ever it is dimmed through the walls, quiet enough for him to pretend he is far away from it. He can still feel the skin of Victor's hand against his lips, and it aches.

Why would War go this far to tear them apart?

“Perhaps you ought to ask him that.”

Yuuri stills completely, and he does not need to look to know, feeling the air shift and twist as a pitch-black shadow falls over the alleyway like mist.

Death is here.
memories

When Yuuri was a child he would always wonder how Earth could be in two places at once. When he finally worked up the courage to ask her, as he was afraid that it might be a rude question, Earth merely laughed, lifting him up to her crystal throne so he could sit on her lap and started weaving flowers into his hair as she explained it to him.

“It’s not so different from how you work, dearest,” she said, poking him in the side and making him squirm with a laugh. “Your body does not move on its own; your mind controls it. Similarly, this form is my mind, while the planet itself is my body.”

It wasn’t until much later that Yuuri discovered the old gods did not truly need such manifestations of their minds to co-exist, as they did not interact with each other the way humans did. Earth’s human shape was purely for his benefit, though it is unique, just as the planet itself is unique.

She ended up becoming oddly attached to it in the end, constantly adjusting bits and pieces of it to suit her daily whims, though they were often small changes. Usually it would be the mole under her left eye she fussed over the most, and if not that then the length of her eyelashes, the shape of her knees or the size of her feet.

Even the human gods, born from human wishes, have bodies unique to themselves. It wasn’t always that way; Art used to dwell in paintings, Knowledge would rest in the pages of books lined in ancient libraries, and Courage would often appear where you least expected it. But ever since gods and men were separated, that changed. They were ripped from their world and thrust into a limbo, an in-between, and so they had no other choice but to take shape.

Love never encountered this problem because he was born with his body, but Charity, for example—one the open door offering shelter to the poor—chose his shape through fancy, much like picking out clothes from a dresser.

Death is different.

It is not a planet nor a star, not a valley nor a river, not a mountain and not a lake. It was not born from human concepts or wishes, and might very well be the oldest god in existence. More accurately, Death is a state of being, inescapable and inevitable for all things, from the smallest ant to the largest star.

As such, it does not have a form unique to itself.

Instead, it steals the faces of corpses.

When Yuuri hears the voice and turns his head to look at the figure standing at the end of the darkened alleyway, he knows in his mind that what he’s seeing is nothing more than a mask, but the name tumbles out of his mouth anyway.

“Mari?”

She looks much older than he remembers her, in her late twenties at the very least, but he could never mistake the shape of those eyes or the line of her mouth. He only knew her for a little while as a child before Earth took him away, and seeing her standing there a fully-grown woman is more painful than he could have ever anticipated.

She died so young.
The centuries are weights suddenly dropped down on top of his shoulders, wearing down his bones. He closes his eyes, steeling himself as best he can before he meets her stare a second time. The words grate over his tongue when he speaks:

“That’s a tasteless form to take, don’t you think?”

“Is it?” Death says, tilting Mari’s head, and her voice lacks any inflection, nothing more than a tool to be used. “I think it rather effective, myself.”

It does not echo against the walls, dying in the silent shadows stretched between them the moment the words leave her lips. Yuuri aches, and wishes that he knew what she looked like with life in her eyes.

“Cruelty isn’t in your nature.”

“As you well know I am not very bothered with what constitutes cruelty, or sympathy for that matter.” Death takes a step forward, and Yuuri does his best to keep still against the wall, the bricks uncommonly cold against his back. “I merely assumed it would be the best way to get your attention, which it did.”

“Job well done.” Yuuri pushes off the stone a moment later, steadying himself before finally turning to face Death pulling on Mari’s strings.

The gaze in her eyes is empty, and where there should be a person there is nothing. A void.

What was she like before she died?

Yuuri grits his teeth through the stab in his chest, inhaling quietly through his nose and exhaling sharply through his mouth before speaking again, hoping his voice holds. “What do you want?”

Death hums through her mouth, through her teeth, head tilting ever so slowly as he draws a mockery of a smile on her face. “Only to offer my counsel, as it seems this situation has started to spiral out of control.”

“Weren’t you the one who told War where I was and what I was doing?” Yuuri replies sharply. “Why should I trust you?”

“It was not as if I guided him to you,” Death says tonelessly, the smile gone. “He came to me asking for your whereabouts, that is all. I did not see a point in lying.”

“So now you’re here to, what, fix things?”

“Oh, no.” Death sounds a laugh through Mari’s throat, and Yuuri’s stomach churns. “I have no dog in this fight; eventually you will all cross the river. Whether today or tomorrow does not matter much to me. I can wait.”

A shudder ripples down his spine and Yuuri shifts his feet uncomfortably, barely suppressing the urge to take a step back. Being reminded of his own death even if it might be centuries away is not pleasant for someone so used to his immortality.

“Then what are you doing here?” he asks instead, trying to keep his discomfort from leaking into his expression. As neutral as Death claims to be, it still hungers. “Why tell me to talk to War? Would he listen?”

“Doubtful,” Death admits. “Once he gets started he’s hard to stop, but you may as well try if you
really want to know what’s going on in that head of his. I’m here just to see how Victor is doing.”

Yuuri tenses, and Death shakes Mari’s head.

“Not to worry, it’s not his time yet; I merely have an interest in keeping track of him,” Death explains simply, eyes shifting over towards the windows of the inn, to Victor’s room. “Call it a pastime of mine.”

“You’ll have to excuse me if I find that hard to believe,” Yuuri says, tone just short of being a sneer. “I’ve never seen you interested in anything but harvesting souls.”

“Victor is a special case.” Death shifts Mari’s eyes back to him, staring at him for a long moment in a silence that only seems to grow heavier the longer it goes on, but Yuuri is not keen on breaking it.

Still, Death keeps Mari’s gaze locked, as if expecting him to say something. When he doesn’t, it eventually draws an amused sigh out of Mari’s lips. “Memory is a very fickle thing, isn’t it?”

“Memory?” Yuuri blinks, anxiety subsiding to make way for sheer confusion. “You mean to say that I forgot something?”

“Maybe you did, maybe you didn’t.”

Yuuri’s jaw tenses. “What did I forget?”

“I am not the one you should be asking that question, as I am afraid I cannot say anything more.”

Death smiles. “Besides, where would the fun be if I just gave the mystery away?”

“Enough of this!” Starting to feel his temper reach its edge, Yuuri cannot keep the scowl off his face, feeling very much like he’s being toyed with. “Is this some kind of game to you?”

Death does not respond, instead turning back to staring up at Victor’s window in silence. It seems distracted and Yuuri is about to snap at it some more when it says, “Do you like daffodils, Love?”

Yuuri slowly opens his mouth, then closes it again when he realizes he has no idea what to say to that. Death looks back at him and seems only to have become more entertained by his bewilderment, but then shakes Mari’s head again.

“Ah, well,” it says as it turns Mari’s back on him, “I’ve given you all the clues I can.”

“Wha—wait!”

It pauses, and in the pause, something shifts. The shadows slink back, and the air lightens. When Mari’s head turns, it is not Death that glances over her shoulder at him, and Yuuri loses his breath.

She speaks so softly that he almost misses it:

“Beware the light, Yuuri.” She turns her head away. “The High One watches.”

Before Yuuri can even think to reach for her, the shadow cast over the alleyway pulls away in an instant and, as if a curtain were pulled back on the world, sunlight hits his eyes, blinding him for just a heartbeat.

By the time he puts a hand up for shade and looks down the alleyway, Death—and Mari—are both gone.
Not long after Yuuri has left him Victor slips out of the suffocating silence in his bedroom and goes
down the stairs to fill the void with noise, not wanting to be alone with his own thoughts. He was
never one to ponder things alone; solitude has always been a detriment that way, depriving him of
the support of others. He was never very fond of himself.

Fortunately for him the tavern is not so crowded downstairs, though the time for supper is
approaching. He notices an empty spot at the very end of the bar, where Christophe wipes down the
counter and chats away at his visitors.

Victor does his best not to look like he’s desperate for the attention, but he must have failed in a
grandiose fashion because as soon as Christophe glances at his face and sees him approach he cuts
his conversation with his other customers short, frowning slightly.

At the very least he waits for Victor to take a seat before wordlessly taking an empty glass and filling
it with ale from one of the kegs, sliding it over to him.

Victor stares into the cup, fingers curling around it, and sighs.

“Something on your mind, Captain?”

“Don’t call me that,” Victor mumbles, lifting up the cup and knocking it back for one big gulp that
burns down his throat as it goes, leaving a horrible, bitter aftertaste in the back of his mouth. He
shakes it off, pursing his lips from the taste. “What do you put in your drinks? Horse piss?”

“Easy there.” Christophe gives him a lopsided grin, folding his arms and resting them on the counter.
“I don’t exactly have the coin to import the good stuff.”

“So it shows.” A brief silence puts a lull in the conversation, and as Victor stares in his cup he can’t
remember the last time he has done this, talking to a friend and airing out his heart. When he tries to
think of something to say, some way to continue the conversation, he realizes he doesn’t know how
to.

“Want to talk about it?”

He is in luck, then, that Christophe is still Christophe and his easygoing attitude about things like
these hasn’t changed. Instead of blowing off the conversation at Victor’s awkward pause or prying
into it uninvited, he merely looks at Victor expectantly, saying nothing more and asking nothing
more, prepared to just stand there and listen.

“I’m not sure…” Victor pauses, glancing at the other patrons who are two seats removed from him
and caught up in their own conversation before continuing. “I’m not sure talking about it will help.
There’s—”

He halts mid-sentence.

There’s nothing I can do.

If Yuuri so wished he could disappear without a word and Victor would never see him again. That
unearthly power he submits so easily to Victor’s will out of consideration, letting him make the
choice to walk to his death, is the same power that keeps him out of Victor’s reach.

“Is this about your friend?”

Victor’s fingers clench around his cup.
A moment later Christophe’s hand comes into view, prying his white-knuckled grip off the drink and setting it aside. Victor relaxes the muscles, exhaling, the breath trailing off into a weary laugh.

“I am not like you, Christophe,” he says, unable to meet Christophe’s gaze. “I’m not brave enough to be myself—it’s been so long, I think I might have even forgotten who that person is.”

He hears Christophe hum, sees him wipe down the edge of the counter with a cloth from the corner of his eyes. “On the contrary, I think you’re very brave.”

Victor finally does look up at Christophe, who is not looking back at him, absently staring out over the small crowd spread out over the tables behind him.

“But?”

“But,” Christophe agrees, lips twisting slightly in a smile, “I always found it curious how you could be so sympathetic towards me, yet never considered granting yourself the same courtesy.”

“That’s different, I’ve—”

“No, it’s not.”

Christophe meets his eyes now, and they stare at each other for a long moment before he sighs and leans against the counter with his arms folded. “Are you sure you want to spend what little time you have on this earth wallowing in self-loathing, or worse, fighting a pointless war?”

There it is, the point this whole conversation has been building towards. As good a listener as Christophe is, that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have his own agenda.

“Is it your turn to try and talk me out of enlisting?” Victor says coolly, brushing off his concern as he turns to slide off his seat. “I’m afraid nothing you can say will—”

A grip curls tightly around his skin, and he freezes on the stool.

“Victor,” Christophe says, hand firm on his forearm, “Lachesis does not allot us threads long enough to waste on doubt and misery. If there is a chance for you to be happy, take it. Don’t throw your life away for the dead.”

Victor’s spine tenses, his jaw clenching. “My father has nothing to do with this.”

It doesn’t sound convincing, not even to himself, and Christophe glances down at the sword strapped to his waist with furrowed brows.

The thrice-damned family heirloom that cost his father his life trying to protect it from bandits—Victor has its golden handle wrapped in cloth, but were he to draw it, the shine of silver would be strong enough to blind.

It’s been doubtlessly infused with some sort of magic seeing as how it does not rust nor chip away, the center of its blade inscribed with foreign curved symbols that run down to the very tip. The bloody thing has been in his family for countless generations, or so his father always told him. It was an honor to hold it, to wield it for one’s country, and to die for it.

It’s a weight he will never lose, even if it might be better had it been lost. What else is he to do with a blade, if not wield it? What else is he to do with his life, if not use it?

Victor’s fingers curl around its grip. “We can’t all chase love to the edge of the world as you did.”
“It wasn’t love I chased,” Christophe mutters, and Victor glances up at him in surprise, receiving a wry smile in return. “It was infatuation, but I was too young to know the difference.”

“What became of him?” Victor asks, lowering his voice, just in case.

“By the time I found him again I had already turned eighteen.” Christophe crosses his arms, gaze wandering down the countertop. “I had served in the army, grown enough to be his equal. He did not want an equal.”

Victor almost winces. He hoped, maybe naively, that at least Christophe would find happiness where he couldn’t, but he always had his suspicions ever since the first time Christophe told him about the man he fell in love with, bright-eyed and adoring.

The people in the cities have this freedom that the ones in villages do not. To mentor a boy often meant more than just teaching. If it was not seen as charity, then it was wholly self-serving, sometimes even both; young enough to be molded however you deemed fit, old enough to be taken as a lover.

As Christophe told him about the practice it appears to be something done primarily by wealthy and the powerful, the dominant. To be subjected to it meant nothing more than to be used, then discarded once you were no longer a boy but a man—submission is what they want, and men do not submit. To do otherwise is to disgrace not only yourself but your family as well.

“Then you have lost nothing,” Victor tells him earnestly, and Christophe smiles.

“I know, but thank you for saying so.” The sound of glass shattering interrupts, both of them glancing towards the right where a drunkard has slammed his cup too hard onto the table, his friends laughing at his angry curses.

Christophe huffs at the sight, shaking his head before turning back to Victor. “When will you be heading out?”

“Within the hour,” Victor replies. “With a horse, I’ll be able to make it back by nightfall, then leave for the main camp at dawn.”

“Then this is where we say our goodbyes, my friend.” Christophe extends his hand. “For now.”

Victor takes his hand, and squeezes it.

“For now.”

The temple is quiet, offerings plentiful as they fill the large bowls before the statue of Eros with various flowers and fruits. The hem of her pink skirt trails over the tiles as she passes by the sculpture that’s bathed in light falling through the windows high up the walls.

The small bits of dust floating around it glow like fireflies, and the temple is quiet save for the soft chatter of the priestesses in the corridors, one of the younger girls busy sweeping the floor with her broom, another replacing the burnt-out torches.

Sara smiles at them both and receives shy smiles in return when she passes, continuing onto the small wooden door at the very end of the main hall. She slips a small golden key out of the pocket of her robe, pushing it into the lock and twisting it to hear the door open with a soft click, turning the handle and opening it just enough for her to slip inside.
The inner sanctum wouldn’t seem much to anyone when described in words, but standing inside it is a different experience entirely. Perhaps it’s because the temple has no ceiling here and the sun is at its highest point in the sky, but the way the light falls on the bed of daffodils gives a golden glow to the entire room.

Sara locks the door behind her, then slowly descends the small steps leading down to the host of merry flowers, lowering herself before it on the stone tiles with her hands settling onto her lap once she sits down on both knees.

It’s strange but whenever she enters the room, all the noise from the outside seems to disappear. Only the wind, occasionally descending into the sanctum, creates a sound as it brushes against the walls and sweeps through the daffodils. The quiet air and the glow of the flowers seem serene at first sight, and she has nearly fallen asleep here on more than one occasion, but there’s something melancholic about the silence, the soft way the daffodils sway in the breeze.

She used to wonder why the high priestess before her seemed so convinced that these flowers were put here by their Lord Eros, but after a week of tending to them, she now knows why.

Closing her eyes, she listens, and waits.

For a long while there is nothing but the flutter of petals in the wind, playing with the edges of her long sleeves and hair, caressing her face before settling down again. But then, quietly, softly, it starts.

Whispers.

She does not always hear what they say, and even if she does she seldom hears enough to understand what they are talking about. Every high priestess before her has experienced them, convinced they are not meant for mortal ears. She does not know what they are, if they are spirits or gods, monsters or demons, dead or living.

All she knows is that sometimes, she can hear something. Usually it will be a word or two that she can barely make out and if she’s lucky it might even be half a sentence.

She expects today to be no different.

But it is.

“…here…”

She keeps listening.

“…I’m... here... don’t…”

She still keeps listening.

“...I’m right here…”

Her heart skips, and her eyes flutter open.

“Don’t leave!”

A gust of wind fiercer than she has ever witnessed within this room sweeps through the flowerbed, fallen petals of daffodils scattering in a whirlwind that reaches up to the very top of the temple.

Sara watches with wide eyes, a shudder wracking her body from head to toe as the echoed scream dies in the breeze, and the silence that resumes feels far greater than what it was before.
She looks down at the daffodils as the petals rain down from above, losing all their color when a cloud passes over and obscures the sun.

The grave is quiet once more.

“Are you ready to leave?”

Victor, running his fingers over the nose of his newly acquired brown mare, turns and finds Yuuri standing by the gates. The two guards standing watch are eyeing him warily as he has his hood thrown over his head, obscuring the upper half of his face, but otherwise do not seem to care much about their departure, courtesy of Victor’s coins.

When Victor finally opens his mouth to respond he finds that he can’t. There are so many things he wants to say that he finds his throat clogged with the words, and so he swallows them all back down and closes his mouth again, nodding silently.

Yuuri walks towards him, then past him without another look. Victor watches his retreating back before pulling gently on the reigns of his horse and guiding her along to follow, catching up to walk beside Yuuri quickly enough.

“You should go on ahead,” Yuuri says without looking at him, most of his face hidden behind the hood. “I’ll be there when you arrive.”

“Will you?”

The accusation slips from his mouth before he can help it, but he doesn’t regret the flinch in Yuuri’s posture that is followed by a quiet sigh, head bending down slightly and shoulders dipping.

“You have my word,” Yuuri murmurs, still not looking at him as they walk the dirt path back towards the forest in the distance.

Victor’s hands twitch, loaded with restlessness, the desire to do something, his tongue burdened with things he should have said much earlier, but all he can do is mount his horse, reigns tight in his hands.

“I’m keeping you to it,” he says through the tension in his jaw and the stiffness in his spine, leaving Yuuri behind in the dirt without another word as the hooves of his horse thunder down the road.

He does not glance over his shoulder until he has neared the edge of the forest, and when he does, Yuuri isn’t there anymore.

Victor’s cottage is quiet; abandoned for the moment, even with its owner on his way. Yuuri opens the front door with a loud creak, the sound startling something in the bushes that rustles and darts away a moment later. It used to be when he opened this door that Victor would be standing somewhere near the windows, struggling with his hair or with the laces on his boots, sometimes sharpening his knives or eating some fruit for breakfast. Now, Yuuri is greeted by emptiness. Silence.

He should have said something.

Stepping inside he breathes in the dust and the staleness of the air, walking over to the nearest chair and settling himself down with an exhale that softens his muscles until he is just a weary pile of bones, wishing he could stop thinking, stop feeling and just be.
He should have done something.

It wouldn’t have helped, but he wanted so much to hold him, kiss him, anything, the smallest caress would have even been enough and yet he withheld himself because it wouldn’t have been fair. It doesn’t stop his skin from yearning for touch, it doesn’t quell the flame in his chest, but he knows he did the right thing in not taking it further even if it was the hardest thing to do.

Yuuri sits and waits, drifting off into wondering whether it might not be better to sleep until Victor gets here when something yellow catches his eye, glowing on the windowsill. He blinks languidly, then sits up straighter in his chair, peering over.

A daffodil.

“Do you like daffodils, Love?”

His heart flutters and he bolts from the chair—two steps and he’s in front of the window, staring down at the flower laid there before the glass.

Daffodils.

A meadow, somewhere long ago.

“Memory is a very fickle thing, isn’t it?”

He forgot. He forgot, he forgot, he forgot, but what did he forget, what should he remember, what was it about daffodils?

There was a daffodil by the river where he met Victor. If Victor plucked it and put it here, then it should’ve withered days ago, and yet here it is, looking freshly picked.

A daffodil by the river.

The river.

Lethe.

Yuuri inhales sharply, and within that single breath he shifts, the cottage gone and his feet planted now at the edge of a riverbank, a woman in the water before him.

She stands in the middle of the stream, skin a pale shade of grey, her long white robes drifting in the slow current, looking up at him with a serene smile. There is nothing about her that marks her otherworldly except perhaps the unhealthy pallor of her complexion, but she looks otherwise entirely mortal even if she very much isn’t.

Oblivion herself, memories washed away in her streams—a creature one tends to forget, as is befitting to her name.

“Hello, Love,” she greets him warmly, as if an old friend, and Yuuri steels his resolve. “Are you here for your memories?”

Then she has them.

He forgot and she has them.

“I want them back,” Yuuri speaks in as clear and steady a voice as he can even while his heart pounds a drumbeat in his chest.
“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Oblivion replies gently, her long black hair hanging around her shoulders and arms like vines, absently curling a lock around her finger as she watches him, and he cannot even remember ever meeting her before but clearly they did in some fashion from the way she greeted him.

“Why not?” Yuuri demands, and it’s so frustrating because he knows that if he could just remember then everything would fit into place, because he’s certain there’s something to do with War that he has forgotten and that might make all the difference, might even save Victor’s life for all he knows. “They’re my memories! I need to know what it is I forgot, before War… wait, was it War who gave them to you? Did he steal them?”

“Oh, Love,” Oblivion sighs, almost melancholy. “No one stole them from you.”

“What?” Yuuri’s brows furrow as he stares at her uncomprehendingly. “I don’t understand—then how did you get them?”

Oblivion drifts forward in the stream, reaching up and grasping both of his hands, her skin icy cold against his own as she looks up into his eyes with pity.

“You gave them to me.”
Yuuri did not know what to expect when he came to the river looking for answers, but to hear that he is the one that gave up his memories seems a claim that stretches far beyond the realm of possibilities and right into the absurd.

Yet Oblivion stares up at him with sympathy, and what reason would she have to lie?

Her fingers squeeze his when Yuuri finds himself unable to respond, mouth half-open in an incoherent question barely formed by his tongue, and her smile is sweet and soft as her thumb brushes over the back of his hand. “Why… why would I…”

“Why did you give them up?” she finishes for him, head tipping to the side ever so slightly as her hair slips down her shoulder with the movement, a wet shine on her moss-black locks. “They were too heavy for you to carry.”

Yuuri looks down at their interlinked hands, hers much bigger than his. Oblivion, he notes, is far taller than him; though she stands two feet below in the water, the top of her head still reaches his shoulders.

Something occurs to him then. “Were you the one who left that daffodil?”

She says nothing, simply continues smiling in the sunlight.

No answer appears to be forthcoming, even if it is obvious that she was the one behind it, yet she seems to refuse to answer. Yuuri continues, suspicions raised. “Even if I gave them to you, I still want them back.”

Her smile slinks back into her lips, and he realizes that the black in her eyes does not reflect any light. “Why would you want to?”

“Whatever lead me to discard them in the past, things are different now,” he says, though it is daunting to know that the reason he gave them away was because they were too painful for him to handle. “I need to know.”

What could’ve happened for him to want to forget?

“Do you?” Oblivion replies gently. “You do not even know what it is that you forgot.”

Yuuri’s brows furrow as he realizes that she’s right. He hadn’t thought of it before, but now that she mentions it, the most bemusing thing about the supposed voluntary amnesia is that he doesn’t feel as if there are any gaps in his memory, nothing that stands out. There is no sense of having forgotten anything, no holes to fill.

“Can you tell me that, at least?” he asks her quietly. “Which memories did I give you?”

“Many, and they were all so sweet.” She smiles again, her lips stretching wide, and Yuuri wants to take a step back but her hands keep him there, grip tightening around his knuckles. “The scent of daffodils, the warmth of a flame, your love and your joy, but your grief, oh, your grief was by far the sweetest.”

Yuuri clenches his jaw, shoulders straightening. “I want them back.”
“You gave them to me of your own will,” Oblivion points out, a dissatisfied purse of her lips. “They are mine.”

The flame flares from his chest and spreads over his body, gold fire coating his skin and Oblivion hisses in pain when it reaches his fingers and burns into hers.

“Return them to me,” Yuuri speaks and his voice booms from his throat, the echo rippling across the water as Oblivion winces, trying to slink back but now it is his fingers that hold hers captive. “Immediately.”

The guardian of the river says nothing at first, head bowed and her face shielded from view by her long hair draping down her forehead like a curtain but Yuuri waits patiently nonetheless. He has never enjoyed using his powers as a leverage, but he doesn’t have the time to wait around and coax her into giving them back voluntarily; people are dying mere miles away, and if he doesn’t hurry Victor might end up among their number.

So he waits, the wind blowing in the silence as a cloud passes overhead and obscures the sun, and in the shade she finally lifts her head and meets his gaze, her expression blank.

“If you truly wish to retrieve them,” she says, tone quiet, “then you must come with me.”

Her change in demeanor is jarring but Oblivion seems a fickle thing, her motives murky at best. Yuuri considers this with some apprehension but the need to know outweighs any concerns he might have about his own safety.

He has been untouchable for so long, he cannot imagine there to be anything that can harm him at this point. “Alright, tomorrow morning I will—”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “It must be now.”

“Right now?” Yuuri raises his brows. “Why?”

She looks up above. “The skies will be clear once that cloud passes.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” It’s more of that cryptic nonsense, and Yuuri feels his irritation building at being left completely in the dark. “Regardless, I can’t go with you right now.”

“Do you wish to retrieve your memories or not?”

Yuuri scowls. “I gave Victor my word that I would wait for him here; I won’t break that promise.”

She stares up at him and he stares down at her, watching her eyes narrow as the large, grey cloud above drifts away.

There is a beat of silence, stillness, and then her hands slip out of his loosened grip and reach up to grasp his wrists instead, pulling him down until her face is but mere inches from his.

“Then I will break that promise for you,” she says, and Yuuri’s eyes widen in alarm but before he can protest Oblivion yanks him down the riverbank as she slips back into the waters, Yuuri falling after her and a shout rips from his throat, unable to save himself when chained to Oblivion’s hands.

The surface of the water bends when he hits it, icy cold darkness engulfing him like a greedy mouth gulping him down into its depths.

He disappears into the currents without a sound.
The sun has just set when Victor arrives at his cottage. The evening hair is crisp and the wind blows heavy through the tops of the trees. It’s unusually quiet, not even the hoot of an owl to be heard—his cottage is dark.

Victor draws a deep breath and gets off his horse with a swing of his leg, the motion as familiar as drawing breath, and leaves the horse tied to the fence surrounding his makeshift garden that looks messier than when he left it. No doubt weeds have begun to sprout.

Perhaps he can recruit Yuuri into helping him root them out, because surely Yuuri is in his cottage right now waiting for him and there is a perfectly good reason as to why the candles haven’t been lighted even though it’s so dark outside that Victor can barely distinguish the trees.

“Yuuri?” he calls, expecting an answer and when he hears none he decides Yuuri must just be sleeping to pass the time waiting for him, because he gave Victor his word and he wouldn’t just leave without saying anything.

He wouldn’t just leave Victor.

Would he?

Victor’s steps hasten as he nears the front door, and he all but slams it off its hinges when he opens it. “Yuuri!”

Nothing but darkness.

He stares into the empty room with wide eyes trying to catch what little moonlight there is, looking for movement in the shadows, for even the smallest sign but Yuuri isn’t there.

Victor is alone.

He inhales sharply, turns on his heel and storms right back out of the cottage, the sight of an empty home like a gaping maw waiting to swallow him whole in its loneliness. The cold air relieves the heat in his cheeks, but intensifies the shudders that have him shaking from head to toe.

“Calm down,” he tells his pounding heart as his hands ball up into fists and his nails cut into his palms, “just calm down.”

Maybe Yuuri is out for a walk and will return soon enough or maybe something happened to him, what if something happened to him, what if he didn’t mean to leave but what if he did—

Victor breathes in deep through his nostrils, closing his eyes and trying to get a grip on the frantic pace of his thoughts before they spiral too far for him to catch. He feels them wrapping around his throat like a noose, tightening around his airways, his heartbeat pounding through his veins, through his bones.

Calm down, calm down, calm down.

A wet feeling against his cheek makes him flinch and his hand almost reaches instinctively to his sword when he opens his eyes and finds his horse right beside him, which almost startles him as much until he realizes what she’s doing. He lets out the air choked up in his throat and feels his shoulders give way slightly, tension starting to leak out of his muscles.

“Curious thing, are we?” he mutters, patting her muzzle and realizing he hasn’t yet given her a name. He has never really had a horse before—he took one on the battlefield when its rider was knocked off, but he gave it away again once the battle was over. Victor always preferred to be on foot.
Breathing a little easier now with his mare’s dark eye staring at him, probably wondering what to make of her new owner if horses can wonder such things at all, he focuses on the twitch of her ears when an owl hoots in the distance and the slow flick of her tail as she moves away from him again, leaning her large head over the garden fence to sniff at some turnips growing below her.

Victor watches her for a while, feeling more at ease knowing he isn’t completely alone, and turns to close the front door behind him before settling down on the dirt beside it, wrapping his cloak around himself to shield from the wind. Even the company of a horse is better than nothing.

He’ll just have to believe that Yuuri will keep his word and return before dawn comes.

In the dark where he should be drowning, bones breaking against the rocks in the unforgiving current of the river, he finds the only sound are his own thoughts, the only movements the deep motions of his chest as he breathes air.

Is he lost to Lethe? Is this what happens to the living unfortunate enough to venture too close to the river? Is this what death is like?

“I am sorry.”

A whisper-soft breath brushes over his face, but he can’t see anything in the dark, not even his own hands.

“There was no other way,” Oblivion says to him, her voice in his ears, in his head, everywhere at once. “He was watching.”

There is no above and below, no stars and no sun and no moon, no light to guide him, nothing to indicate where he should look. He floats in an abyss of nothing, and yet it is strangely serene in its own way. A quiet embrace that smothers all.

“Who was watching?” he asks, and his voice sounds so quiet. It does not echo like it would in a cave, like he expected it to. Part of him thinks he ought to be more alarmed at the fact that he is, very literally, inside of Oblivion and he has never heard of anyone making it back, but he feels strangely at ease.

He could stay here for a while, he thinks. Just floating in the dark, nothing to weigh him down. Yes, he wouldn't mind staying here a while, maybe longer. Maybe forever.

“Your memories will tell you.”

Yuuri blinks, though it makes no difference to his sight, and feels somewhat jolted awake. Of course, his memories; that’s why he’s here, to get them back.

He almost forgot.

“How long will it take?” he asks. “Victor is—”

Victor.

Victor.

Yuuri gasps and though there is only air for him to breathe he suddenly feels as if he’s drowning. He promised Victor he’d be there, the last night they could spend together before parting ways at dawn. His mind reaches instinctively to search for Victor, but he finds nothing. No Victor, no prayers, no
voices.

There is only silence in his head.

“You have no choice,” Oblivion speaks softly. “This goes far beyond War’s bloodlust.”

Yuuri shakes his head, tries to struggle for a grip, for something, but he keeps floating aimlessly, wouldn’t even know which direction to swim in.

“I don’t have time for this!” he cries. “Just give them back so I can leave; Victor is waiting for me!”

“You cannot simply reclaim them.”

“What are you talking about?”

Oblivion sighs and it feels as if the darkness itself sighs with her, suddenly far less like the gaping hole he assumed it was and far more like a living, breathing thing.

“I am forgetting, I am loss,” she explains. “I can point you in the right direction, but I cannot give them to you; that is not in my nature. You must find them yourself, relive them to remember.”

A feeling of dread passes over Yuuri. “How long will that take?”

“Years.”

Something wraps around his ankles, thin ropes or maybe even fingers, and Yuuri’s eyes widen in horror as he’s dragged through the dark, hands flailing to reach but finding nothing.

“No, no, I changed my mind! Keep the memories!” he cries, but whatever is holding his feet is too strong. It feels like being pulled away in the currents of a river. “Let me go! I have to get back to Victor! I have to—”

Light bursts through the dark like a star below him.

He falls.

Myths often claim that, after The Sun threw his curse upon mankind, it was War that spawned from that curse and became the first human god—or if not War, then it was Greed or Hatred. It is a story easily used to prey on the weak and powerless, to make them believe in their sin and beg for absolution, but it is not the truth.

It was not War, but Love that came first.

After centuries have passed and history has been distorted on the tongues of men, only the gods still remember the day Love was born. He came from a flame, burning as bright as any star, defiant in his resolve to see humanity protected from the whims of apathetic immortals, determined to see it flourish and prosper in freedom and happiness where once it was enslaved.

But even this is not the whole truth, because long before Love, there was a young boy that Fate favored and cursed in the same breath the day he was born from his mortal mother.

A young boy who liked the scent of flowers, and whose fingers plucked on strings.

ACT I END
year eight, spring

When man came from vast Earth she bid them to worship her,
for she was their mother and they were her children,
their flesh born from her soil.
—The Theogonies, lines 534-536

His fingertips brush the edges of petals, the soft sound of laughter echoing as nymphs flit through the wild grass like flashes of light too quick to catch for a human eye, making the flowers in the meadow dance. The sunlight is soft, falling just over the top of the forest neighboring the open field bordered by a large lake, glowing through the branches of trees.

When he raises his hand with his palm facing the sun and spreads it just so, he can even see the rays falling through the gaps of his fingers. Eight winters old, his hand is almost big enough to envelop it completely.

“Over here!” he hears from his left and he turns his head to look but doesn’t see anyone or anything there, aside from a thick patch of violets that’s rustling suspiciously.

Curious, he treads a bit closer, leaning over to peer at what might be hiding among the flowers when a burst of color erupts from the grass and collides into his chest.

As his breath is knocked out of him he feels himself tipping over and falling to the ground, two slim arms wrapped tightly around his back and a laugh in his ear.

“Yuuko!” he cries right before he hits the grass, petals and pollen flying up into the air. A cloudless blue sky comes into view above him for a single heartbeat before it’s obscured by a brightly smiling face.

“You’re back!” she chirps happily, her hair littered with little cherry blossoms blooming with the season. The last time he saw her they’d just been buds.

“Did you wait long?”

She shakes her head, rolling off him into the grass and lying down on her back among the flowers. Yuuri’s gaze trails curiously to the branches wrapped around her body and peeking through her thin, pink dress that are, like her hair, blossoming with a few flowers here and there, scattered namely around her arms. They weren’t there last spring.

“Pretty, aren’t they?” she says proudly when she notices him looking. “I’m finally old enough! Next spring there will be even more.”

“They’re very pretty,” he replies. “Did you show Takeshi?”

Her brows furrow at the mention of his name. “I did, and he didn’t care.”

Yuuri isn’t sure he believes that. As far as nymphs go, Takeshi certainly isn’t the most graceful, but he has always had a soft spot for Yuuko. “What did he say when you showed him?”

“He didn’t say anything!” Yuuko complains. “He just stared for a while and then ran off!”

He can’t help but laugh at that, wishing he’d been there to witness Takeshi’s no doubt flushed face and hasty escape.
“What?” Yuuko demands with a pout, poking him in the arm and frowning at Yuuri’s grin.

“I think he’s just shy.”

“Shy?” she repeats. “That oak?”

“You should ask him why he ran away.” Yuuri sits up in the grass, brushing some petals and dirt off his shirt, the blue now stained with green from the grass. Yuuko sits up next to him and gives him a doubtful look.

“Maybe,” she concedes after some thought and a brief pause, hooking her arm around his and leaning her head on his shoulder with a sigh. “He’s so dense.”

“He really is dense,” Yuuri agrees, watching her thumb a flower on the inner side of her wrist. They sit in pleasant silence for a short while, enjoying the breeze and the warmth of the sun.

His gaze eventually shifts to a few slender figures in-between the trees playing with friendly forest wisps darting through the air. The orbs of green light lead the playful young nymphs on a chase as nebulous spirits curiously follow, flocking to the energy.

Further down the tree line, by the edge of the lake, a tall willow nymph sits in the grass surrounded by others, the long branches of his hair falling down his body like a thick curtain as he regales the various admiring flower nymphs with a story. Behind him others play in the lake or glide lazily with the currents, enjoying the warm sunlight, spirits floating above them reflecting the color of the green-tinted water.

Yuuri watches one particularly mischievous spirit attempt to copy the shape of a nymph it sees drifting in the water below, stretching and twisting itself into her shape as the nymph huffs and scowls at it. It waves at her cheerfully until the disgruntled nymph dives under and splashes water at the spirit with her large, gray tail, making it disperse and flee with laughter.

He wonders what his family would say if they saw this.

“Yuuri?” Yuuko sounds hesitant, or maybe worried as she lifts her head from his shoulder. “Are you lonely, sometimes?”

It isn’t a question easily answered, even if his first reflex is to lie and say no. Instead, he chooses to say nothing at all, and starts plucking at the grass.

He could never make friends with the other children in his village, his only playmate while growing up being his sister and now nymphs and spirits who are normally very flighty when humans are around. There’s just something about him that doesn’t fit, and while his parents insist he’ll grow out of it eventually, Yuuri has his doubts.

“It’s okay to say that you are,” Yuuko continues gently. “I’m still your friend no matter what!”

Yuuri doesn’t know what to say to that, so he settles for a quiet, “I know.”

He can feel her staring at him but refuses to look up at her, until she suddenly releases his arm and gets up off the grass, extending a hand to him. Cherry blossoms bloom from her palm. “Come on, enough gloom!” she decides. “Let’s chase some wisps!”

Yuuri stares at her hand, then looks up at her determined face, and his expression eases into a smile as he reaches and grabs her wrist, allowing her to pull him up.
He doesn’t feel very lonely anymore.

The evening air is refreshingly cool against his skin as Yuuri walks back through the forest towards his village, the wisp he caught floating close around him, giving off a bright green light that helps illuminate the way.

He touches it when it drifts near his cheek, like sticking his finger in a warm cloud, and the wisp makes a high, cheerful noise like the chiming of small bells as it spirals around his hand and brushes on his wrist before floating beside his head again.

These green wisps are common in the forest, though he’s unclear on what they are, exactly. Nymphs animate and embody nature, and spirits are often born wherever nymphs tend to gather, a byproduct of their magic. Wisps, however, are everywhere, even near villages. Nymphs and spirits avoid humans as much as possible, but wisps seem not to care, if they even have the capacity to care, though they do tend to be bound to specific places.

Yuuri watches his wisp float ahead of him as they near the edge of the forest, the tiny lights of fireflies around them like dots compared to its large glow. He wonders what it’s like to be a wisp.

When they reach the end and Yuuri steps out the tree line, the wisp makes a soft sound and stays amidst the trees. Yuuri looks back at it and smiles, giving it a small wave. The wisp chimes happily and makes a twirl in the air, then darts right back into the forest and disappears, taking its light with it and leaving him in the dark.

Yuuri turns back to look ahead of him, seeing the buildings and houses of his village like shadows cut out against the large fields, lanterns hanging from buildings providing some guiding light.

With a heavy sigh he resumes his trek back home, treading onto the dirt road winding through the fields and towards the village that’s caught up in the quiet. Beyond his village there are nothing but meadows and farms; they are almost completely alone here, as close to wilderness as humans dare venture.

When Yuuri finally reaches and enters the vague boundaries of the small town, the few people still outside at this hour barely deign to look at him as he treads through the bare streets. He does his best to pretend it’s normal to be completely ignored, and in a way, for him it is.

Most of the houses he passes by are very modest, small wooden shacks just big enough for a few people to sleep in. His own is in the middle of the row on his left, and he halts in front of it.

He feels nothing but dread at the thought of walking through the door, but he has no choice.

When he does, however, the first face he’s confronted with is Mari’s. She’s sweeping the floor when he walks in, and when she turns to look at him her brows quickly descend into a frown. “You’re late.”

“Sorry,” he mutters, closing the door behind him. “Are mother and father—”

“Father’s still out,” she answers, returning to her sweeping. “Mother’s in her room, she wants to talk to you.”

Yuuri suppresses the urge to turn around and walk right back outside, instead nodding and dragging his feet toward his parents’ bedroom door. Mari pats him on the shoulder when he passes her, and he stands still in front of the door, taking a deep breath before reaching over and opening it.
He finds his mother seated near the window, fixing a hole in father’s clothes, though she pauses in her work and looks up at him when he appears in the doorway.

“There you are,” she says, greeting him with a smile. “Where did you go?”

“I was playing in the forest,” Yuuri responds quietly, closing the door behind him but taking not a step further inside.

Her expression falls and he tries his best not to fidget, but can’t meet her gaze when he hears her sigh. “Again?”

Yuuri stares down at his feet and shrugs, mumbling, “It’s been a month.”

“I don’t understand what’s so special about that forest,” his mother complains. “You can’t run off to play when there’s still work to be done, especially now; the festival is just a few days away.”

“But I did work,” Yuuri insists, looking up to meet her disapproving gaze. “I was in the field all morning with father and we finished harvesting the first crops, so I thought—”

“Our work for our Blessed Mother is never finished.”

There it is, the reason he hates coming home.

“Why can’t she do her own work?” he blurts, and the regret sets instantly into his chest when he sees the color draining out of his mother’s face. “I’m sorry.”

“How many times,” she starts, then pauses, taking a deep breath to gather herself. “How many times have I told you not to ask such questions? We exist only to—”

“Only to serve her, yes, I know!” Yuuri crosses his arms tightly over his chest. “But what if I don’t want to serve her?”

As expected, his mother looks at him as if he’s grown a second head. “Everyone wants to serve Her; that’s why we were created.”

This is why he doesn’t fit.

Everyone—his parents, his sister, the other children, everyone else in the village and beyond—seem content serving a goddess they have never seen before, happily slaving away the rest of their days in service to her.

They are a farming village with some fishermen in between, and at the end of each week half of what they produce is gathered to eventually be offered to this goddess who decides where it goes and who receives it. It’s even worse on the Day of Offering right before the spring festival, where even more is expected of them, to the point where people have died in previous years from overworking themselves.

No one else, not even his sister, seems to think there’s anything strange about this. Why are they living their lives according to the whims of some immortal woman no one here has ever laid eyes on? Just because she created them?

Well, Yuuri never asked to be created, so whatever service this goddess thinks he owes her, she is sorely mistaken.

But his mother is staring at him, and to her he says, “I know,” and lets the subject go without further
argument. He has learned the hard way that questioning such things too much eventually leads to
punishment.

When his father gets home that evening and they have supper as a family, Yuuri stays silent. He
hears them talk about the latest gossip in the village and how the preparations are going for the
festival, seeming particularly excited about the latter.

Doubts creep into him every now and then when he listens to them like this. Is he really the only one
who thinks this way? More than once he has wondered whether there’s just something wrong with
him, if he is the odd one and everyone else is normal.

It doesn’t change the fact that he refuses to live his entire life for a complete stranger even if she
claims to be the earth itself, but it does make him feel very, very lonely.

Either way, he keeps his mouth shut, and doesn’t return to the forest.

The sun is burning and he sits in the shade of his house right below a window, sweat-soaked and
exhausted from the work that afternoon, and listens to his mother fussing over his sister inside.

“There is nothing to worry about, dear,” their mother says gently. “I’m sure the temple servants will
find a fine match for you.”

“But what if they don’t?” Mari replies. “What if I don’t like him at all?”

Her sixteenth year is fast approaching, Yuuri remembers.

“I’m sure it won’t come to that.” He hears footsteps creaking on the floorboards. “Your father and I
worked out just fine.”

He pushes himself up off the ground and leaves the shade, entering the stream of activity on the
streets. Everyone is excited for the start of the festival, though before the festivities can begin they
must first adhere to the Day of Offering, which happens to be today.

Carts filled with various goods—vegetables and fruits, meat and animal furs, stacks of wood and hay
—are being hurriedly transported to the center of the village, those who haven’t yet prepared their
offerings particularly frantic.

Yuuri follows the current of people towards the square, and it doesn’t take long for the statue
centered there to come into view.

It’s surrounded by dirt and dust, but not a speck of it is on its marble, as if it repels any filth. No one
would dare to attempt to find out; the last child who tried to throw dirt at the statue was taken away
by the village elders and never seen or heard from again.

The woman the statue depicts is supposedly the Great Goddess herself, wielding a tall scepter and
clad in long green robes, looking far more severe than her title of Blessed Mother would suggest as
she towers over the entire village.

Yuuri shuffles out of the way of the people behind him as he joins the crowd lingering on the edges
of the village square, watching the offerings pouring in, gathered around the statue. They have until
last light to present their offerings, and anyone that doesn’t make it tends to disappear.

He can see his father near the foot of the statue, loading out the hay from his cart they spent days
harvesting in front of its tall pedestal. Some pray before they leave the circle of offerings, others do
not even look at the statue out of reverence, and Yuuri feels like the amount gathered this time around is less than what it was last year. He certainly hopes not, or quite a few people won't make it to the festival.

Once his father is done loading out the hay from his cart, he directs his horse and carefully maneuvers them out of the circle. Yuuri ducks behind a man standing next to him when his father glances his way, in no mood to hear about how thankful they should be for their merciful master and that she allows them to prosper from her lands and demands so little in return.

Luckily he isn’t spotted, and the person he is hiding behind—the village carpenter, a tall, lanky man with too many wrinkles for his age—scowls at him when he doesn’t move away fast enough. Yuuri feels his face turning red under the glare and quickly steps to the side, putting some distance between them.

He has blasphemed one too many times for the villagers to forget so easily, and it’s only due to his age that he hasn’t been exiled yet.

“The sun is almost done setting,” he hears from behind him, the sudden remark all but spoken right into his ear making him flinch violently until he realizes it’s just his sister. Mari grins at him as she comes to stand next to him.

“Why do you always do that?” he whines, rubbing at his ear.

She shrugs, picking at the hem of her finest robe, brightly colored with patterns of yellow flowers while Yuuri wears the simple shirt and pants he wore while helping his father in the field, covered in dirt and stained with sweat. Perhaps he should have put more care into his outfit today.

“It’s fun watching you jump,” Mari replies simply.

“I didn’t jump!” he protests, though it doesn’t come out entirely convincing. Normally, his sister would’ve laughed at the attempt. Today, she stares down at the ground, and says nothing. “Mari?”

“I’m leaving this year.”

Yuuri frowns deeply, though she doesn’t meet his gaze. “But you can come back, right? Whenever you want?”

“I don’t know.”

The pause between them is uneasy, pulled taut and trembling.

“Why do you have to go?” he asks.

“You know why,” she says. “To wed and have children.”

“With who?”

“I don’t know yet; a priest or priestess will find a match for me once I get to the temple,” Mari explains quietly, looking more and more uncomfortable the more he presses on. “I’ve already gotten my summons.”

“Do you want to marry?”

She blinks, and finally turns her head to look at him. “What?”

“Do you want to marry?” he repeats, and she stares for a while before looking away again and
saying nothing, chewing on her lower lip. Her silence speaks for itself.

“It’ll be the same for you, you know,” she replies eventually. “Doesn’t matter whether you want to
or not. We have to do as the Goddess dictates, trying to fight it is pointless and will only bring you
more misery.”

“Yes, I know, because the Goddess knows best,” Yuuri mumbles, kicking at a small pebble and
watching it roll over the ground, coming to a standstill next to a basket of wildflowers.

The two siblings fall into silence as the amount of people still bringing in offerings starts to steadily
lessen, most villagers now part of the crowd surrounding the statue and waiting for the sun to sink as
torches and lanterns are lit while the light shrinks away below the horizon.

Yuuri stares up at the statue’s face and wonders how accurate it is to what the Goddess really looks
like. He’s so fixated on the contour of her nose that he doesn’t even notice it when his mother and
father join him and Mari until he feels his father’s hand patting his head.

“You worked well,” he says when Yuuri looks up at him, and though he doesn’t want to feel
pleased, the praise is still reluctantly welcome.

But it means little in the face of his sister’s imminent departure, and the fact that he might never see
her again.

Perhaps his father senses Yuuri’s dour mood because he doesn’t attempt anymore conversation, and
his mother is whispering something to Mari that’s drowned out in the chatter of the crowd around
them.

They’re all waiting for the sun to set and for the offerings to be collected. Every year is the same; the
moment the last light disappears from the sky, a mist appears over the offerings laid down around the
statue, descending like a soft blanket of snow, and when it sinks away all the offerings will be gone.

So they wait as one village, the chatter slowly dying down the darker it gets until there is nothing but
complete silence and just the faintest glow of the sun’s last moments of the day glowing in the
distance.

They wait, the light disappears, and the mist starts to form. It isn’t so thick at first, drifting in the air
right above the offerings—maybe more like smoke than mist—but not reaching any further, almost
like a strange barrier has formed between the villagers and their offerings. The top half statue is the
only thing visible.

Yuuri always wondered what would happen if he stuck out his hand and touched it, but he doesn’t
exactly want to risk being whisked away together with the offerings, and neither does anyone else
from how far they stand away from it, putting at least five feet between them and the mist.

There is nothing but complete and total silence. No one dares speak, they’re all convinced this is the
doing of the Goddess directly. Some are even knelt in prayer.

Yuuri sighs, and a woman in front of him turns back to glower at him disapprovingly.

Well, excuse him for breathing.

The mist descends upon the offerings and it’s all rather quite boring seeing as how it’s the same exact
thing every year and he remembers seeing this happen four times already. The only interesting and
somewhat terrifying part is afterwards, when it’s time to find out who has disappeared together with
the offerings for not working hard enough.
Yuuri doesn’t feel nervous, since he, his father and his sister all managed to produce even more hay than they delivered last year, but he can pick out a few people fidgeting, one man—a fisherman—looking like he’s caught between being frozen and bolting on the spot.

Even so, they all wait for the mist to recede, and it does. When the sky has turned its darkest color, it begins to dissipate, and as expected, all the offerings are—

“Wait!” a man suddenly cries at the very front. “There’s something left!”

As the mist clears up in its entirety and the crowd breaks out into excited murmurs, it appears as though there is one offering that hasn’t gone away like the others.

Stacks of hay.

“What… why is…” Yuuri hears his father stammer behind him, and when he turns to look at his mother and sister they are both as pale as death as everyone’s eyes turn to look at them.

“Was their offering rejected?” he hears whispered.

“I bet it wasn’t good enough.”

“Then why haven’t they disappeared yet?”

“Maybe our Blessed Mother is being generous this year!”

“Father?” he hears Mari say from beside him. “What’s happening?”

“I’m—I’m sure everything is fine,” his father speaks, hand on Yuuri’s shoulder squeezing tightly. “There must be a reason for why our offering was left behind; perhaps the Great Goddess witnessed our hard work and decided to take mercy on us? I should go take a look—”

Before he can do any such thing, however, a deep rumbling noise shakes the very ground they stand on as if the earth itself speaks, screams and shouting drowned out by the growl as dozens of people fall to the ground and the buildings shake precariously.

Yuuri falls against his sister’s side who barely manages to stay on her feet, heart pounding in his eardrums when he sees something happening at the foot of the statue.

Large, thick roots coil around the statues pedestal and touch on the finely-crafted ankles, and suddenly, the rumbling stops just as quickly as it came.

The whole crowd is left dazed, but they aren’t given a moment’s rest when, in front of their very eyes, the statue begins to move.

First the head and neck that twists, and the statue turns to look right in Yuuri’s direction. He is completely petrified like a dear that is faced with the tip of a hunter’s arrow, his sister clinging to his shoulders, his mother and father having fallen to the ground.

Then, the expression on the statue starts contorting strangely, as if it’s getting used to moving, and it starts stretching her limbs.

Various people begin to shriek in fear, others outright run, some fall to their knees and prostrate themselves before it—the statue raises its palm, and opens its mouth.

“Quiet!”
Yuuri has never heard a silence so deafening.

If he ever wanted proof that the Goddess exists, here it is.

The statue, or Goddess, or whatever is happening here seems unconcerned with the mortal terror it has inspired in the village, and turns her—its—full attention on Yuuri and his family, twisting her body on the pedestal to face them and lifting her scepter, pointing it right at them.

“You were the ones that offered me this hay, were you not?”

Neither of them know what to say, but it’s his mother that finds her voice first.

“Oh, oh,” she sobs, and when Yuuri glances over at her he sees her on her knees, looking as if she’s trying to come to terms with her imminent death, “B-Bl-Blessed Mother, we are s-so sorry t-that the h-ha-hay was not t-to your sta-standards and we b-beg for—”

The statue makes a vaguely dismissive hand gesture. “The hay was fine.”

His mother’s sobbing abruptly stops, and now it’s his father that speaks, or rather, splutters. “Wh-wha-huh?”

“The hay was fine, but I want a different offering from you,” the statue-goddess says curtly, tapping her nail against the staff of her scepter, the loud noise of stone hitting stone rattling through Yuuri’s bones.

“I… we… a-anything we can give you!” his father professes, bending down on his knees and pressing his forehead to the ground.

The statue’s eyes drift from him to Yuuri standing beside him, whose heart nearly jumps out of his throat when she points again, this time with her finger, right at him.

“Then give me the boy.”
year thirteen, summer

*But the glowing Sun grew dismayed,
for without its light Earth would be barren,
and yet he was not held in equal reverence.*
—The Theogonies, line 537-539

The marble is cold beneath his bare feet, the sound of skin slapping against stone echoing through the huge, pristine white open hallway, sunlight falling through the gaps between the spiral-carved columns and glowing on his skin. He hurries towards the very end where the spotless tiles trail off into a stairway that leads down to the garden and fades into wild grass and wilder flowers, blooming in every color.

"Where is he?" he hears shouted from behind him, and that’s his signal to speed up his run into a sprint. "Find him, quickly!"

Yuuri cannot help the smile that forms on his face as he heads for the stairs until a figure comes running up them before he gets there and blocks his path. It’s one of the servants, dressed head to toe in heavy brown robe, only two dark eyes visible in the gaps of a dark mask, decorated with thin vines blossoming into small, pink peonies.

Yuuri recognizes him by the flowers—Paean, one of his tutors.

"Now, now, young master," Paean says with his hands up in a placating gesture. "Let's not do anything rash, shall we?"

The decision is easily made: Yuuri glances at him, then at the view he has on the garden below, and just as Paean notices his plan Yuuri runs between two columns and jumps down.

"No, stop!"

He lands neatly on his feet and doesn’t glance back, bursting out into a full sprint through the garden surrounding the palace towards what he hopes is freedom.

"Catch him!" someone shouts behind him as he bolts in between the trees, hoping that running in an uneven pattern might throw them off. "CATCH HIM!"

Footsteps follow him, the ground starts sloping down and the garden ends as the thickness of the trees increases, sharp branches whipping across his legs as he sprints between the bushes, his heart skipping in his chest as he starts running down the hill and thinks that he’s finally, finally made it—

"Woah there!" One huge arm wraps around his waist from behind and he's lifted off the ground as if he weighs nothing more than a feather, feet left kicking in the air. "Not so fast, princeling."

Dread sinks into the pit of his stomach as he squirms in the iron-tight grip. "Let me go!"

A deep voice laughs in his ear, one he has never heard before.

"I'm afraid that's not possible," the man says as throws Yuuri over his shoulder, freedom lost in a single moment. Yuuri's face flushes scarlet in embarrassment as he starts struggling out of spite rather than any hope of escaping.

"Let go!" he shouts futilely, kicking and slamming his fists against the man's back but he might as
well have been hitting a mountain. He catches a glimpse of long, brown-taupe hair pulled back in a ponytail and light-blue robes that hold a white shimmer in the sunlight as he's carried back.

"Settle down," the man says, sounding amused, and Yuuri only then notices the odd but familiar echoing quality to his words, the sound of wind rather than a man's voice. "You'll just end up hurting yourself."

Yuuri releases a breath and with that single exhale it seems as if all the energy is drained right out of him, slumping over on the man's shoulder who pats his back. "There, there, let's get you back home."

He watches the hillside disappear behind the trees. "This isn't my home."

The man carrying him says nothing in response, stepping over a rosebush to enter the garden surrounding the mountain palace again, and Yuuri notices that he's being held quite far above the ground. Whoever is carrying him must be very tall, and very big.

"Oh!" He hears a gasp behind him, one of the servants. "Blessed Father, we had no idea—"

Yuuri stiffens completely at the title. Blessed Father? He has never heard anyone addressed with such a rank, except for her. A foreboding feeling creeps up his spine.

"Where's the old tyrant?" the man—god—says cheerfully and Yuuri hears at least one person choking and another making a whimpering sound.

"Her Greatness is resting at present, Lord," Yuuri hears Paean say, sounding much calmer than his companions. "If you could bring the prince inside she would be most pleased."

"Not a problem," the god says. "As you were!"

Yuuri is jostled lightly when the god continues on his way towards the staircase, but doesn’t react. All the fight has left him; if he thought it a long shot to escape one god, he can’t possibly run from two, especially if the one carrying him up the steps is who Yuuri thinks he is.

"What’s happened to you?" the god remarks at his silence, prodding him in the side. "Lost your will to live?"

Yuuri curls his hands into fists, but keeps his mouth shut. There’s no point in struggling now. Instead he should bide his time and wait for another opportunity. He managed five years; a few more months won’t kill him even if every new sunrise stings in his eyes, another day lost.

"Ah, I know what’s on your mind," the god says as they reach the last step and start on their way through the open corridor winding around the entire palace. It’s all sharp edges and hard stone. "You’re afraid she'll punish you when she finds out! Don’t worry, princeling, I’ll keep this a secret between us."

"And the servants," Yuuri mumbles.

"Hmm? Oh!" The god laughs. "Yes, those things."

Yuuri doesn’t reply and watches the tiles below him pass by, arms hanging limply down the god’s tall, wide back. He must be several times Yuuri’s size, but even though Earth is the only god he has seen these years, her towering height has gotten him used to the idea that humans are just very small in comparison.
The god turns left and they enter another hallway with a ceiling so high it reaches to the top of the palace that sits atop a mountain like its crowning jewel. Where the outside of it is a spotless marble white carved with perfect symmetry, the inside of it is dark, earthy and irregular.

All the walls are wood, stretching up like the world’s tallest trees, vines covered in flowers crawling up the rough, uneven surfaces. If you look long enough you may even see them shift. The ground is covered in grass and soft earth that breathes at its queen’s whim, windows high and plentiful to let in as much sunlight as possible. The view outside offers a sea of clouds, stretched out over the horizon and slowly drifting by.

The icy wind and snow you’d expect at these heights isn’t there, held back by a force that can only be attributed to the palace’s mistress, allowing green to flourish where it shouldn’t. The palace, like the mountain, like the earth and everything on it, is her.

“You there,” the god says to someone out of Yuuri’s field of vision. “Where’s your master?”

“In her chambers, my Lord,” the servant says in a very small voice, and the god hums in acknowledgement before continuing on his way. “Ah, my Lord, she would not want to be disturbed!”

The fearful cry is ignored as the god strides on through towards, as Yuuri well knows, the grand ornate double doors that lead to where Earth rests.

“All these pointless hallways,” the god grumbles and Yuuri hears the doors slamming open as if they were made of timber, wind blowing harshly through the corridor before settling down again as the god treads further into the palace. “All these walls! A big open space would be much more convenient.”

His footsteps thunder on the ground and Yuuri feels the quakes through his entire body with each one. It seems as if in no time at all they’ve reached the end of the corridor when Yuuri is tossed off the god’s shoulder and nearly lands face first on the ground, preventing the painful collision with his forearms.

“Ow,” he mumbles as he pushes himself up to sit on his knees, rubbing an elbow but not passing up the opportunity to glimpse at the god beside him who stands in front of yet another pair of double doors. These ones are made of stone, even larger and more ornate than the last ones, an array of beautiful but rough gems glittering in its surface.

The many colors glimmer in the subtle white shine stretched tight over the god’s skin, and as Yuuri imagined he is huge, even bigger than Earth. Yuuri is barely tall enough to reach his hips and has to crane his neck to look at the god’s face, whose gaze is focused on the doors in front of them that are blocked off by large vines.

No doubt he has come here for an audience, though he is the first one to do so since Yuuri was taken by Earth and certainly the first one he has ever laid eyes on beside the goddess herself. Waking up Earth when she’s slumbering is impossible for a human, so Yuuri is more than curious to see how another god would go about it.

As if on cue the god sighs and widens his stance, spreading his feet apart, Yuuri watching curiously while wondering whether it’s a good idea to be near whatever is about to happen. The god puts his hands on his hips, opens his mouth wide and sucks in an inhumanly deep breath—Yuuri feels the air around him shift, catching him completely off-guard when the god suddenly shouts:

“AWAKEN, MOTHER EARTH!”
Stone crumbles off the doors, the walls quake and the tremors through the entire palace knock him back off his knees and onto his behind. The sound echoes for quite a while, and by the time it dies down Yuuri realizes that, oddly enough, his hearing is completely unaffected. He was certain he’d gone deaf for a moment, but as he stands up from the ground and can hear his feet shift through the grass, it seems he avoided the worst of it. Likely because the shout was never aimed at him; he doesn’t want to know what would happen to his ears or his head if it ever is.

The silence continues and the god frowns and crosses his arms, still staring at the doors. After a short while has passed he starts tapping a sandal against the ground, and while Yuuri is mildly alarmed by the fact that he can sense the vibrations through the earth he decides to finally open his mouth again and ask a question.

“Um,” he starts, losing all the words when green eyes flit his way, though his attention slips briefly to the god’s frankly impressive chin before he finds his voice again. “I don’t mean to be rude, but, uh, who are you, exactly?”

The god stares at him blankly and Yuuri is deathly afraid he was actually very rude, but after another anxious heartbeat passes the god’s lips crack into a smile and he starts laughing. The sound rolls through the air like drums, almost as loud as his shouting.

Yuuri is still not sure whether this is the precursor to some sort of horrible smiting so he holds his tongue and waits, until the god suddenly reaches down with a massive hand—Yuuri squeezes his eyes shut—and then, very gently, pats him on the head.

“I’ve never had anyone ask me that question before!” he says jovially, and Yuuri nearly collapses onto his knees in relief. It’s not as if Earth has ever punished him physically, since all her punishments involve adding extra hours to his training and his lessons, but he doesn’t exactly know what to expect from other gods.

Gods.

Yuuri lets that thought sink in.

He knows multiple gods, now.

“Allow me to introduce myself, princeling,” the god says brightly. “I am Heaven.”

Yuuri makes a high-pitched sound and tries very hard not to stare or accidentally shatter his teeth by how hard he’s gritting them, seeing as how he is looking at Heaven.

Of thunder and lightning, the Just, the Merciful, the Stormbringer, and the only god who could fit the title of Blessed Father.

The same god Yuuri was just kicking and yelling at a little while ago.

“’m Yuuri,” Yuuri blurts out admirably, rather than gawk as was his first instinct. “Nice to… uh, honored to meet… to make your… I’m very nice to meet, I mean, it’s very nice to meet you, ser! Or, uh, my Lord. My Lord Heaven, ser—”

Heaven furrows his brow and when he raises his palm Yuuri instantly snaps his mouth shut, certain he’s positively flaming red. He should have paid more attention when getting tutored in etiquette, though considering that he is being confronted with the literal embodiment of the sky itself he’s doing rather well.

Why couldn’t it just be a forest, or a river god, or a mountain god? Why the entire SKY?
“Are you quite alright, princeling?” Heaven asks, and rather than the disapproval Yuuri was expecting it seems instead Heaven is worried.

Which, well, he’s not sure how to feel about making the actual clouds worried about him, but he’s sure it qualifies for some sort of accomplishment in being absolutely pitiful.

“Fine,” he squeaks at a pitch that would’ve even made a mouse feel sorry for him, and quickly averts his gaze to the ground between his feet, hoping that if he stares long enough a hole will spontaneously open up to swallow him whole.

As if that wasn’t bad enough his brain decides to cheerfully remind him by way of vivid mental imagery that he was just carried around Earth’s palace by this enormous god said to be second only to her in power.

Yuuri’s eyes dart over to the windows nearby and he wonders if it’s not too late to just jump to his death and end it all at this point.

Why does his life have to be so utterly bizarre?

“Perhaps you should—”

“SHUT UP.”

The shout rocks the entire palace, and Yuuri feels the ground underneath his feet shaking like the irritated grumblings of a sleeping giant, dust and small bits of stone crumbling from the ceiling high above them. He would have lost his footing had he not grabbed at Heaven’s leg, clutching at it to keep standing while the god himself looks completely unaffected by the stirrings, attention back on the doors.

The vines blocking off their path shift and retreat onto the walls, allowing the doors to click open, swinging inwards with a huge creaking noise.

Apparently, if you are a god, all you have to do to wake up Earth is to yell at her.

When the tremors in the ground stop Yuuri hurriedly releases Heaven again, though a glance at the god confirms that he barely noticed. Certain his existence can’t get any more painful, Yuuri turns to peer inside Earth’s private chamber—though calling it a chamber is somewhat misleading.

A small lake of depthless, crystal blue water reflects light into the rest of the room, centered and surrounded by earth and green, a small forest flourishing with life as its mistress has emerged from the pool.

She has her back turned to them, wrapping an orange robe around her body, hair dripping wet onto the flowers blooming around her feet.

“Have a nice bath?” Heaven remarks, and at the mention of the word bath Yuuri nervously wonders if Heaven has some sort of death wish.

Earth’s “baths” are hardly for hygiene; when she returns her consciousness to the planet to rest, she preserves her human body within that lake. Yuuri only knows this because he once made a similar mistake of calling it a bath when asking about it, which earned him a day’s worth of lecturing. Gods do so love to take their time, especially when they’re talking.

“Do you never tire of being so utterly obnoxious?” Earth huffs, her gaze fixated on Heaven for the moment, allowing Yuuri to take a step back in a perhaps naive attempt to slip away.
“Not remotely.”

Another step.

“Charming,” Earth snipes, and Yuuri takes another step. He’s nearly far enough into the corridor to sneak around the corner and disappear. “Is there a reason you stormed my palace or can I throw you out with the filth?”

“I do have a reason, actually, a very good reason—”

“Oh, Yuuri!”

Yuuri freezes at the mention of his name, cheeks tinting red at being caught in the act. He was so close, too.

“Yes?” he says, his hopes of quietly sneaking away during the conversation dashed. Earth is looking at him fondly, however, and spreads her arms.

“Come here!”

Yuuri sighs and trudges over, circling around the lake to where Earth waits, but stops short of an embrace. He does not bother trying to look up at her—he’s just an inch taller than her waist, and doesn’t feel like hurting his neck by craning it.

Earth sighs and kneels in front of him, putting her large hands on his shoulders, trying to catch his eyes that keep darting away from her face.

“Your latest attempt failed, I see,” she says, the soft tone reverberating through his whole body like a quiet hum.

“I got really far,” he mutters, staring at his feet.

“That you did,” she agrees. “You might have even succeeded, were it not for Heaven—but I am curious about one thing.”

Yuuri glances at her, brows furrowed.

“How were you going to get down the mountain, dearest?”

He blinks.

That’s a very good question.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Heaven announces loudly from by the doorway, loud footsteps reverberating through the chamber as he walks further inside. “You’re alright with his escape attempts?”

“Of course,” Earth says dismissively, rising from the ground and releasing his shoulders. “If he can prove capable enough to slip away, he can go see his sister as a reward. It was quite a nuisance at first, but I admit the game has grown on me.”

Two years ago, Yuuri would have gotten incensed at her calling this a game; he has learned since then that this is just the way Earth operates. She cares very much about him for reasons Yuuri has yet to decipher, but any other human seems to mean very little to her.

Heaven comes to stand by Earth’s side and looks down at Yuuri critically, who starts feeling very
self-conscious with both gods staring at him now.

“You never did tell me why you decided to take him in,” Heaven says, turning to Earth. “After what you did for him before, I should think—”

“Heaven!” Earth hisses, but Yuuri’s ears have already perked up.

“Before?” he asks, and Earth glares at Heaven, who appears lost for a moment until understanding dawns in his expression.

“You haven’t told him?”

Earth opens her mouth with a fierce scowl, but before she can curse at Heaven Yuuri interrupts.

“Told me what?”

“Nothing, dearest!” Earth says quickly, turning to him with a smile. “Heaven is just a little confused, that’s all. Why don’t you run along now and…”

Yuuri waits for her to finish her sentence, expecting to be dismissed, but as she trails off a different sort of light dawns in her eyes. “And…?”

“I’ve changed my mind.” Earth brushes her fingers through her wet hair, the locks drying instantly at her touch and shifting themselves into a long braid down her left shoulder. “You should attend.”

Attend?

Heaven hums thoughtfully. “I’m not so sure he will appreciate a mortal in his presence.”

“Oh, please, we are all mortal,” Earth dismisses. “Besides, my little flower here is not just any mortal.”

Yuuri, still completely lost as to what all of this is really about, frowns at the implication. “I already told you—”

“Yes, yes, you don’t want to rule the humans, I understand,” Earth interrupts. “Unfortunately for you, you have no choice in the matter; I need a ruler, and I have decided it will be you.”

There it is again, the old argument.

Earth has grown weary of lording over the humans. She does not enjoy it as she did at first, as they take up nearly all of her attention with their petty squabbles, yet she is so much bigger than them, so much more than them. She has appointed emperors and queens, given them their domains and built their empires for them—if she were to abandon them now without any replacement to speak of, it would all dissolve into chaos.

So, she has tired of them, and it has led her to conclude that humanity needs its own ruler, someone to take over for her. For whatever absurd reason, she picked Yuuri, a mere farmer’s boy who used to play with nymphs in the forest.

Him, a king—no, a god.

It’s too ridiculous for words. Every time the topic is brought up Yuuri refuses her, and even though it seems futile to try and resist the will of a deity, resist fate as Earth often claims, the thought of becoming something so unlike himself is frightening. He never wanted to be ruled nor does he want to rule.
All he ever wanted was to lead a simple life.

For today, however, he doesn’t have the energy to reignite the debate after his failed escape attempt and turns his attention to the still mysterious topic at hand. “What am I supposed to attend?”

She looks mighty pleased with his concession, and with a glimmer in her eye, she says, “A visit.”

Yuuri glances from her to Heaven, who appears indifferent, then back again to her. “A visit. From who?”

Earth smiles. “The gods, of course!”

He was wrong.

His life isn’t bizarre at all.

His life is cursed.

“Pleased to see you still walk among the living,” Paean remarks dryly when Yuuri comes trudging into his study later that afternoon. “I have been informed that Her Greatness has decided to allow your attendance during her audiences.”

Yuuri sits down at the chair before Paean’s desk and slumps over, forehead hitting the wooden surface.

“Lively as ever,” Paean comments.

“I don’t want to attend.”

“Truly? I did not notice.”

Yuuri shift his head, resting his chin on the table. “Please tell her that I can’t attend.”

Paean shakes his head. “If she won’t listen to you, young master, why would she listen to me?”

“I can’t attend!”

“Why not?”

Yuuri sits up, motioning desperately with his hands. “All the gods will be there!”

Paean rests his elbows on the table, hands folded in front of his mask, and continues to stare at him. A petal falls off one of the peonies above his nose.

“All of them!” Yuuri repeats, flailing growing more frantic.

“I understand this may be,” Paean pauses, “somewhat distressing—”

“Somewhat?”

“—but it is not as if you would be made to talk to them. Her Greatness merely wishes for you to observe and learn what it means to be a ruler amongst rulers.” His teacher turns his gaze out the windows. “Someday you will be a part of them.”

He has been told this ever since he arrived here, but not why, never why.
Yuuri stares behind Paean to the huge branches that are sticking out of the wall, holding large, heavy tomes and curled around ancient scrolls, functioning as makeshift shelves. Nearly everything in this room is made of wood, save for the windowsill caked with earth that sprouts wildflowers and mushrooms.

“I don’t want to be a part of them.”

All the beauty and wonder in this place, yet it still feels like a prison.

“Why is that?”

Yuuri stares down at the petal that fell from Paean’s mask, lying on the desk between them. “I don’t want to rule anyone.”

“In time, you will.”

He looks up at his teacher, expression hidden and his dark eyes just as unreadable, surrounded by lines of gold etched into the surface of his delicately carved mask. “What do you mean?”

“Even those purest of heart will eventually succumb to the allure of power,” Paean replies stoically. “Such is our nature, as humans.”

Yuuri takes a moment to think about Paean’s odd reply. “So, you agree? That I shouldn’t be a ruler?”

Paean closes his eyes for a moment, and Yuuri hears him sigh behind his mask before he leans back into his tall chair, folding his hands over his stomach. “Her Greatness is convinced you will be able to transcend your humanity.”

“But you don’t think so?”

“Whatever you were before, you were born a human in this life,” he says, and Yuuri’s eyes widen at the implication. “That will always be true.”

“Whatever I was before?” Yuuri repeats quietly, but Paean shakes his head.

“I have already said too much.”

Yuuri wonders at this secret being kept from him, but decides not to press any further for now. He watches another petal break free from the flowers on Paean’s mask, fluttering down to the ground.

“I don’t want to rule,” Yuuri murmurs, thinking of his sister, of the tremble in her lips as if they were holding back a scream. “I don’t want to tell anyone what to do, I don’t want to force anyone to do anything.”

“Refusing the throne would be no better than to abuse it,” Paean says and Yuuri looks up at him in confusion, brows furrowing deeply. “You may be too young to understand, this is an opportunity unlike any other. People are suffering far worse than you realize, and they need a ruler that understands them.”

“Suffering?” Yuuri blinks. “You mean like being forced to marry and making offerings?”

The laugh that escapes Paean is almost bitter. “If only that was the extent of it.”

“What else is there?”
Paean stares at him for a long moment, then shakes his head. “You are too young to worry about such things yet, though I will say this: to the gods, we are less than dust.”

Yuuri tenses, but Paean makes a dismissive gesture with his hand. “No need for worry; even if she overhears, Her Greatness happens to agree with me.”

“She does?”

“Yes, she does,” Paean says, sounding a bit amused at Yuuri’s incredulous tone. “In fact, she has been searching for a replacement for a long time. She understands her reign is a harsh one, and she is more than ready to let us be.”

“If I accept the throne.”

Paean nods, and just as Yuuri opens his mouth, he adds, “I am still sworn to secrecy, young master; I wouldn’t waste my breath asking why.”

Yuuri sighs and slumps into his chair. He hadn’t expected anything different, but it’s the one question he wants desperately answered. He wants to know why, why he was ripped apart from his family and forced into this odd world of magic and gods. Why, and for what?

“Well then,” Paean decides suddenly and rather loudly, getting up from his chair and reaching out a hand. One of the branches holding some scrolls behind him shifts, plucking one from the bottom out of the pile and placing it into Paean’s hand. “I think, in light of your invitation, it is time we went more in depth regarding etiquette.”

“Do we have to?” Yuuri moans, eyeing the large scroll in his teacher’s hand warily. Somehow Paean has a way of making a subject that should be incredibly interesting and exciting into the most boring lecture imaginable.

“You didn’t recognize the Stormbringer on sight and proceeded to embarrass yourself within moments of meeting him,” Paean responds, his tone almost dry enough *not* to be a scolding.

“I guess another lesson wouldn’t hurt,” Yuuri mumbles, feeling his face flush.

“Good.” Paean clears his throat. “Let us begin!”

“As I said before,” Heaven says, seated in an opulent crystal chair that scatters light in every color imaginable, having Yuuri squint every time he looks over in his direction, “I do actually have a matter of some importance to discuss.”

Somehow his voice carries easily across the room, even though the table they are seated at stretches for an absurd thirty feet with both gods at either head of it. Yet his words are spoken as if he were sitting right next to them, Yuuri dining on Earth’s left whose own chair is solid, dark stone—exactly Heaven’s opposite.

Meanwhile Yuuri’s chair is simple wood. Earth offered once to make it prettier, but he quickly turned her down. A chair made of solid gold might be fit for a god, but his behind is still very much human and prefers a simple cushion, not to mention the fact that he’s barely big enough to fill it.

Neither of the gods are eating the extensive supper of meat and fruits Yuuri enjoys either, though he spots Heaven plucking a grape from a plate now and again, freshly plucked. After all, the dining hall is rife with fruits and vegetables growing everywhere, shaped like a small garden.
“And this could not have waited?” Earth replies in boredom, twirling a lock of her hair around her finger. “You know I am being pestered by every creature with even the slightest significance from here to the void—The Ocean is now demanding humans start drowning their horses as a sacrifice.”

“Why?”

Earth huffs. “He finds it amusing.”

“Well.” Heaven straightens up in his chair. “All the more reason I should be here, then. I have no business of my own, mind you—the humans interest me very little—but I have heard talk of… shall we say, dissatisfaction among some of our kin.”

“When are we ever satisfied,” Earth mutters, grabbing her golden chalice from the table and taking a sip.

“This is my warning to you, sister,” Heaven says, leaning forward onto the table. “The Sun has grown displeased.”

“I figured as much,” Earth replies dismissively, “considering he insisted on an audience before anyone else. But when is the fool not displeased?”

That’s the audience Yuuri is expected to attend first? One between Earth and The Sun?

“It’s about the construction of the temple,” Heaven continues, plucking another grape from the pile and tossing it into his mouth. “The one on Apheleia’s Hill.”

Yuuri takes a sip of his juice, expecting yet another dismissive reply, but when he notices Earth tense up from the corner of his eye, he freezes.

Her expression is blank, a gaze in her eyes Yuuri has never seen before.

“You did give him your word,” Heaven replies, his tone cautious, elbows leaning on the table. “You said he could build one anywhere he pleased.”

“Anywhere but there.”

He has never heard her voice sound like that before, slow and cold like water freezing over, her fingers clenching around the armrests of her chair. Whatever is going on here must be very sensitive; Earth may be a harsh mistress, she is usually very slow to anger.

Heaven looks unperturbed, however, and Yuuri decides not to panic yet. “He disagrees.”

“He can disagree all he wants,” Earth replies curtly. “There will be no temple on that hill, especially not one dedicated to his ego—if that is all you came here to tell me, then I’m afraid you wasted your time.”

“In truth, I came here to make a proposal.”

Earth snorts, and sensing the atmosphere relaxing Yuuri takes another slow sip of his drink, glancing between the two gods. “If this is about yet another temple…”

“Nothing of the sort!” Heaven assures her with cheer, straightening up in his seat, hands resting on his legs. “I merely wanted to offer to mediate between the two of you as I know you are not the best of friends—and to return to your earlier question, no, this could not have waited, seeing as how he is almost here.”
Yuuri half-chokes, half-spits out his drink and Earth absently pats him on the back, her indignant look still aimed at Heaven.

“What do you mean, he’s almost here?” Earth demands, taking the cup away from Yuuri who has the juice all over his mouth and chin and offers him a green handkerchief she conjures out of thin air with a twirl of her hand. “Does he intend to barge in here, unannounced?”

Heaven smiles apologetically. “I wouldn’t call it unannounced, exactly.”

“Please don’t tell me—”

Whatever Earth is about to say next abruptly dies halfway out of her mouth when the humming starts.

It’s unlike anything Yuuri has ever heard or felt before. A low buzz that vibrates through the palace, the floor, the walls, through his chair, through his bones and even through the very air itself. He grips the edges of his armrests, looking over at Earth who seems not at all concerned about the tremors, but the dark look that passes over her expression tells him that whatever is about to happen here in this room today, he does not want to end up in the middle of it.

The sunlight pouring into the dining room from the windows on the left starts growing brighter, burn warmer, Yuuri’s only protection being the tall back of his chair that casts a shadow over him. He cannot even glance in Heaven’s direction anymore, the light that reflects off the crystal unbearable to his eyes as the humming grows even louder.

The Sun is coming.

He squeezes his eyes shut, feeling the heat press into him from all sides, the light burning through his eyelids, the tremors so harsh he finds that he dares not open his mouth lest he accidentally shatter his teeth, and then all at once, it stops.

It’s as if nothing happened, the sudden silence and stillness utterly disorienting. Yuuri hesitantly opens his eyes again, and though his food has been all but tossed off the table that has been held into place by the roots wrapped around its legs, everything appears to be normal once again.

For a time.

The double doors to the dining hall burst open with a bang that makes Yuuri all but jump out of his chair, blinding light silhouetting a tall figure who stands in the opening with his arms spread wide, commanding a voice that roars through Yuuri’s ears like a storm.

“The Sun has risen!”

Earth slumps in her chair, and covers her eyes with her hand. “Ugh.”

Yuuri can only watch as the light behind The Sun fades, outstretched arms slumping to his sides, leaving behind the frame of a tall, lean man with blue eyes and thick, dark brows who stares at the back of Earth’s chair, offended.

“Pardon me?”

The Sun—glowing in gold flame like a torch—stares at Earth as if she had personally gone over there and slapped him in the face without provocation, and Yuuri is so torn between hysterical laughter and whimpering that he finds himself completely frozen.
This is not what he imagined all those years ago when Earth commanded him to live among gods.

Earth’s expression shifts in an instant to a smile as she gets up from her seat, turning to The Sun with her arms stretched wide. “My dearest brother, I am so pleased you could visit so soon! Come, sit with us!”

In a moment of what must be insanity Yuuri is reminded of the time his aunt and uncle came to visit from a neighboring village, and they had them over for tea. It ended in the table, as well as the tea, being flipped over.

He hopes this meeting will fare better.

The meeting does not fare better.

Yuuri sits in between two camps, stuck in the center of a battlefield he had no idea he was walking into, a war waged not with swords or spears but with polite condescension and the sharp edges of words.

The Sun has taken Heaven’s chair and turned it into heavy gold inlaid with jewels each so precious as to feed a whole village for a year. As much as Yuuri tries to keep his head down—and to his relief, he has yet to be acknowledged—it does offer him the opportunity to observe and study this god, the blue of his eyes a sharp contrast to the rich glow on his tan skin, the yellow of his robes.

If one were to see The Sun from a distance, watch the light dance over his skin like flames, feel his voice shatter through one’s thoughts, fear and worship would only be the most natural of responses.

But seeing him here, confronted with his peers, is a different story altogether.

“You promised,” The Sun says for the twelfth time (Yuuri has been keeping count). “You said I could have my temple wherever I pleased!”

Earth glances at Heaven who sits to the right of her, right across Yuuri. Words pass unspoken in their gazes, before Earth turns back to The Sun who takes a bite out of a pear, looking rather chagrinned.

It is surreal.

“I thought it was common knowledge that Apheleia’s Hill was to be left alone,” Earth replies calmly, reaching for her goblet and taking a sip of whatever drink is in there. “Seeing as how you want to construct something on my body, demanding worship from my children, I believe the terms should be for me to decide, would you not agree?”

“Children,” The Sun scoffs, taking another bite out of his pear before throwing it back down onto the plate filled with fruits in front of him.

Yuuri glances to the servants tucked at the very edges of the walls on either side of the god, each as stiff as statues, eyes nervously glancing over to The Sun whenever he moves. He does not see Paean among them.

“Whatever you may consider them is beside the point,” The Sun continues, chewing angrily. “You gave me your word, and I expect you to honor it.”

“Brother, be reasonable,” Heaven interjects. “Surely you can think of a better place for a temple to be built? Perhaps a mountain would be more suited—”
“What is the point of a temple if worshippers have to climb a mountain to get to it?” The Sun snaps, getting up from his chair and beginning to pace through the room, plucking an apple from a near tree and taking a bite of that one as well. “No, it must be that hill. I have decided!”

Apparently, The Sun eats a lot when he is under duress.

“You might have decided, but I have not,” Earth replies sharply, “and there will be no accord until I decide.”

The Sun spins on his heel to face her, apple shattering like frail glass in his fist. “Without me, you would be a lifeless rock.”

“And without me, you would have no one to worship you!” Earth looks increasingly frustrated, but not as much as The Sun is from the way he glares. Yuuri is just glad he is being ignored during all this; he’s not sure he could withstand the hatred in that look and not spontaneously catch flame.

Earth takes a deep breath and sighs, easing back into her chair. “These games you play will cost you dearly, one day.”

“What games?” The Sun mocks. “The only game I see being played here—”

“Let’s stop pretending this is about the temple,” Heaven interrupts calmly, looking to The Sun who has crossed his arms over his chest and looks absurdly like a child being denied something by his parents. “If you want more followers, prove yourself worthy.”

The Sun looks Heaven with a frown. “You are not suggesting…?”

“Why not?” Heaven says. “It would prove whose favor weighs more once and for all—yours, or hers.”

Earth smiles. “An excellent idea.”

“For you, perhaps!” The Sun erupts, the light embracing him flaring painfully bright, Yuuri having to cover his eyes. “Even after hundreds of battles your Champion is undefeated, and what do I have to contend with? The leftovers?”

“Have you so little faith in your own power?” Earth mocks. “Surely any mortal elevated by The High One would have no trouble dethroning just one man?”

The Sun huffs and turns away, starting to pace again. Yuuri glances curiously from one to the other, wondering what all this talk about Champions and dethroning is about.

“It does seem a little bit unfair,” Heaven offers in the silence. “Considering your Champion has so much experience, I cannot think of another gladiator who could match him.”

“Then why keep to single combat?” Earth replies. “A battlefield, a thousand men each. I may have nurtured his strength, but his mind is all his own, I assure you—unless you do not think you can find a better tactician to surpass him?”

The Sun, looking very red—not just in the face, but in general as the golden glow on him has begun to burn crimson—sharply turns towards her mid-pace once again. “Fine! Fine, we shall see! A thousand men it is!”

He stalks back over to the table, leaning onto it with his knuckles, gaze aimed straight at Earth. “But make no mistake, however many battles he may have won up until now, when the time comes, I will
crush him.”

Earth merely smiles in return. “I look forward to it.”

With a last scoff, The Sun promptly turns towards the doors, all but marching his way back the way he came. When they slam shut behind him, Yuuri lets out a huge sigh.

At least no tables were flipped.

“Are you sure this is wise, sister?” Heaven asks quietly. “You may think his ire makes him predictable, but ever since the humans came he has begun to resent you—hate you, I fear. That should not be taken lightly.”

“For all his years, he is still but a child,” Earth responds irritably. “It is what happens when one is used to being the center of everything, I suppose.”

“Um,” Yuuri says, finally feeling comfortable enough to speak up now that the literal Sun isn’t in the room glaring at everyone anymore. “What is this about, exactly?”

“Oh, yes, I forgot that you have yet to meet him!” Earth says, a look passing over her features Yuuri has never seen before, one of pride. “Usually disagreements such as these would be settled in the Coliseum, but I’m afraid my Champion has become too adept at single combat for any man, no matter how blessed by a god’s favor, to truly match him. So, we have decided on something a little less predictable.”

“It will be his first time, will it not?” Heaven says, appearing far more concerned than Earth.

“We will have time,” Earth responds, in contrast looking not at all concerned. “A few years, give or take—more than enough to prepare him.”

Yuuri opens his mouth, but finds himself speechless.

A thousand men on each side, two thousand people, waging a small war and throwing their lives away over what? A plot of land? A single building?

“You seem to already have it all planned out,” Heaven continues, amused at the prospect, as if these weren’t people but puppets, expendable. “I’m not so sure he will take to the idea as you have.”

“Nonsense, he’ll love it, and he’ll become all the greater for it,” Earth decides, as if there can be no further argument.

Yuuri feels at once a great sympathy for this unnamed Champion. Is he like Yuuri, taken away from his home and forced into a role he never asked for? Forced to fight battles for distant gods that do not see him as anything more than a tool, something to be used, and yet to be undefeated despite it all—Yuuri can hardly imagine it.

“You have never met him before, have you?” Earth speaks to him, snapping him out of his thoughts. There’s a softness about her smile that eyes a bit strange, though Yuuri cannot put his finger on why that is. “It might be a while, but once you’ve completed your education I’ll make sure to introduce the two of you.”

“Your, um, your Champion,” Yuuri starts hesitantly. “What kind of person is he?”

“He’s Earth’s favorite,” Heaven answers before Earth can. “As far as humans go, at least. He has never lost a fight, not to man or to hubris. Both men and gods adore him, though there are exceptions
as you saw with my brother just now.”

“I think you’ll like him very much,” Earth adds brightly, and while Yuuri listens as she goes on to describe him, describe the silver in his hair and the blue in his eyes and the shine in his smile and the strength in his hands, something forms in Yuuri’s mind, something like a bubble rising from the depths of a lightless ocean to find the surface and breathe air again.

A title.

A name.

Victor.
year twenty, autumn

*And so the High One said:*

> ‘Creatures of mud that dwell below me,
> I gaze down upon you and fill your days with Light;
> I give you warmth when Wind should stir;
> I give you Life where none would grow.
> Build me too the temples you have devoted to Earth.’

—The Theogonies, line 540-545

Sunlight sparks off the end of his blade as he swings, the sharp edge cutting through air with a powerful arc that ends in a ring of metal when it’s caught on the flat side of a broadsword.

The knockback is so strong that he staggers, a drop of sweat beading on his forehead sliding down the wrinkle between his brows to the tip of his nose as he watches the broadsword sweep up and come down with force.

He dives to the side and watches the tiles shatter where the tip meets the ground, startled for just a moment, which is all the time his opponent needs to rip his weapon from among the broken stones and swipe at him again.

Yuuri narrowly blocks it with his own, but the strength behind it is so strong that it shudders through his blade and into his arms. Another swing and his katana is knocked right out of his grip, clattering onto the floor and skidding a few feet before it stops. Yuuri looks down at his hands, pain throbbing through his fingers, the insides covered in bright red marks.

“You are still startled too easily,” Heaven says from the ornate marble bench he’s lounging in, Yuuri’s opponent—a servant with orange lilies adorning the typical earth-brown mask—sliding the sword back into its sheath. “You mustn’t allow yourself to be intimidated, trust your instincts.”

The sun glows sharp high atop the palace, and Yuuri feels it burn into the dark of his hair as he puts his hands on his hips and catches his breath. The servant across from him appears entirely unbothered by the exercise even though they have been going at it for several hours, standing passively with a hand on the hilt of the plain broadsword resting in an equally simple sheath.

Yuuri’s sword is similar in its lack of any decoration, considering it’s merely for practice, but compared to the size of the broadsword he must admit he wasn’t looking forward to any clashes.

“I believe the young master is due some respite,” his opponent speaks, cool brown eyes watching Yuuri closely from behind the mask, appearing completely unbothered by the heat despite the heavy dark robes.

Heaven may be his teacher in the art of battle, but Bellum is no less responsible for his training.

“I’m fine,” Yuuri replies, rubbing a sore spot on his hip that met the full force of Bellum’s heel in an earlier round. Bruised, no doubt. “But I wouldn’t mind a bath.”

“It’s about time for your lessons with Paean, I suppose,” Heaven remarks, giving him a knowing look as Bellum picks up Yuuri’s katana for him and returns it to the rack of weapons nearby. “Get going, then! And don’t push yourself too hard; Earth will be very cross with me if you end up spraining something.”

“I’ll escort him,” Bellum assures.
“It’s just a bath,” Yuuri mutters back, though he knows it to be futile as he heads towards the stairs, Bellum trailing him like a shadow.

While he hasn’t officially been assigned one, it seems Bellum has decided to fulfill the role of personal guard ever since being appointed to aid in Yuuri’s combat lessons. It looks a bit strange at first glance considering Bellum is shorter than Yuuri by two inches, but his lack of height belies the power he holds in his arms when he wields his sword.

Yuuri is certain Bellum was initially encouraged to keep an eye on him because of Yuuri’s suspicious lack of escape attempts, which put Earth on edge. He’s no longer a little boy and while he may not be as good a swordsman as Bellum, who counts as one of the finest warriors in Earth’s service, his skills are nothing to scoff at either.

But as years passed, Earth’s wariness waned. Yuuri hoped it would mean Bellum’s incessant stalking would come to an end as well, but for whatever reason, it continued.

“You can’t keep following me forever,” Yuuri remarks dryly as he passes by another servant waiting by the stairs offering him a soft towel, buttercups adorning her mask. “Thank you, Hygieia.”

Her green eyes widen slightly, surprised as ever, which is as amusing as it is exasperating to Yuuri. The servants are so used to being ignored that even after several years of Yuuri trying to memorize all their names and address them as such, they still cannot seem to understand why he does it.

“Not forever, no,” Bellum agrees seriously. “Just until you are old enough to leave the palace.”

“Surely you must have something better to do?” Yuuri responds as they climb up the stairs into one of the many corridors, the summer greens faded into red and yellow and orange leaves that litter the ground, flowers replaced by wild mushrooms and pinecones scattered over the floor, the grass no longer growing.

“There are no wars for me to fight.”

Yuuri’s lips thin into a grimace, leaves crunching underneath his boots. “None yet.”

“You speak of Victor.”

His heart flutters in his chest like a startled bird caught in a cage, and he wonders if there will ever come a time when he will be able to hear the name without faltering in his step.

Bellum continues as if he had not. “While his prowess with the blade is undisputed, whether he is as adept as commanding a large force remains to be seen.”

Yuuri doesn’t reply to that, not knowing what—if anything—he could even say in defense of a stranger.

He has never met Victor, shouldn’t know him beyond the stories of his conquests in the Coliseum and yet the name says something to him, sings something like an old song he has forgotten; he knew the name before anyone ever told him.

With Bellum by his side Yuuri trails through the corridors in contemplative silence, wondering about the secrets being kept from him. Not just regarding Victor, but also about Yuuri himself. Years have passed and it is no clearer to him as to why he was chosen.

“You are awfully quiet,” Bellum comments when they pass two more servants sweeping up the leaves that have blown into the palace and Yuuri only gives them a passing smile instead of his usual
greeting.

“I’ve just been thinking a lot lately.”

Bellum hums. “The Stormbringer has been working you rather hard today.”

“It’s not that,” Yuuri replies vaguely, though he admits the steady increase in both training regimen as well as his studies with Paean the past few months has evoked some suspicion. “How did you end up here, Bellum?”

A slight pause before he responds. “You’ve asked me this before.”

“I have,” Yuuri says, glancing at the reticent warrior from the corner of his eyes. “You said Earth chose you, but you never told me how.”

“She didn’t possess the village statue and disappear me, if that’s what you mean.”

Yuuri frowns at him, and Bellum relents slightly. “My name wasn’t always Bellum.”

“It wasn’t?”

“Earth renamed me.”

“Why?”

Bellum is silent.

When Yuuri keeps stubbornly staring at him as they come to a halt in front of the large wooden doors leading to the bathing chambers, Bellum sighs and elaborates, “She renamed me after I fought Victor in the Coliseum.”

Yuuri’s mouth parts slightly, then closes again, a hundred questions filling his head. He starts with the most pertinent one. “How did that happen?”

“I was in service to a king a long time ago,” Bellum says, eyes drifting off towards an invisible point above Yuuri’s shoulder. “He became neglectful of the weekly offerings, deciding to cut them by half, and then by half again. Whether it was for his own gains or for the sake of his people, I cannot say, but you can imagine how Earth responded to this.

“There were floods, earthquakes, hundreds died and thousands more lost their homes. The king used Earth’s temple as a refuge for those who needed shelter, taking down her statues and suspending all rites of worship permanently.”

“That cannot have ended well,” Yuuri says, almost wincing at the thought of being the focus of Earth’s ire in any way.

“It didn’t.” Bellum stares at Yuuri for a moment with a distant look, then continues, “I was one of the many who lost their home and loved ones in the floods. I didn’t care why the king did it, all I saw was the suffering of my people and I wanted it to end.

“Earth offered to settle the matter through a trial at the Coliseum; if the king or one who would stand in his place could best every single gladiator in a gauntlet, she would restore all the damage she had done and revoke the obligation of offerings. At the time, I was the king’s best warrior.”

“You lost against Victor,” Yuuri states, and Bellum inclines his head. “But you were spared.”
From all that Paean told him about Victor, Yuuri gained the impression that no one ever survived a battle against him, as is the nature of the Coliseum. Gladiator matches do not end until there is only one man left standing.

“She judged I would be more useful to her alive than dead.”

Yuuri is unsure what to say in response; compared to Bellum, his life has been a far easier one. Working in the fields has left callouses hardened on his palms and the backs of his fingers, but at least he didn’t lose anyone, not truly. His parents are still alive, and his sister—while wed by now—is doing well, or so Earth told him last.

He wonders whether Bellum’s current situation is at all an improvement to his previous one. To fail at exacting your revenge on your enemy is one thing, but to then be claimed by that same enemy as a servant? Bellum cannot possibly be happy like this.

“Thank you for telling me,” Yuuri settles on at length, not comfortable voicing the questions floating around in his mind. “I’ll, um, I’ll be right back.”

Bellum inclines his head slightly and shifts to stand stoically beside the doors to the bathing chambers, like he was stationed there as a suit of armor.

Without another glance Yuuri pulls open a door, remembering when he was younger how he would struggle with the heavy weight of these things, huge as they are. Now, however, they weigh nothing, the muscles on his arm barely flexing. His training has done well for him in that department, at least.

The bathing chamber itself is very simple, mostly consisting of water. The huge pool before him is surrounded by tall, pristine white pillars rising from the rocks that cover the edge of deep green water lying almost perfectly still. It would’ve looked like a natural hot spring were it not for the artificial rectangular cut of it, vines blooming with pink flowers wrapped around the pillars, dropping petals every now and then making the occasional ripple.

Yuuri undoes the thin rope tied around his waist, pulling his dark blue robes off over his head. It took a while getting used to how wide they were. The clothes he was always used to wearing at home weren’t as freely flowing as these, not to mention the stupidly restrictive sandals. Still, he adapted fine, and it’s not as if he is in want of anything as far as bodily needs go.

After having shed all his clothes he moves to the edge of the pool, standing atop a rock and dipping his foot in to make sure the water isn’t too hot. Though he knows logically it’s always kept at a good temperature, whenever he sees the steam he can’t help but check.

Feeling it’s just warm enough Yuuri bends down and hops in the rest of the way, the water reaching just above his hips. He takes a breath and submerges himself, coming up moments later and brushing his hands through his hair.

The cleansing (and healing) properties of the water are, simply put, magic. One doesn’t have to spend very long in the pool to be free of dirt or sweat or grease. Usually a few minutes drifting around does the trick. It’s particularly helpful after training as Yuuri can already feel the bruise on his hip healing, the spot feeling warmer than the rest of his body.

The servants, however, are not allowed to bathe here. They have their own bathhouse in the palace, and as far as Yuuri knows he and Earth are the only ones who use this room.

He drifts on his back, petals floating around him as he stares up at the stone mosaic on the ceiling depicting dolphins and other fish bursting out of waves and chariots pulled by winged horses,
carrying them high into clouds.

Time passes in silence and he closes his eyes, mind pleasantly devoid of anything but the soothing warmth of the water, the faint scent of lavender and something sweeter he can’t identify running through the steam. He could fall asleep like this, would fall asleep if he could breathe underwater.

There’s a knock on the doors.

Yuuri blinks his eyes open and straightens up, his feet finding the bottom of the pool as he puts a hand through his hair, trying to shake off his drowsy haze. “Come in.”

One door creaks open slowly, Bellum’s arm pushing it as another figure ducks under while murmuring an embarrassed thank you. Yuuri peers at the servant’s mask as that is the only way to differentiate them all, noting the buttercups.

It’s Hygieia, carrying a towel and a fresh set of clothes for him. Her head is bowed but Yuuri doesn’t miss the glance she throws his way—the water doesn’t hide anything from view, but Yuuri isn’t bothered.

“Thanks,” he calls out as she sets them down by the rocks.

She lingers on her knees, hesitant. “Um, would… would you like a massage?”

Yuuri considers it indolently as he watches one of the large pink flowers that fell off a vine drift by him in the pool. The water may have healing properties but it’s purely regenerative, not relaxing; it doesn’t do anything for the knots in his back.

“Sure.”

Hygieia is good with her hands, Yuuri notes when he’s sitting on the bench carved into the wall of the pool and she’s on the very edge of the rocks, fingers working diligently into his tense shoulders.

It’s strange. He almost expected to feel something, but he doesn’t. Paean has talked to him extensively about the concept of hormones, libido and sex as part of his lessons in human anatomy and biology, but Yuuri can’t say he feels any different than normal. Aware he’s being watched, certainly, but not much else.

Maybe it’s because all the servants are covered up. The only other people he’s seen wearing normal robes are Earth, Heaven and a handful of other gods over the years, and Yuuri isn’t very inclined to fantasize about any sort of divine entity on the small chance they hear his thoughts. Gods like to do that; he can’t even count the amount of times Heaven has teased him about his daydreaming. Not to mention that they’re not remotely attractive to him. He has seen both Earth and Heaven completely bare plenty of times—gods don’t fuss over nudity the way humans do—and never has he ever felt any sort of desire welling up inside him. Mostly because they are familial to him, and so far beyond him. They’re parental figures, not objects of desire.

Thankfully his hormonal phase has subsided and he doesn’t feel as pressed about needing to touch himself now that he’s hit his twenties. The only fantasizing he’s done is with vaguely-defined shadows of human men, and he’s certain his juvenile erotic imaginings don’t come close to the real thing, which more often than not leaves him frustrated and so he’s given up on it entirely. The itch is still there, but it’s easier to deal with now that he’s matured.

“All done,” Hygieia says and Yuuri’s half-lidded eyes snap open wide, blinking in surprise. He almost dozed off again, carried away by his very nearly inappropriate thoughts; he almost forgot
there was another person in here with him.

Probably spurred on by the heat in the room. Heat always has that sort of effect on him.

“You’re really good at this,” Yuuri notes as he stretches and yawns, muscles feeling relaxed and easy as he turns his musings towards the girl behind him rather than let them wander off.

It’s the first time he’s had Hygieia tend to him. She’s several years younger than he is, no older than sixteen if he recalls correctly. One of Epione’s daughters, who tends to Earth personally in things such as bathing.

Hygieia is already up on her feet and holding out the towel for him as Yuuri rises from the bench and steps out of the water, taking it from her while purposefully avoiding her eyes. It’s obvious she’s uncomfortable, not used to serving others yet, not to mention a girl in the middle of flourishing into adolescence. It wouldn’t surprise him if he was the first man she saw naked.

Yuuri doesn’t miss the once-over she gives him before she quickly turns her head away again, but pretends not to notice as he uses the towel to dry off his hair first, indulging her curiosity so long as it remains curiosity and doesn’t become something else. That would be unfortunate, seeing as how he hasn’t the slightest interest in women, let alone young girls.

He watches her when she turns her back on him and wonders if he’s starting to get spoiled when she bends down to pick up his clothes for him and his initial instinct is to let her do it.

“That’s unnecessary,” Yuuri says belatedly when she already has his robe in hand. “I prefer to dress on my own, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh.” Hygieia’s shoulders shrink into herself as she drops the robe, making her appear smaller than she already is. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” Yuuri replies quickly. “I always bathe and dress by myself.”

“Oh,” Hygieia says again, pointedly looking away as Yuuri dries the rest of his body. “I apologize for intruding, then.”

Yuuri sighs, feeling as if he’s had this conversation a thousand times before, which is probably fairly accurate.

“There’s no need for an apology, you were just tending to your duties,” he answers as he reaches for the set of clothes and grabs the thin undergarments first. “You can still bring me a towel and some clothes, but you don’t need to dress me.”

He knows better than to try and tell her not to serve him anymore. He attempted it once when he was younger and naïve, sick of constantly having his wine poured by someone else and the servant in question—Keraon, he remembers—had been utterly mortified. Relieving a servant of their duties in this palace means they’ll be returned to the human world outside, discarded as useless as Paean informed him later.

It leaves a bad taste in his mouth, but he doesn’t have a choice but to let them serve him or risk having them sent away to somewhere far worse than this.

“I understand,” Hygieia says, sounding relieved as Yuuri reaches for his robe next. She picked out another one identical to what he wore for practice, but in dark red. “Also, um, Paean told me you are to meet him at the western gardens instead of his study for today.”
Yuuri looks up briefly from tying the rope around his waist. “That’s unusual,” he muses. “Did he mention why?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

Yuuri waves it off with a casual gesture contradicting his polite tone as he turns toward the doors. “I’ll head there straight away, thank you.”

Though he resolved himself to being part of this cruel hierarchy, in the end he still can’t help but come away feeling guilty.

Earth promised him that once he accepted his place on the throne she would release all her human servants, leaving her with nymphs, spirits and minor deities in her service, but until then this would continue.

He accepted it, he remained passive. Logically, he knows that’s the only thing he can do, but it does nothing to assuage his conscience.

The masks, the heavy robes, the involuntary servitude, existing only to please their masters—Yuuri didn’t understand what Paean said when he told him all those years ago that refusing the throne would be far worse than to claim it, but he does now that he’s older.

If he runs away, what good will come of it? Earth won’t force him to the throne if he’s truly set on refusing it, she has said so many times before, but then what? She’ll replace him, and what if his replacement isn’t as bound to morality as Yuuri is? Is he going to run off back to his village to work himself to death on the fields while a despot no better than Earth continues her reign, or possibly makes it even worse?

It’s why he gave up, eventually. He couldn’t turn his back on these people, can’t turn his back on the countless others like Bellum’s loved ones that ended up caught in the middle of a pissing contest between king and god, killed for nothing, dead for nothing.

His thoughts wander further as he exits the bathing chamber, Bellum trailing him silently as he departs towards the western gardens.

He has had several years now to think of what he’ll do differently once he ascends the throne, whatever that means. The mandatory offerings will be abolished, naturally, and he’ll have to reevaluate all the people Earth chose to rule in their respective kingdoms and empires, depending on the place. Many of them, he knows from his many lessons with Paean, are tyrants.

Earth didn’t care what kind of moral inclinations they had so long as they were willing to make the offerings and worship her, which led to very unsavory characters wearing crowns and wielding power they should have never had. Yuuri has already drawn up a list of names inside his head, and though it will be a long while before he’s finally able to demand change considering he’s still very young, he already knows where he—

His foot slips on air and Yuuri only then realizes he has missed a step going down the stairs, losing his balance and falling towards the ground before an arm around his waist stops him.

“You should pay more attention to your surroundings, young master,” Bellum says stoically as he pulls Yuuri upright.

“Sorry,” Yuuri mutters, awkwardly scratching the back of his neck. “And thanks.”

“Oh, Yuuri, that was dangerous!”
Yuuri glances down to the gardens below him, several nymphs gathered in laughter and dance. Some of them, seated in a circle near the stairs and braiding flowers in each other’s hair, are looking at him in worry.

“It’s no good to daydream while you’re walking,” one of the group, a nymph covered from head to toe in brightly blooming vines, cautions him as he makes it the rest of the way down. “You’ll get hurt!”

“I know, I know,” Yuuri replies, exasperated as another one with huge bushy green hair that sprouts various wild berries reaches out and grabs at his robe.

“Come sit with us!” he coaxes. “I want to braid your hair!”

“Yes, come sit with us, Yuuri!”

“I can play a song for you, if you want!”

Yuuri smiles and shakes his head, then glances over his shoulder at Bellum who’s still near the top of the stairs. “What are you waiting around for?”

Addressing Bellum directs the attention of the nymphs from Yuuri to him, and suddenly all the happy noise quiets down. Yuuri looks around with a frown.

“It’s alright,” he says, the nymphs all looking collectively uneasy, like they’re on the edge of bolting. “He’s a friend.”

“He’s a human,” the berry-nymph hisses nervously.

“It can’t be helped,” Bellum decides before Yuuri can reply. “I’ll return to Heaven.”

Yuuri watches him go, then turns towards the group of nymphs closest to him who have relaxed with Bellum’s departure, back to chatting animatedly and laughing amongst themselves.

“I’m a human too, you know,” he says. It’s been this way for as long as he can remember—nymphs adore him, but cannot stand any other human. They always flee when someone aside from Yuuri gets too close.

“You’re different,” the vine-nymph replies simply, twining a rose into her friend’s long, root-like hair.

Yuuri has been through this routine many times before and decides not to waste his breath asking questions he won’t get answers for, continuing through the gardens towards the edge of the tree line surrounding the castle.

Soon he sees Paean sitting there on a collapsed pillar by himself, removed far enough from the nymphs not to deter them and separated from them by a row of hedges blooming with roses. He’s holding a book in his hand, flipping through it too quickly for him to be reading. He’s probably skimming it, looking for something.

While he is the only person in the vicinity aside from Yuuri, to say he’s alone would be somewhat inaccurate. Yuuri notices them only a second after seeing Paean: four huge, winged white horses tied to a golden chariot, sitting by the only road leading towards the cliffside of the mountain palace, cutting through the trees.

Yuuri breathes in the fresh air and approaches his teacher silently, deciding to ignore the horses for
the moment. His footsteps in the grass give his presence away and Paean looks up from his book, a petal falling off one of the peonies on his mask, carried away by a soft breeze.

“There you are,” his teacher says, closing his book as Yuuri settles down on the grass in front of him. “How was your training?”

“I lost again,” Yuuri replies, feeling his mood drop slightly. “Heaven says I’m still too easily startled.”

“You lack confidence,” Paean corrects and Yuuri does his best not to wince. “It’s always been one of your flaws, but a particularly difficult one to have when it comes to combat—doubting your blade won’t be forgiven as easily in battle as it is during a spar.”

“I’m working on it.”

Paean sighs deeply, far deeper than he usually does. “I know you are.”

There’s a brief silence and Yuuri looks at his teacher curiously, not being able to read his face due to the mask but being able to read the slumped posture of his shoulders and clasped hands just fine.

“Why did you want to meet here?” he questions, glancing towards the horses and the chariot. Are they going on a ride? Perhaps Paean has decided to teach him how to handle horses, or something of the sort.

“This isn’t a lesson.”

Yuuri blinks back at Paean, flustered. “What?”

Paean gets up from the pillar, gray eyes seeming grave as they stare at him through the mask. “You are to leave the palace, immediately.”

The wind blows through the leaves and through the space between Yuuri and Paean, flowers in the grass bending at its force. Yuuri can do nothing but stare.

“It’s not permanent, of course,” Paean continues after the pause. “You are to return before winter, but the autumn season you’ll be spending down below.”

“I don’t—I don’t understand,” Yuuri stammers, feeling as if his brain has just been swiped out of his skull, leaving him without one. “I can go? I can really leave?”

“Just for a few months,” Paean emphasizes sharply. “Consider it a test; Earth wants to know how you will fare on your own.”

Even for a god, this is insanity. “So I just… I have to go? Right now?”

“Yes.”

“But I need to pack, I need my—”

“You are to leave with only the clothes on your back.”

Yuuri continues to stare in mute shock, and Paean’s eyes crease slightly with what Yuuri imagines is a smile of some sort. Either an apologetic one or a pitying one, he can’t quite tell which one it is but he figures it’s a bit of both, knowing Paean.

“I did say it was a test,” Paean points out wryly, walking over towards the chariot and petting one of
the horses at the very front. “Earth’s tests are hardly ever fair. She is, as you know, a cruel mistress. Still, this is what you always wanted.”

“Yes, but, this is…” Yuuri shakes his head, pushing himself up off the ground. “This is very sudden, I don’t even know where to go or… or what to do once I’m there, wherever there is!”

“They’ll leave you at the base of the mountain,” Paean says, speaking of the horses as he continues petting one on the side of its neck and ignoring Yuuri’s outburst. “The rest you’ll have to figure out for yourself. You’re free to do whatever you want, to go wherever you please.”

The enormity of liberty suddenly thrust upon him is so overwhelming Yuuri can hardly comprehend it, quietly walking over towards the chariot. All those years of trying, all those escape attempts, all the times he fell asleep crying for the family and friends he had lost, and after all this time she just wants to set him free?

“Why now?” Yuuri demands, looking up at Paean, fists clenched. “Of all times, why now?”

“She judged you to be ready,” Paean answers simply, which means not even he knows the reasons behind it.

Yuuri stares at the chariot in front of him, his escape from the palace that has kept him contained for so long that it has become as much as a home as a prison, the world that was a distant dream suddenly waiting right at his feet, huge and vast and terrifying.

“You’ll be fine.”

Paean’s hand is warm on his shoulder even through the glove.

“Before I go, I…” Yuuri falters, and there are so many things he wants to say, wants to ask, but only one thing occurs to him then and he pauses in surprise at his own forgetfulness. “I never asked Bellum what his name was, before.”

Paean gives him a look Yuuri can’t quite read. “Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t tell you.”

“He doesn’t remember?” Yuuri guesses, receiving a nod in affirmation. “Why not?”

“Everyone in Earth’s service is given a new name upon entering it,” Paean explains without inflection in his voice. “You are required to drink a cup of water from the river Lethe to forget your old name and embrace the one chosen for you by our Blessed Mother.”

Yuuri chews on the inside of his cheek for a moment, not liking the sound of that at all. It’s just another way to control people, to take away what they were before and reshape them in whatever manner you see fit.

“Even you?”

“Yes, even me.” Paean pauses, and Yuuri feels the gaze burning on his face though he does not lift his head to meet it. “Though I do remember Bellum’s human name. It was Otabek, if I’m not mistaken.”

Yuuri hums at this, as it doesn’t sound like any name he’s heard before, wondering what part of the world Bellum—Otabek—is from, what his home was like. “Couldn’t you just tell him?”

Paean shakes his head. “He would forget it as soon as he heard it.”
Likely the effect of the water is lasting, then. It’s a strange last thing to fixate on, but nothing else
comes to mind as Yuuri stares at the chariot before him. Many things flash through his mind like bits
of light flitting across his thoughts as if reflected from shards of glass, there and gone again.

Did Heaven know? Did Bellum? Why isn’t Earth here to say goodbye? Where is he supposed to go,
what should he do, how is he expected to survive when years of being pampered have softened the
rough edges of a farmer’s boy who was used to the wild, but now knows nothing except for gilded
chairs and velvet pillows?

The initial shock steadily continues to wear off and his anxiety grows and grows and grows, until the
bits of light in his head start burning behind his eyes with an urgency and intensity that has him short
of breath.

His sandals aren’t made for walking long distances and his robe isn’t ideal for travelling either, and
he would’ve liked to at least have his sword with him, speaking of which he hasn’t sharpened its
blade in a while now even though he doesn’t use it in practice—

“Yuuri,” Paean says, his voice snapping him out of his thoughts with the sudden clarity of a bell.
“You’ll be fine.”

“I… I hope so,” is all Yuuri can answer in return as he takes a big, deep breath to calm himself,
feeling steadier as he repeats Paean’s words in his head. You’ll be fine, you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.

Before he can change his mind, he lurches forward and steps—hops—onto the chariot, eyeing the
horses in front of him doubtfully as he grabs ahold of the reins with some hesitance, unsure of how
to handle them.

He still can’t believe this is happening.

“Don’t worry, they can fly on their own,” Paean reassures him, not that flying down a mountain is all
that reassuring to begin with, self-steering horses or no.

Yuuri turns his head to look at his teacher, opening his mouth to say something but finds he can say
nothing at all.

Paean’s eyes are shining brightly, the wrinkles around them appearing deeper than they are, and
there is a quiet tremor in his voice as he squeezes Yuuri’s shoulder one last time and says, “Until
winter.”

It’s his only goodbye when the horses suddenly start moving and Yuuri nearly falls over, clutching at
the edge of the chariot as it’s slowly driven away from the gardens towards the forest and onto the
dirt-road.

Suddenly his head is filled with all the things he wants to say as the chariot rides away from Paean
and starts picking up speed, but there’s only one thing Yuuri can manage as he sees his teacher’s
figure grow ever the more distant.

“Paean!” Yuuri yells so loudly he startles birds out of their trees, and as much as he has wanted this,
part of him undeniably wants to jump right back out the chariot and return to the safety of the palace,
the comfort of Paean’s hand on his shoulder.

But he stays inside, white-knuckled fists clenched around the golden railing, and all he can do is
shout across the ever-growing distance between them.

“Thank you for everything!”
The last thing he sees of the palace is Paean’s arm raising up in a wave before the chariot takes a turn around the trees and his teacher, as well as the gardens, disappear.

Yuuri all but collapses onto the floor of the chariot as it starts gaining more and more speed, hands hanging onto the edges, heart pounding in his chest as he realizes this is happening, this is really happening.

The forest is darting by in a blur and when Yuuri peers out over the rim of the chariot the trees suddenly disappear and the glare of the sun in his eyes is so bright he squeezes them shut, wind blowing through his hair as he notices with a start that the sound of dirt and pebbles grinding underneath the wheels of the chariot has disappeared.

When he opens his eyes, there is nothing around him but clouds and endless sky.

Needless to say, Yuuri spent the rest of the ride screaming in terror with his hands covering his eyes, huddled up in the corner of the chariot. Somehow, he was unaffected by things such as basic physics; the moment the chariot dove he remained glued to it as if he wasn’t spiraling downwards over a mountain. Magic, most likely.

When the chariot finally lands after the harrowing descent and came to a turbulent standstill in a large open clearing at the base of the mountain somewhere in the woods, the first thing Yuuri does is fall onto the grass and promptly throw up his breakfast.

Admittedly not the best first step into the world below he could have taken, but at least it’s a step.

Wiping his mouth clean with the back of his hand, Yuuri gets the vague sense that one of the winged horses that’s staring at him is actually pitying him. He stares back with a scowl and the horse snorts, throwing its head back—as if it were a signal, all four of them begin to move, breaking out into a gallop and circling around the huge clearing as their wings spread wide and they take off into the air again.

Yuuri watches them leave as he tries to catch his breath, spitting out the saliva left in his mouth to try and get rid of the acidic aftertaste, ribs aching in his chest. The horses fly up high above the trees and towards the clouds until they’re nothing but a dot in the distance.

The sound around him suddenly pops through his eardrums.

Unseen birds hiding in the branches chirp incessantly and the leaves rustle in the wind. There’s the sound of streaming water nearby, bushes shaking as something darts through them too fast for Yuuri to catch. Something buzzes by his ear, making him jump and swat blindly to his left.

He looks around the clearing and for the first time in years, finds that he is truly and completely alone. It’s not as scary as he imagined it to be, but he’s unnerved all the same.

“Now what?” he asks no one in particular.

The birds continue chirping.

He sighs, turning towards the sound of a river nearby and decides his first order of business should be to wash his mouth and drink some water, hoping it will calm his heartbeat that’s still pounding loudly in his head.

Trying to shake off his hesitance Yuuri slaps himself on the cheeks, takes a deep breath and tells himself sternly, “One step at a time.”
And so, he takes a step.

Pale fingers trace the spines of ancient tomes lined on the shelves of a dark-wooden cabinet, pausing on one book dyed in what once must have been a vibrant red and is now faded and dimmed almost to brown, fraying at the edges.

The woman’s deep blue eyes drift towards the chaos of scrolls and books spread across the large desk centered in the oval room, lined with stone walls and a single, solitary window across the doorway.

There is an old, iron cauldron next to that very same window sitting on a small table, above it a shelf of glass flasks and jars filled with a variety of odd and colorful ingredients; there’s a large vial of dragon’s blood that glows a faint amber in the shadows; a small basket filled with multicolored feathers from a variety of birds both ordinary and magical; a bottle with what appears to be oddly large and unnaturally green toad eyes floating in liquid; and a diversity of more mundane things such as plants and minerals.

“This one?” the woman asks out loud, tapping on the spine of the faint-red tome.

A wind blows across the desk moments after the question leaves her lips, her long, auburn hair streaked with gray braided down to her hips swaying as the breeze settles around her like its own entity, encircling her.

“Lexicon Alchemiae,” the wind answers brightly, and when she removes her finger the book slips out of the shelf as if pulled by an invisible hand, turning and opening up to pages fluttering by, allowing glimpses of what seems to be a list of words. “A comprehensive dictionary of terminology commonly used in alchemy.”

The woman frowns slightly. “Does it include formulas?”

The pages that were turning before reach the end of the tome, a blank page with some notes scribbled at the very top in handwriting so messy as to be completely illegible.

“No,” the voice says, sounding somewhat dejected.

“Never mind, then,” she replies with a sigh, and the tome shuts itself and slides back into place. “I suppose I’ll simply have to visit the Grand Library instead; they are sure to have the books I need, even if it may take a while.”

The air around her shifts, as if becoming restless.

“Will you bring some back?” the disembodied voice asks eagerly, wind brushing over her cheek like small fingers and prompting a chuckle.

“It has been a while since you last grew, hasn’t it?” she muses fondly at the small god, a part of a larger whole scattered across the human world that has found its home in this tower filled with books and magic and study.

It is a single speck in a cloud of dust compared to the gods of nature who are beings that have preceded humans by thousands of years and more, while this little one is dependent entirely on humanity’s progress for its growth.

Knowledge—still so small but eager, ever grasping—flutters back restlessly towards the desk, sinking into one of the scrolls with a sigh that breathes through the room.
She can’t help but smile as she turns away from the old bookcase and approaches the desk as well to grab the satchel she had hung over her chair that morning, deciding the sooner she leaves the earlier she can return for supper.

“Milena,” Knowledge starts, the scroll it resides in curling up.

Slinging the satchel over her shoulder and brushing some dust off the skirt of her long, green robes, Milena looks at the scroll. “What is it?”

There’s a long pause as Knowledge no doubt ponders what it is about to say, and a short while passes while Milena patiently waits before Knowledge finally says, “I want to know more about restorative herbs!”

Milena suppresses a grin, laugh lines deepening around her eyes. “Is that all?”

“Yes!” Another pause. “No!”

“What else would you like to know?”

Knowledge rolls the scroll open and then closes it again, appearing indecisive.

“Many things!” it exclaims, beginning to sound distressed. “Everything!”

“There, there,” Milena quiets the young god comfortingly. “How about we start with the restorative herbs and work our way down from there? If I’m not mistaken I saw a very extensive guide on poisonous plants native to the region last I visited.”

It is a little bit odd, the way Knowledge has changed so little from the time Milena came to the Tower as a child to now when she is well into the later stages of her life. The god is just as excited and fretful as the day they first met, but she supposes that the lifetime of a human is nothing compared to that of a deity, no matter how small.

“That will do,” Knowledge settles on at length, easing out of the scroll and darting up into the air. If you know where to look, you might spot flashes of blue where the god moves, dashing into the bookcase with a contented hum that makes the tomes tremble in the shelves.

Satisfied with Knowledge being at rest for the moment, Milena turns towards the doorway and heads out, closing the door to her study behind her and locking it tight. Knowledge can go where it pleases, of course, but she would rather the younger students of the Tower not have access to some of the more volatile ingredients she keeps in there, such as that vial of dragon’s blood; a single drop can melt through the toughest metal.

The protective runes on the vial are the only thing keeping it from scorching through the glass, and she does not need another incident of someone accidentally burning a hole through the floor—the fireball spell a fledgling attempted to cast two weeks ago did enough damage to last them year.

Milena looks around the winding corridor, finding it completely empty save for her. Likely most of the sorcerers and their students are outside, enjoying the fine weather and taking the opportunity to have more practical lessons and lectures rather than pouring over theory within the confines of the Tower as they usually tend to do.

As she starts to walk through the corridor towards the stairs, it seems her theory is likely to be accurate seeing as how she doesn’t run into anyone until she’s all the way down to the second floor, spotting a few older sorcerers milling about at a small table near some windows, discussing something over some books and scrolls in hushed tones, enjoying plates of grapes and berries as they
Life in the Tower is certainly a step above what most commoners know. Were it not for their Blessed Mother decreeing their kind—humans attuned to the realm of magic and divinity—to be exempt from the hierarchy that seeps through their world, Milena is certain she would have been married with children a long time ago.

As it is she enjoys a quiet, peaceful life in the Tower, a safe haven located at the edge of the city Eirene, removed and wholly prohibited for the general populace to approach let alone enter. It can get a bit suffocating and the allure of the city is always there, but they are allowed enough visits to where they are largely content.

Milena arrives at the entrance hall on the ground floor, the sunset coloring the light falling through the windows as deep gold as it falls across the spotless gray stone tiles, decorated with images of blue runes that serve as wards against intruders.

She steps across one such rune when she suddenly feels it warm up through the sole of her sandal, and she quickly pulls her foot away as it lights up blue, the other runes quickly following suit as the entire hall is drenched in light.

Startled, Milena hovers at the edge of the steps, wondering what could elicit such a strange reaction; there is no one around but her, and she is certainly not an intruder. Even if there were something wrong with the wards and it identified her as an intruder regardless, she would have been immediately flung through the front doors and ended up outside. Yet, the runes are merely emitting light, pulsing with magic.

Then, she feels it—feels him coming before she even sees him.

Around her the air changes, thickens, like the pressure of water bearing down on her from every side. She inhales and finds it has suddenly become harder to breathe, and the light from the runes is starting to burn like sunlight, too warm for comfort.

She has felt this before, during battles of powerful sorcerers who poured out all of their magic to best the other, but this kind of energy isn’t one that results from a clash. It is a singular force, originating from just one point—

The entrance doors, huge and hulking in their weight, swing open simultaneously and Milena has to shade her eyes from the burst of sunlight that streams into the hall, clashing with the blue glow from the runes as a single figure stands in the doorway.

As her vision adjusts to the light, the first thing she notices are the way the blue glow of the runes reflects in his eyes like crystals with the sun at his back glittering off the silver in his hair, the silver of his armor, and anyone else would think they were standing in the presence of a god.

But then the man smiles widely—young as ever, bright as ever—and spreads his arms wide.

“Mila!”

The pressure fades and Milena’s knees nearly give out, holding onto the stone railing of the stairs beside her as her old friend crosses the hall towards her.

She lets out a breath, brushing a small lock of hair behind her ear.

“Milena,” she corrects, harried as ever by her friend’s penchant for dramatic entrances. “How many times must I tell you to write before you visit?”
Victor stands in front of the steps and his cheerful smile eases into something more playful as he takes her hand and presses a kiss to her knuckles. “You look as enchanting as ever.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Milena huffs, pulling her hand away and trying her hardest not to smile at the silly wordplay. “You nearly broke the wards, again.”

“What can I say, I was excited to see you,” Victor replies easily, combing his fingers through his short locks, though they fall right back onto his brow. “How long has it been?”

“Five months.” Milena watches his hand lower down to his waist, resting comfortably around the golden handle of his sword strapped to his side for a moment before pulling away again in an almost jerky motion, as if belatedly realizing the vaguely threatening gesture it would make. She is not a gladiator as he is, after all.

“Far too long,” Victor decides, glancing at her satchel. “Were you going out to the city?”

“I was actually just going to visit the library for a bit.”

“Then let me accompany you,” he insists, offering her his arm and this time she cannot suppress her smile. “I’ll be glad to treat you to drinks afterwards.”

As always, no matter how sternly she tells herself she shouldn’t get caught up in his presence, the way he talks and smiles and looks at her is too disarming to resist and she finds herself with her hand wrapped around his arm and following him outside without hesitation.

“How have you been, Mila?” he asks her with sincerity and she can’t even pretend to be irritated at the name because being the center of his attention is something you cannot help but long for once you meet him, like a flower finding the sun for the first time.

“I’ve been happy enough,” she answers honestly, forcing herself to tear her gaze away from his eyes towards the meadows stretching out in front of them, Eirene appearing a looming monolith in the distance as they head onto the dirt road that leads towards the city.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Victor says, and from anyone else it would have sounded a mere pleasantry but for some reason, coming from his lips it feels genuine and it warms her.

Perhaps it’s because her life is so short compared to his, and he really does want her to enjoy it because to him, she’ll only be here a little while before she’s gone again.

She’ll never ask and he never talks about it, but she knew him when she was a small child and he doesn’t look a day older from back then. She knows the sword on his hip has tasted blood, she knows the Coliseum is his home and she knows that by the time she has become ashes he will be young and vibrant as ever.

He might be human in every other way, but he’s the closest thing to a god Milena thinks mankind will ever have.

“I won’t be in the city for long,” he says after a short pause as she thinks this. “So, I want to make the most of it while I’m here.”

Milena stares at him and finds that the mirth dancing in his eyes has gone away.

“Is there to be another gauntlet at the Coliseum?” she asks hesitantly, and it’s as if a shadow briefly falls across Victor’s features before fading away again as he raises his head and looks at her. It happens so quickly Milena almost wonders if she imagined it.
“No, no,” he responds casually, conjuring up another smile with ease. “This time is a bit different, but I’m sure it won’t take me very long.”

From how vague he is about it Milena surmises he’d rather not go further into detail, seeing as how blunt Victor usually is.

“To tell you the truth, I’m looking forward to when it’s all over,” he continues when she doesn’t respond as they tread past the daisies and dandelions blooming at either side of the road.

Milena looks at him curiously, and something shifts in Victor’s eyes as he stares ahead towards Eirene’s stone walls slowly nearing them the more they walk.

“How so?”

He appears oddly aloof for a moment, brows twitching together into a wrinkle before smoothing over again and for the first time in all the years Milena has known him, he looks like he’s longing for something.

“There is someone I have been waiting to meet again,” Victor says quietly, “for a very long time now.”

Milena hums in surprise. “And who might that be?”

He turns to her and he’s not quite smiling, his mouth curved slightly, but his face lights up and his eyes glitter like Milena has never seen before, and the way the name passes his lips is so loving, as if it were a treasure cradled in his mouth:

“His name is Yuuri.”
year twenty, winter

*But man looked upon the Sun,*  
*and, as Earth commanded, turned away.*  
—The Theogonies, line 546-547

A friendly tree spirit leads him in twists and turns through the forest into the open fields where he stands and stares for a very, very long time until both the fear and the anticipation dissipate into cautious hope.

Cheerful meadow nymphs greet him with delight and insist he stay a while so they can decorate him with flowers, before finally sending him on his way onto the road leading to the nearest village. It is a winding path through and over the hills surrounded by wildflowers and weeds, lit by the sun that almost seems to glow warmer down here than it ever did in the mountain palace.

In spite of the beautiful scenery, Yuuri cannot help but feel nervous. The last time he passed through fields like these he had been a child. Now, as a man who had lived the past twelve years surrounded by towering walls and huge trees, marble and stone, he finds himself a stranger to the wide-open meadows.

His discomfort doesn’t last for long; soon enough he sees a small town seated at the base of a big hill in the distance, farmlands stretching out in front of him. It’s a much smaller town than the one he grew up in—not big enough to have a statue, maybe not even a town square—but it feels familiar even if the people and the houses look different.

When he arrives, the villagers welcome him with equal amounts of curiosity and wariness before giving him a barn to spend his nights in provided he work the fields with the rest of them.

Yuuri’s first week in the world below passes so quickly he hardly feels it.

Everything is too much all too sudden, too many people and too much space and too many options for him to explore. He knows he is in a country called Hestia, knows it’s an ocean away from where he was born, knows it’s known for its mountains and gems and jewels, but not much else.

When the farmer whose barn he sleeps in asks him where he’s headed, Yuuri finds himself stumped.

Where is he headed?

He asks the meadow nymphs if they can find out where his family is and how they’re faring. One of them whispers his question to the wind and promises his answer will arrive soon, and after another day passes, sure enough, the wind whispers back.

They are all of them alive and healthy. His sister has two children of her own now, two girls, and his parents are still tending to the fields the best they can.

Yuuri’s heart aches as he smiles in relief. They are so far away, but they are doing well, and that’s what matters most.

Once he receives his answer, he decides to move on. He has no destination in mind, nowhere in particular he wants to go, so the only thing he can do is see as much of what the world has to offer as possible. The quickest way to do that would be to head to the heart of the kingdom where it beats the loudest, instead of its very fringes where the sound barely reaches.
Near the end of his second week, Yuuri gathers all the necessities for his journey in a small bag and—slightly better prepared now than he was the last time—sets out once more.

To Eirene.

During Victor’s abnormally long stay in the capital, he bids Milena visit him often. He is a guest at the home of the King’s cousin twice-removed, a vulture who possesses considerable wealth.

When Milena first lays eyes on his house, she witnesses as much.

It rivals the stature of any holy temple, and though it might not be a palace it is surely big enough to satisfy a prince, pristine columns stretching out over the top of the hill to encompass nearly a quarter of it. The other residential buildings pale in comparison to its sheer size, and considering this is where Eirene’s wealthiest have claimed the land that’s saying something.

Milena wonders if it has its own bathhouse as she approaches the front steps. The two columns surrounding the entrance are sculpted the visage of handsome young men, barely-clothed save for the robe wrapped thinly around their hips. The doors are wide open, a huge hall with a finely etched mosaic floor with spiral designs so brightly colored it borders on ostentation.

She’s uncertain of entering without announcing herself even though Victor invited her, but the hall seems empty save for a striking bust of the god Helios standing by a door on her left. She lingers on the doorstep, and hesitantly clears her throat.

“Hello?” she calls through the mansion, glancing at the huge stairs curving up to the second floor where the sound of a door opening and closing echoes through the corridors. “Victor?”

“Yes, yes, I’m coming!”

He comes into view a moment later, notably without his armor, instead having replaced it with a lovely white chiton. It suits him beautifully.

It’s a simple, single-shoulder robe, accompanied by a matching light blue shawl draped across his right shoulder, pinned together by a large, silver coin decorated by the carving of a laurel wreath. It leaves his arms bare, displaying his every muscle covered by pale, soft skin, the thin fabric of it almost teasing every time it flutters in the breeze.

Milena cannot help it; she’s so struck by the change that she can’t do anything but watch him descend the steps. He looks just as magnificent exposed like this, perhaps even more so; there’s a radiance to his skin that almost instinctually coaxes a touch. Had he been a carving or a statue in the temple of Aphrodite, he would not look out of place.

He smiles when he sees her, finally reaching the ground floor and coming to a halt at the very base of the stairs, hands folded behind his back. “Good morning.”

“It’s afternoon,” she corrects him instead of a greeting, composing herself.

“Is it?” he says with a surprised tone, though his eyes laugh as he approaches her. “I suppose I slept half the day away.”

“I suppose you did,” Milena replies dryly, casting another look around the sunlit entrance hall. “Why is it so empty in here?”

“Oh, yes.” Victor joins her in looking around with an amused smile. “I dismissed the owner and set
his servants free.”

Milena turns to give him a startled look. “You what?”

“I gave them each a generous amount of coin before letting them go, of course,” Victor replies while extending his arm to her. “Would you like to tour the premises? It’s a bit too gaudy for my taste, but it’ll do as a summer home—pity winter is here.”

“Victor,” Milena sighs as she takes his arm. “What is going on, really?”

“I’m preparing,” Victor replies simply.

“Preparing for what?” she presses as he guides them through the door next to Helios’s bust, which leads to a the biggest courtyard Milena has ever seen, big enough for a sizable pond to sit at its center. “And why does your preparation involve relieving a mansion from the Duke of Eirene?”

“He wasn’t using it that much anyway.”

“Victor.”

He sighs beside her as they walk the gravel path twisting through the courtyard and around the pond, various statues of naked gods and goddesses scattered around, some of which Milena does not even recognize.

“I need everything to be perfect,” he replies as he gestures to a stone bench sitting by the pond, and Milena takes a seat.

“For Yuuri?”

He sighs with a dream-dazed smile. “Yes, for Yuuri.”

“You still haven’t told me who he is,” Milena points out a bit sourly.

Victor smiles wider. “That’s because it’s a secret.”

“Can you at least tell me how you met him?” she says with a frown. Two weeks have passed and all she has gotten from bringing up this mysterious Yuuri in conversation is having Victor drift off into some love-struck haze, not snapping out of it until she changes the subject.

“Hmm, well.” Victor leans back against the bench, plucking one of the pink flowers blossoming from the vines that are wrapped around its legs and armrests. “I was much, much younger at the time.”

“Back when you were a child?”

Victor looks particularly amused at this. “In a way.”

“And?” Milena urges, curiosity aflame. “So you met as children, grew up together and fell in love, is that it?”

The smile lingers on his face for a moment before fading away entirely. “It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s all in the past now,” Victor replies quietly, twirling the small pink flower between his fingers. “Not like he’d remember to begin with.”
“He doesn’t remember how you met?”

Victor averts his gaze, all the brightness gone. “It’s a long and depressing story and I don’t want to talk about it.”

The silence that settles between them on the bench feels cold, and Milena immediately regrets asking. It feels like the sun’s gone away, even though it’s shining warm overheard.

“Well,” Milena starts awkwardly. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

And just like that, the light is back in Victor’s eyes as he turns back toward her and grins all silly like a young boy in love. “Me neither.”

Caerus is a city carved into the side of a mountain.

As Yuuri anticipated, mining is the primary duty of those who reside here. They have little crops to harvest beyond what supplies the hungry bellies of the miners, as all the valuable gems are used as offerings instead.

What he did not anticipate is how much harsher the living conditions here are. Their houses are much smaller than the farming village he came across earlier, pressed against each other to fit as much laborers into the city as possible. Children do not even dare play on the streets for fear of drawing the ire of city guards that work for the man in charge of this place, a Duke who lives miles away in what is no doubt luxurious comfort.

Appointed by a cruel king who was chosen by an apathetic god.

It is a terrible feeling of helplessness, witnessing an older man collapse in a fit of coughing and be reprimanded for it by an officer with a whip because he dared dropping the basket of gemstones meant to be presented by the village statue at the end of the week.

Yuuri almost turns away when the third strike splits the scarred skin on the old man’s back open, but resolves to keep watching.

He has to. He knows well by now that none of the gods truly need any of the offerings given to them by the humans, which makes this all the more sickening, but if he is ever to take the throne from Earth then he needs to know about the suffering inflicted upon his subjects, even as it happens right in front of him.

Yuuri opts not to stay in Caerus for any longer than he really has to. There are many more places he has to bear witness to and besides which, it is his first time being in a city—before this all he knew of where small villages or huge palaces—and it’s not a pleasant one.

There are too many people, too nearby, living too close to each other. When he walks the streets he can’t turn a corner without running into someone, and it makes him feel too crowded, suffocated. Not to mention that these people’s lives all seem to revolve around mining. They work like slaves, scarcely allowed reprieve because Earth covets shiny things more than she does food.

He leaves for Zelos on the third day, one step closer to the capital.

“Did you know the Grand Library used to be a temple of worship?”

Milena glances at her companion’s thoughtful profile, his eyes bright with the exercise of a long walk
as they travel the city to the Grand Library for the fourth time in three weeks, and yet Victor has not uttered a single word of protest at Milena’s insistence on taking him along with her.

“I did know that,” Milena says with a smile as they walk the road leading to where the Grand Library sits on finely-paved streets, crafted from pristine marble. “It was dedicated to Gaia, was it not?”

Victor hums. “As many things are.”

Milena doesn’t reply to that, letting the conversation come to a brief stop that doesn’t last very long as Victor picks up another thread.

“Yuuri isn’t the only reason for me being here, you know.”

“Oh?”

Victor does not elaborate as they finally reach the top of the hill, the Grand Library towering over every other building nearby, tall and gray. It’s not as tall as the Tower, shaped more like a perfect cube, as if a block of stone that was simply dropped here, the Library fashioned out of its rock by a god; from a distance it looks immaculate and looming, serpent-shaped pillars surrounding it on every side, the dark of it standing out from amongst the white colored buildings surrounding it.

Of course, Milena knows better than to think its construction was the doing of a divine hand, but slaves are not a comfortable topic of conversation and she is too complacent with the way things are to speak on it. It’s an ugly something she buries, much like everyone else, somewhere deep into the ground as it rots, not spoken of, much less seen or heard. It makes ignoring it easier.

“Would you mind if we make a slight detour?” Victor requests as they stand still in the middle of the street, others that pass by them walking around them but not saying anything. Their gazes linger on Victor, who has put his strikingly silver gladiator armor back on, and Milena can already hear the whispers circulating through the streets.

She is sure many of the wealthy who dwell here were able to afford visiting the Coliseum once or twice.

“Not at all,” Milena replies as she decides to ignore the stares and the gossip, turning back to Victor with a smile. “I’m in no hurry, lead the way.”

She follows him through the streets, having known him for too long to think she could ever guess what could be going through his mind. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

Victor smiles cryptically but says nothing as he leads them towards one of the large villas stretched across the hill—not nearly as big as the Duke's, with only a ground floor to speak of, but still nothing to scoff at.

He leads her up the steps between the tall, straight pillars, the stone colored in soft gold as opposed to the white that is more common. Without even bothering to announce himself he strides right through the open doorway, startling a servant who had been scrubbing the floor in the entrance hall.

“Hello there, friend,” Victor greets the servant kindly. “Is the master of the house home?”

“Victor!” Milena hisses as the servant nervously scrambles up from the ground. “You can’t just barge into someone’s home like that!”

“I-I’ll notify him at once, my lord,” the poor servant boy splutters red-faced before bolting away into
Victor looks supremely unconcerned as he admires a pot of bright red flowers sitting on a small table by the entrance, bending down to smell one. “Hmm… I never liked geraniums much.”

He throws one look at her scowling face and begins to laugh.

“Oh, take it easy, Mila,” he says, looking thoroughly amused. “I’m here visiting an old friend of mine; he won’t mind the intrusion.”

“Won’t he?” Milena responds, unimpressed.

“Not at all,” another voice responds from the corridor the servant fled into moments ago, and an old man dressed in long, white robes steps into the entrance hall. Milena can see various scars peeking out from underneath his sleeves, a few small ones across the bridge of his nose and his left brow.

He smiles at them both, saying to Milena, “Charity often dwells in these halls.”

At that very moment a soft breeze sweeps through the room and though she can’t see anything Milena instantly feels the presence of a spirit that makes her feel at ease, and she swears she even hears a soft chuckle echoing against the walls.

Most gods don’t often reveal themselves to humans, unless they are like Knowledge who fulfills its purpose in part through communication with people and anyone or anything who is willing to listen and answer its questions, as that is how it learns. Creatures like Charity, however, are content with simply existing.

“Nikolai,” Victor greets the master of the house warmly, embracing him without hesitation, then gesturing to Milena. “This is the lady I’ve been telling you about.”

“The sorceress Milena?” Nikolai turns to look at her, thick brows arching. “We don’t see many of you outside the Tower.”

“We have little reason to leave, save for the allures of the city,” Milena replies. “Though I did not expect Victor to have a friend here.”

“I only recently moved here myself at the behest of the King,” Nikolai replies. “I used to live in a small village called Thrasos to the south of here by the coast, which is where I first met Victor.”

“I taught him the sword,” Victor adds casually, and Milena’s jaw slackens slowly. “You could say I was the reason he ended up becoming a general.”

“I’m sorry,” Milena glances from one man to the other, her gaze lingering on Nikolai. “How old were you when Victor taught you?”

“Oh, no older than eight winters I believe,” Nikolai answers as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.

If Milena had her suspicions about Victor’s unnaturally long lifespan before, they are all but solidified now. Victor, however, only seems amused at her shocked expression while Nikolai at least appears sympathetic.

“Why don’t we sit down and have some drinks?” Nikolai suggests. “This may take a while.”

On his way to Zelos, the nymphs that usually so love to accompany him as he moves from village to
village begin to slink away, and soon he finds himself completely alone as he travels up the gravel path winding up a large hill where Zelos stands.

It’s a contrast of high, dark towers and bright, colorful lights that dance through its tall shadows that, as Yuuri discovers to his horror once he ventures close enough, are wisps.

They are imprisoned in lanterns—bottles, really—hanging off the walls of the stone streets. Some are lying still inside, their light faded, while others are shaking frantically inside the makeshift lanterns. Other lanterns are empty, perhaps having once housed a wisp that then eventually died there.

Wisps are not meant to be contained, much less used in such a manner. Yuuri barely suppresses the urge to take a stick to each and every lantern and break it open, knowing it an impossible task; Zelos is huge.

The narrow streets are like a small maze, the people who roam here dressed lavishly and as colorfully as the lights from the wisps. Were it not for his anger Yuuri would’ve been completely overwhelmed at the noise and the lights and the smells; almost everyone he sees seems to possess some sort of wealth, flaunting it in the golden embroideries in their robes or their jewels.

But then he passes by a single alleyway that isn’t lit by wisps and gets a glimpse of what Zelos hides behind its pretty lights: a boy and a girl, crouched in the alleyway and sharing a small bit of bread, broken shackles left rattling around their wrists.

A woman wearing a bright golden robe with her hair braided into an elaborate knot atop her head, decorated with pearls and emerald green flowers, notices him standing still and staring down the alley and comes to stand next to him, peering toward what he’s looking at.

Her expression turns to one of distaste when she sees the children, delicately painted red lips pursing. “Awful, isn’t it?”

Yuuri glances at her, then looks back toward the children. “It’s terrible.”

“Quite unsightly!” the woman agrees, turning up her nose and averting her gaze from the children as Yuuri startles and turns to look at her in disbelief. “Some people are so careless with their property, they end up escaping and scurrying about the alleyways like rats; the stench is unbearable!”

Yuuri is at a loss of what to say but he has never felt revulsion so potent as he does then. He’s so disgusted that he actually feels nauseated as the woman huffs and strolls away, and when he looks back down the alley the children are already gone.

His visit to Zelos is even shorter than it was in Caerus. He leaves the city the very same day and camps the night out in the wild before continuing to the capital, Eirene.

He’d rather sleep in the dirt than spend another moment surrounded by monsters.

“That’s your grandson, then?” Victor asks Nikolai, pointing out a short boy with bright blond hair among a group of them, being taught how to shoot arrows with a bow by an instructor at the shooting ranges at the very edge of the city, where the barracks for the soldiers and training grounds reside.

They watch him attempt to shoot the arrow into the dummy for the fifth time, but he ends up missing so badly that the arrow flies right over the dummy’s head and hits the city’s wall.

“Yuri has never been very good with the bow and arrow,” Nikolai responds mildly as Yuri lets out a
yell of frustration and almost throws the bow down at the ground. “He is much better at swordplay.”

“So he takes after you, hmm?” Victor says playfully, coaxing a proud smile out of Nikolai.

“I hope he does.”

They watch for a while longer in silence as the other children all take a turn, Yuri’s anger at his failure tempered into a quiet, seething resolve that’s painted into a scowl on his face.

“Have you told him you will be heading into battle?”

Victor’s question rests between the two men like a falling leaf.

When it touches the ground, Nikolai says, “Would it make it any easier for him if he knew?”

“Children are more resilient than you think,” Victor replies as he watches the instructor scold a boy for pretending to aim at his friend. “Even if you do not survive, he will.”

Nikolai looks at him for a moment, then turns back toward his grandchild. “Would you like to meet him?”

They watch Yuri try again, holding up the bow, knocking an arrow, and taking a deep breath.

He exhales, releases, and the arrow flies.

“I’d love to,” Victor says with a smile as Yuri cheers, his arrow firmly embedded in the dummy’s chest, right through the heart.

On his way to Eirene, Yuuri meets a young boy outside the towering city walls with a bow and arrow, trying to shoot into the center of a target he crudely painted on the trunk of a tree.

Deciding to stay at a distance at first, Yuuri glances toward the nymphs who have been following him about when they turn very quiet at the sight of the boy but do not seem particularly averse to his presence so long as they go unnoticed. Nymphs tolerate children better than they do adult humans, and Yuuri figures this must be part of the reason why he is so liked by them; he grew up surrounded by nymphs, after all.

Yuuri watches the child in question struggle, arrow after arrow flying past the tree or missing the target entirely. The boy is impatient; he does not think about the placement of his feet or his posture, thinks only with his eyes and his hands.

“He is very bad,” a meadow nymph comments softly after yet another spectacular miss, prompting the other two nymphs to giggle.

The sound reaches the boy who quickly turns their way, eyes wide, and the moment his gaze falls on them the nymphs scatter in shrieks and laughter, disappearing into flower petals and leaves that are swept away by the wind.

“Who are you?” the boy demands angrily, though he appears unsure of himself. “Were those nymphs?”

“Yes, meadow nymphs,” Yuuri answers.

The boy assesses him slowly, blue-green eyes flitting up and down Yuuri’s form, likely looking for weapons. Smart child.
“Who are you?” he repeats, sounding less petulant this time.

“Just a traveler,” Yuuri answers as honestly as he can. “Do you know I can get into the city?”

“There are gates on the south and north ends of the walls, but you have to pay a fee to get in if you’re an outsider,” the boy responds stiffly, then turns back towards his tree. “If that’s all, go away—I’m trying to concentrate.”

Yuuri watches as the boy raises his bow again. “You’re holding it wrong.”

The boy blinks then scowls, lowering his bow to glare at Yuuri.

“I can show you how to do it right, in exchange for a favor.”

“What kinda favor?” the boy asks warily.

“Get me into the city.”

He considers Yuuri’s request, but only for a moment. “Alright.”

Yuuri wonders whether it is wise for this boy to be so trusting of a stranger he just met, but perhaps teaching him how to use a bow properly now will go a long way in helping him defend himself should he need to.

Nonetheless he keeps his distance, not wanting to cause him any discomfort. “Keep your wrist straight,” he instructs, “and hold your elbow level to your shoulder; you keep letting it drop down.”

The boy grumbles something underneath his breath but does as he’s told, and when he shoots again the arrow actually hits the right half of the clumsily drawn circle.

“Yes, I did it!” The boy grins widely, running back toward the tree to fetch his arrows. “Thanks for the advice, um—”

“Yuuri.”

He blinks hard. “That’s your name?”

“It is.” Yuuri stares back at the boy curiously. “Why?”

“My name is also Yuri.”

He’s inclined to say it’s a coincidence, as the two of them could not be more opposite in their looks and their disposition, but it is so peculiar and unexpected that he can’t help but suspect maybe his entire journey was not as spontaneous as Earth would have him believe.

But he knows better than to try and guess the mind of a goddess, so he simply smiles at the young boy and says, “Well then, Yuri, it’s very nice to meet you—now, how about getting me into the city?”

Victor gazes over the streets from the balcony of his temporary mansion, unbothered by the cold evening wind that sweeps through Eirene, when his heartbeat suddenly flutters in his chest and a chill kisses down the skin of his spine.

The distinct sound of footsteps passes by his ears, the scent of daffodils hanging in the air, a premonition of dark eyes in a lovely face whose shape his fingers and his lips know by heart.
After all this time, after all this waiting—

He’s here.

Yuuri came here for a reason.

The city of Eirene. No one has ever managed to successfully lay siege to it, to make its people bend and its walls break—not that many have tried.

He came here to witness.

But now that he is finally where he is meant to be he finds that something else pulls at his feet, taking him through the streets until his legs become heavy and sore, aching through every string of muscle.

He’s looking for something else, beyond the poverty and the wealth and the deceit and the arrogance, beyond how the disparity reminds him of the mountain where Earth sits on her throne so high above she does not even care to look below herself even while she claims to love, claims to be a mother.

His eyes search the people, feeling something carried in the wind, a scent he cannot let go.

It reminds him of daffodils.

Despite the weariness of his journey, the pressing need to rest his head on a pillow and close his eyes, Yuuri feels restless. Like he’s on the edge of finding something he has been searching for his entire life but did not think could possibly exist.

“Are you lost?” a soft voice says and Yuuri halts in his tracks, turning to look but finding no one in the darkness of the winter evening, standing in the middle of a dim road where the houses are made of wood and uneven stone, mismatched and crooked, nothing like the immaculate villas built above them.

“Hello?” he calls out hesitantly into the shadows, his way lit only by the occasional lantern. “Who’s there?”

“I am,” the voice replies from behind him, and once again Yuuri turns to look, but he sees nothing. “I have been here the entire time.”

Yuuri peers at the empty space. “In Eirene?”

“No.” The voice is quieter now, its location hard to pin-point, as if it’s coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. “Beside you.”

Yuuri swallows thickly, eyes flitting here and there to catch a glimpse of movement but still finding nothing. “Following me?”

“Yes.”

He takes a deep breath. “Why?”

“You love this world,” the voice says and now it sounds as if it is coming not from around him but from inside his own mind, a thought of his own making speaking to him. “You love the humans.”

Yuuri blinks, disoriented, but strangely enough does not feel alarmed with the intrusion—if anything, it is familiar. Nestled inside his mind as if it were born there. “What is there not to love?”
“Plenty.”

The worried lines between his sister’s brows. A cold statue looming over a crowd of people scurrying like ants to please it. Lashes on an old man’s back. Chains around a child’s wrists.

“But you love them in spite of it,” the voice points out. “Even though it would be easier to resent them.”

He is not like Earth, grown sick, grown weary. He will not give up on them; he will save them.

“I choose to love,” Yuuri answers, and feels something warm glow inside his chest. “If not me, then who will?”

“Yes.” The voice sounds fond. “You must.”

“Who are you?” Yuuri asks, his wariness faded away into fascination and wonder. “What are you?”

Right before his eyes, something takes shape. Lines, glowing gold as if drawn into the air with the strokes of a divine brush, forming into a person. One that looks strikingly like himself.

Yuuri stares in awe as the stranger smiles at him, pure and warm.

“I am Love.”

It is barely above a whisper, but he feels it strike through him like a clap of thunder.

This must be one of the spirits that have spawned from mankind.

“Were you…” Yuuri almost hesitates to ask. “Were you born from me?”

The spirit—Love—shines faintly, its smile widening happily.

“Yes.”

That does not ordinarily happen. Yuuri considers the spirit before him, not sure how to feel. Paean has taught him about these particular kinds of spirits—the humans refer to them as gods, and he supposes to them they must seem as much since they have never encountered an actual deity—but usually they form where such emotions congregate through multiple people.

Fear and Courage are often found on battlefields, Knowledge (or Curiosity, depending on who you ask) in libraries, Art and Devotion in temples, and in a few cases spirits like Compassion or Wisdom will attach themselves to certain people who exemplify the best of these traits.

But Yuuri has never heard of a spirit being born from a single person.

“I don’t understand,” Yuuri begins to say, but before he can finish Love sighs loudly.

“You think too much,” it says. “Feel. That is enough.”

“What is it that I’m supposed to feel?”

“Love,” the spirit answers. “Your love. His love.”

Yuuri frowns. “His love? Who are you talking about?”

The spirit frowns back at him, then slips around him and pushes him in the back.
“Feel!” it demands, gone when Yuuri glances over his shoulder, but still present within himself. A candle in darkness.

Yuuri takes a deep breath, and tries to listen to its advice, but he does not know where to start. He supposes he ought to think of people or things he loves, but he’s not sure how that’s supposed to guide him to any answers.

Nonetheless, he does as the spirit says, thinking first and foremost of his sister as he starts to walk aimlessly through the street, starting to climb up the hill.

Mari. Is she happy, he wonders, is she still doing well? What about his parents? What about Yuuko and Takeshi? The life he left behind has always weighed on him, but at the time it felt more like a prison. More of the same.

In the end, Yuuri thinks, nothing has changed.

“You were free, once,” Love murmurs inside his head, and Yuuri wants to respond that he has no idea what the spirit is going on about, but for some reason his heart remembers the feeling of being untethered, of being weightless.

Maybe, a long time ago, but he couldn’t possibly say when. He doesn’t remember anything beyond his life in his old village, and then being taken away by Earth. Moved from one cage to the next. If there was ever a time when he was truly happy, then he has already forgotten it.

“You did forget,” Love agrees. “But you’re also starting to remember.”

Yuuri halts.

Remember.

Remember, remember, remember—silver in his hair, blue in his eyes, the shine in his smile, the strength in his hands—a title, a name.

Daffodils.

He remembers.

“Victor?”

The name escapes his lips breathlessly, and he’s not sure what it means but it means something.

He starts to run. Up the hill, like a man possessed, Love urging him to run faster, and he’s tearing through the streets like a storm when his lungs start aching so badly that he can barely breathe and he belatedly realizes he’s been screaming Victor’s name this entire time and he can’t stop because he is so close, so close to a something that he has been missing his entire life, born blind to a color he is now desperately searching for to complete him.

“Victor!” He knows, somehow, that Victor is near, that he’s within reach, and he has to find him if only to put this flame in his heart to rest. “Victor!”

Yuuri turns a corner, opens his mouth to keep yelling until he is heard, but then he sees.

A balcony bathing in moonlight.

The sensation that washes over him is inexplicable. It’s as if without knowing he was waiting for this his entire life, as if he was born just for this singular moment in time.
He stares up into breathtakingly blue eyes watching him from a balcony covered in vines as the moon shines high up above them, and the whole world falls away. His feet move him closer, eyes mesmerized by the color. Everything up until now has been leading up to this; he was just the last one to realize it.

Champion, gladiator, victor, Victor stares down at him, hair swaying softly in the breeze, lips parted slightly and for all the deities Yuuri has borne witness to, for all their power and grace, never did he feel the urge to collapse to his knees in adoration for anyone. Not until now.

He comes to a halt below the balcony where Victor stands motionless, speechless, as if a vision of splendor captured into a painting by a god—the color Yuuri couldn’t see—his light blue shawl fluttering in the wind. Yuuri is almost surprised when he finds himself opening his mouth to speak as he didn’t think he’d be capable of forming anything of coherence in this state, but he at least has the presence of mind to utter three simple words:

“I found you.”

They are barely more than a whisper, but Victor hears him, and Yuuri knows he hears him because his eyes are starting to well up with tears.

“You did,” Victor says just as softly, a tremor in his voice that sings to Yuuri’s ears beautifully, his hands braced for a brief moment on the edge of the balcony and just as Yuuri thinks he should go up to meet him properly, Victor vaults over it.

Yuuri watches in mute shock as Victor soars and lands neatly on his feet like a bird flying down from its perch and Yuuri feels the thump of the landing through the ground but Victor straightens, unbothered. They stare at each other, and then Victor takes the first step, and another one, and another one, coming to a halt right in front of him and Yuuri can hardly believe that any of this is happening, that he is here, that Victor is here and close enough to touch.

Victor looks at him, searches his face—or rather looks as if he’s memorizing Yuuri’s face, his watery gaze slowly drifting over every part of it.

And then he finally meets Yuuri’s eyes, and he starts to cry.

Yuuri watches, horrified as the tears begin sliding down Victor’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Victor whispers, not reaching up to wipe them away like Yuuri wants to do because they should not be there. “It’s been so long, I almost didn’t think—”

Yuuri reacts without thought, stepping into his space and winding his arms around Victor’s back, pressing close and it’s astonishing how easily it all fits, how comfortable and right and familiar it feels even with Victor silently weeping against his shoulder, fingers curled into Yuuri’s cloak, breathing in.

Who was he to Victor, and why can’t he remember?

“I’m here now,” he mutters, resting a hand on the back of Victor’s neck, thumb rubbing soothing circles into his skin. “I’m here.”

He doesn’t know what it means nor what is expected of him—there is always something expected of him—but he feels strangely at peace.
They stand there locked in an embrace for what feels like an entire lifetime on its own, as if Yuuri’s life only just begun once he found Victor. The warmth of his body that seeps through the fabric of their clothes into Yuuri’s makes any idea he had of what warmth really was pale in comparison. How did he not freeze to death without Victor?

Another cold breeze travels through the streets and Victor sniffs, pulling back from him but keeping his hands on the dip of Yuuri’s back, tears still clinging to his lashes, vividly blue eyes surrounded by red.

“You probably don’t remember, but we knew each other once,” Victor says, his smile carrying a sadness that makes Yuuri’s heart twinge inside his chest. “It was a long time ago.”

“This is the secret,” Yuuri realizes, feeling breathless. “This is what Earth was keeping from me.”

Victor inclines his head. “I asked her to let you go, in light of the upcoming battle.”

“How did you know I would head to Eirene?”

“You are not the only one the nymphs are fond of,” Victor says as he takes Yuuri’s hand into his own, his smile turning mischievous, his reddened, teary eyes bright and cutting through Yuuri’s dark ones, small suns of light shining into his.

Yuuri’s heartbeat stutters.

“Oh,” Love says in his mind, then whispers, “Kiss him!”

“You feel cold,” Victor murmurs while Yuuri feels very much that he is the opposite, heat spreading to his cheeks as he avoids Victor’s gaze and stares down at their intertwined hands as he ignores Love’s pleading inside his head. “Won’t you come inside?”

Yuuri nods silently as his heart pounds inside his chest and he is dizzied by the sensation, the lightness, the yearning in his chest—he has never experienced anything like this before.

He lets Victor pull him along toward his estate, still staring at their hands, feeling Victor’s warmth and wondering why this was kept from him for so long, why they could not meet sooner. It’s the most frustrating thing; his heart recognizes but his mind refuses to remember.

“No doubt you have questions,” Victor says and does not release his hand even when they are inside, standing in the entrance hall on top of a mosaic floor that Yuuri once would have felt guilty treading on for how much it must have cost to build. Now, it offers him an excuse not to look up at Victor’s eyes and instead admire the artwork.

“I have some,” Yuuri agrees, and when he glances up at Victor’s face he immediately looks away again.

No one has ever looked at him like that before—adoring, tender, devoted—and he doesn’t know what to do with himself.

“Then I will answer them.” Victor pauses, brows drawn together in concern, a hand reaching up and a finger trailing over Yuuri’s cheek. “You look worn from your journey; no doubt it was a difficult one. Perhaps it’s better if we talk in the morning instead.”

Now that Victor mentions it, his feet do feel a bit swollen, and he hasn’t had a decent bath in weeks, but the need for answers presses on him just as much.
“Can you just answer one question?”

Victor smiles affectionately. “Just the one?”

“Maybe two, for tonight,” Yuuri says, trying very hard not to stammer. “Did we… I mean, when did we…”

“We met in a past life, when we were very young,” Victor answers, quiet, seeming almost melancholy. “We fell in love.”

Yuuri’s heartbeat stutters and he feels it in his pulse, feels it through his entire body, like the tremor of an earthquake. He knew this, but he had forgotten it before, forgotten everything about Victor and the thought of it seems absurd now—how could anyone possibly forget Victor?

Something gnaws at him, something small but something with sharp, rusted teeth and rotted nails, something he thinks he doesn’t want to remember.

“Why did I forget?” he asks.

He doesn’t want to know the answer.

Victor meets Yuuri’s gaze again, and his voice is unsteady when he replies.

“Because you died.” Victor’s tears have yet to dry. "And I killed you.”
When Yuuri was a young child, Paean would often tell him folktales to distract him when he was yearning for his family, ancient myths of creation and birth whose realities were gradually distorted by the human tongue over time.

They should not be taken as history, Paean said to him, though some may possess a kernel of truth obfuscated by the passage of centuries.

One such tale remained with him for years, every word engraved into his memory as Paean told him:

“Many ages ago, in a time only the gods still remember, Earth shaped the first humans and breathed life into them. Death watched, biding his time until the day came where he could lay his claim on them.

“There was one that caught his eye: the firstborn man was strong and proud, as well as extraordinarily lucky. Again and again he managed to evade Death, escaping lethal injuries and surviving illnesses that would have killed a lesser being.

“One day, however, the man’s daughter fell ill and could not recover. Her condition worsened, and though the man begged and pleaded Earth to help his daughter the goddess refused and cautioned him against trying to save her, for her time had already come and nature’s laws should not be violated.

“But the man was not ready to part from his daughter, and Death saw in this opportunity, and so went to the man, telling him that in exchange for a certain flower that grew by a river located deep within the forest, he would spare his daughter’s life. This flower was considered sacred as it was said to be the first flower to have ever grown on Earth, but Death did not tell him this and made him believe it to be a mere trifle.

“His daughter pleaded with him not to go, knowing it would go against Earth’s wishes and not trusting Death to be fair, but her father did not listen, and agreed to the deal. He went in search for the flower, overcoming many a trial to reach the river. Exhausted by his long journey yet still searching, the man finally found the flower growing on the edge of the riverbank, but when he went to pluck it the earth crumbled underneath his feet and he drowned.

“The flower remained, untouched, and Death claimed its first human life.”

As Yuuri looks at Victor now, mournfully confessing to sin, inside the very depths of his soul something unlocks.
He remembers the truth.

Many ages ago, Earth shaped the first humans and breathed life into them.

They grew from her soil, small and bright-eyed, the world a mysterious something waiting to be defined by young minds grasping for everything new with eager and greedy fingers.

But before the masses of little lives she planted like seeds spread across her body like flames, it all began with a single man.

Her firstborn.

Earth walked by the riverside, body adorned in softly flowing robes tinged with the color of a calm morning tide, edges of glittering translucent blue silk brushing over the flowers surrounding her feet with every step.

Her eyes searched the white and yellow daffodils spread out before her until they finally found the figure lying curled up among the flowers a few feet ahead, appearing fast asleep.

She smiled as she approached her most beloved nymph, kneeling beside him and brushing her fingers through his dark hair blooming with the same flowers surrounding him, sunlit skin shining soft gold.

“Wake up, dearest,” Earth spoke to him, gently rousing him from his sleep. “I have something to show you!”

Brown eyes finally slipped open and slowly blinked up at her.

“Hello,” Yuuri murmured, turning onto his back and stretching among the flowers that swayed in a sudden breeze when he yawned, seeming to shine more brilliantly now that he was awake.

“Hello,” Earth greeted fondly. “Up on your feet, now, and follow me!”

He watched her curiously as Earth rose again with excitement written plain on her face. He had seldom seen her like this and was keen to find out what had her so animated as he pushed himself up from his flowerbed and stretched a bit, loose white robes dangling off his shoulders, blossoming vines coiled around his arms and legs peeping out from under it.

“Where are we going?” he asked as he followed Earth’s footsteps, sleepily rubbing his eyes out as they walked the length of the river, towards the hills. It was not often that Earth took this form to visit him in person; usually she was content to remain as she was, the steady earth beneath him, a home where he burrowed his roots.

“You’ll see,” Earth said, glancing at him with a mysterious smile across her lips.

Yuuri sighed and decided not to question the whims of his mistress, knowing it would do him little good, and trailed her to the edges of the forest. As they travelled, he noticed a white figure drifting in the river below, following them.

“Hello, Oblivion,” he greeted his neighbor, only her eyes and the top of her head visible from below the water as she stared at Earth curiously. “Do you want to come along?”

The river goddess hummed, her waters rippling briefly before she went under, disappearing only to
burst through the surface again a kingfisher bird, small and white with streaks of deep blue across her wings. She soared high above him in a circle, before descending and landing on his shoulder.

For as long as he could remember he had always lived near her waters, and though she often seemed to shy away from others, she had taken exception to him and they had become fast friends. Others usually avoided her because she was connected to Death’s domain, one of his many rivers, but the association did not bother Yuuri. Oblivion was kind, in her own way.

He smiled when he saw more figures move towards them from between the trees, curious forest nymphs coming to see what the fuss was about.

“What’s the occasion?” a brazen oak called from across the water, Earth replying with nothing but that same, enigmatic smile.

Soon they gathered a whole following of nymphs as well as spirits flying low above them, attracted by Earth’s extraordinarily good mood. Once they finally reached the edges of the forest, The Sun stared down at them through the cloudless sky.

“I do not see the point of this,” The Sun spoke, its light almost painfully bright as its voice boomed across the vast distance of sky between them. “What are you intending to do with the pitiful creature?”

Earth did not deign to look at the distant star as she replied cheerfully, “That is not your concern.”

“What creature?” Yuuri inquired as Earth grabbed his hand and pulled him along into the meadow, still smiling from ear to ear. He had seldom seen her this excited.

“Don’t be so impatient, dear one,” Earth said, and Yuuri decided to settle on following his mistress toward the meadow, enjoying the feeling of grass tickling along his feet and ankles. “You will see!”

It did not take him long to notice Earth had a very specific destination in mind as they walked through the untamed fields; they were headed toward a solitary birch tree, and he could see a figure sitting underneath its long branches.

A curious sight, considering Yuuri did not remember there being a tree here.

“Who is that?” he asked, glancing at Earth who smiled at him and released his hand.

“Stay here,” was all she said before leaving him standing there in the meadow with curiosity burning inside his chest, urging him to defy her and go look.

He did not, and instead remained standing there as he watched Earth approach the new thing—he felt Oblivion take off from his shoulder with a flap of her wings, flying high and settling on a branch in one of the trees nearby, watching the creature from a safe distance.

It looked like a nymph at first glance and he would have guessed it to be the nymph of the birch tree that had so suddenly appeared in the valley, but he could sense nothing from it. It was disconnected from everything around it, it had no roots, nothing to belong to, and though it appeared very much similar it felt more like an animal to him than a nymph, free and roaming and untethered.

It was almost disturbing, seeing something so alike yourself yet different.

Mesmerized by this strange new thing, Yuuri continued to stare, only faintly aware of the many other nymphs and spirits who had gathered around the edge of the forest, peering through the trees and bushes. There was an odd silence surrounding them as Earth knelt down before her latest creation, as
if the very air was holding its breath in anticipation.

“Wake up,” Earth told the creature, brushing her fingers through its long, silver locks until its eyes fluttered open, as blue as any sea nymph’s Yuuri had ever seen, staring up at Earth’s face in wonder.

Earth smiled at it, continuing to caress its beautiful hair and sighing blissfully. “How I’ve waited for you.”

The creature opened its mouth slowly, but no sound came out as its gaze wandered from Earth to the grass beneath, to the sky above, hand stretching and sliding over the wood of the tree it was seated against, looking so in awe of everything before turning its attention back to its creator.

“Who are you?” it asked.

“I am Earth,” Earth answered. “I created you.”

The creature tilted its head. “Why?”

“It is my purpose to create.” Earth settled down in front of it, and Yuuri did his best to suppress the urge to approach them, to get a better look at this strange creature with its pleasant voice that did not echo in anything, so small.

The creature remained silent for a moment, reaching out and touching on Earth’s robes with its fingertips.

“What is my purpose?” it asked.

“To create,” Earth answered. “Just as I create.”

“Create?” the creature repeated thoughtfully. “What will I create?”

“Many, many things.”

“Things like me?”

Earth laughed. “You are not a thing, you are my first; you are man.”

“Man?” Man, as Earth called him, said this word aloud slowly, as if testing it on its tongue. “Is that my name?”

“If you wish it to be,” Earth said. “I could give you another name.”

“I would like that,” Man said, plucking a single blade of grass from the ground and staring at it curiously, twisting it around between his fingertips as Yuuri watched, attention rapt. “If there are going to be more of me, then I would like my own name.”

Earth hummed, seeming to think on it for a moment. “I have tried to create something like you for such a long time… Heaven did not think I could do it, The Sun mocked me for it, yet here you are.” She smiled fondly at Man. “My victor.”

“Victor.” Man nodded. “Yes, I like that.”

Earth beamed, then turned toward Yuuri, who had not been able to take his eyes off Man.

“Yuuri!” she called. “Come meet him!”
Nervous, Yuuri stood still for another moment before he finally got his feet to work but almost stopped again when he found Victor staring at him, expression open and curious and unguarded, a newborn in a vast world.

He approached them, unable to break away from Victor’s gaze as he slowly settled down beside Earth.

“This is Yuuri,” Earth introduced them, giving Yuuri a fond look. “My youngest, until you.”

“Hello,” he said quietly, and Victor sat up straighter and smiled at him, eager and friendly.

“Hello!” Victor said enthusiastically, brighter now that he was beginning to grow accustomed to existing. “What are you? And what are those things in your hair? You have a lovely scent.”

Yuuri felt himself shrinking away, taken aback by Victor’s keen interest in him. “I’m an anthousai, a flower nymph,” he answered, fingers fidgeting with the hem of his robe.

“He is a daffodil,” Earth said to Victor, whose eyes had gone from studying Yuuri’s face to looking at the daffodils in his hair.

Shy yet curious to see what Victor would do with it, Yuuri sprouted one from the ground, delighting in Victor’s gasp of amazement as he plucked it and held it out to him. Victor took the stem from his fingers carefully, instinctually aware of its fragility as he looked at it, the tip of a finger brushing gently over the edge of a sun-colored petal.

“You are very pretty,” Victor said gently, turning the daffodil around between his fingers before tucking it behind his ear and Yuuri felt himself flush as he looked away from Victor.

No one but Earth had ever called him that before—beauty mattered little to nymphs who were happy to simply exist, yet the compliment glowed warm in his chest and in his cheeks.

“Thank you,” he replied, acutely aware of Victor staring at him until Earth interrupted.

“Would you like to meet the other nymphs?” she asked Victor, whose eyes widened.

“There are more?”

Earth looked at Yuuri with the slightest wrinkle between her brows, considering him, her good mood seeming to have taken a turn of sorts. It was a subtle change, but it made Yuuri wonder if he did something wrong. Should he not have given Victor a flower?

“Run along, now,” she told him. “The others would love to meet him as well.”

“Does he have to leave?” Victor asked both to Earth’s and Yuuri’s surprise. “I would like him to stay.”

“You will have plenty of time to talk to him later,” Earth assured him while Yuuri felt incredibly pleased at Victor’s desire to keep him here, even if it would not be heeded. “But I still have so much to show you, and my brothers and sisters cannot wait to meet you!”

“Brothers and sisters?” Victor asked, his interest piqued once more.

While Earth happily indulged him with an answer she gave Yuuri a look, and Yuuri quickly got up from beside her, reluctantly walking back the way he came toward the forest where the crowd was still watching the exchange. No doubt he would be hounded with questions as soon as he joined the
Yet as unwilling as he was to leave so quickly, Earth was right; there would be plenty of time to talk to Victor later and it would be unfair of him to keep Victor’s attention all to himself, as fascinating as he might be.

But if Yuuri found Victor staring after him when he glanced over his shoulder as he walked away, then Earth could not fault him for the smile it brought to his face.

His generous nature did not last for very long.

Once night fell Yuuri found himself inevitably yearning to return to the birch tree standing in the meadow, knowing that Victor would likely be spending the night there. He stirred from his flowerbed, growing restless from his stargazing as he thought about Earth’s firstborn.

Evidently Victor was not her firstborn in the literal sense, but it was clear that he was something special, different from the nymphs and the spirits that were so connected to her. The wonder and curiosity he possessed was not a trait often come across in their kind, who knew instinctually and intimately their place in nature. Victor was disconnected and therefore eager to explore it all, and there was something undeniably charming about that.

“Are you thinking of visiting him?” Oblivion said softly, and Yuuri twisted his head to look at her, the top of her head from her eyes up visible from the dark waters of her stream, her voice echoing softly through the ripples in the water. “I’m sure Earth would not mind, but you should take care not to run into my master; Death will want to visit him as well.”

Yuuri could not help but shudder at the mention of the god. He was acquainted with it the way all living creatures were: from a distance. The thought of his own death seldom crossed his mind, and it worried him to think Death was visiting Victor so soon. Were men so fragile? Were their lifespans so short?

“It is not to take him,” Oblivion assured him, his concern no doubt written across his face. “Death is merely curious.”

That did not make him any less concerned, but he supposed it was better than the alternative. With a breath Yuuri pushed himself upright, resolving to go see Victor.

After a short walk through the forest, he reached the edge and saw Victor’s figure curled up underneath the tree, sleeping comfortably in front of a softly crackling fire that he had somehow managed to confine to a strange circle of stones. The only times Yuuri had seen fire had been when lightning struck an unfortunate tree.

The fire wasn’t the only oddity, however. Earth stood in front of Victor, a solitary figure cut against the fields that stretched into the darkness, her soft sand-colored robes fluttering in the wind, and Yuuri could hear her voice though he could not make out the words. She was talking, but he wasn’t sure to who until she looked up at the branches above Victor.

That’s when Yuuri saw it.

Death, perched high on branch of the birch tree, head twisting this way and that way, and if it were not for its rotted wings Yuuri would have never noticed any difference from an ordinary crow.

Yuuri stood frozen for a moment before he had the sense to crouch behind the bushes, and sent a seed to be carried by the wind, landing not far from them. With a flick of his fingers a daffodil sprouted among the grass, unnoticed by both gods, and as Yuuri focused he could now clearly hear
them speaking through the flower.

“What a peculiar little thing,” Death mused in its genderless voice that grated like jagged rocks dragging across the stone walls of an endless cavern, staring at Victor sleeping underneath the tree; no doubt exhausted after a long day of exploration and meeting all of Earth’s other creatures. “What do you intend to do with it?”

“Oh, nothing,” Earth answered.

Death was silent, which indicated that it probably did not believe her. Neither did Yuuri, for that matter.

“Ah, well, I suppose it is of little consequence,” Death decided easily. “Either way it will find its way to me; everything does eventually.”

Yuuri felt an unpleasant chill travel up his spine and only barely resisted the urge to flee, as was natural when Death deigned to visit the world of the living in physical form. The forest was abnormally silent. Save for the wind that blew softly across the grass not a single creature made a sound.

“He has barely been born a day and already you hunger for him,” Earth scoffs. “Do not think you can take him from me so easily.”

“Yes, I can sense this one is different,” Death says slowly, a feather falling from one of its wings, landing beside Victor’s head. “You put something inside him, didn’t you? Something divine.”

“A soul.” Earth lifted her chin defiantly. “He has a soul, as will the others that are born after him, though none quite like his own.”

A soul?

“Thought you might be able to outsmart me, hmm?” Death is abnormally still now. “You only delayed the inevitable. Even a soul, however divine, is not eternal.”

Divinity was not given lightly, and through his astonishment Yuuri could now understand why Earth treated Victor so differently. Having a soul meant it would long outlast whatever body it housed, and a soul touched by the divine especially was one that could endure as long as any god could.

Yuuri did not have a soul, nothing to outlast him in his death, and while created by Earth he was not divine. The daffodils were a part of Yuuri, and if the first flower he was born from were to be destroyed, he would surely perish together with it.

But his friend Oblivion, even as connected to her river as she was, would not simply disappear when her river did. As a goddess the river was not a part of her, it was her domain, and even if she lost her domain she would still exist in the afterlife.

Did this mean Victor was akin to a god? Were men to be gods on Earth? Yuuri could not imagine Earth giving up her entire body as a domain for others to rule. Did that mean Victor was special?

“Maybe not, but you do not have to destroy them,” Earth spoke, pulling Yuuri out of his thoughts. “You could keep them for a little while, if you’d like, and then let them return to Life anew.”

“A cycle of rebirth, many deaths instead of one?” Death said, pensive. “I suppose it would be more satisfying than waiting for their souls to disintegrate. Very well, I will offer you this: once a mortal body passes, I will take its soul to Oblivion who will wash it clean so that it can be reborn in a new
body, and so it will repeat.”

Earth eased into relief, and Yuuri could understand why. At least this way her children would not be lost to her forever, and even if they lost all memories and all sense of who they were before, their souls would remain the same.

“I accept your offer.”

Yuuri wondered if she would tell Victor.

There was hardly a moment where Victor was alone.

He always seemed to be surrounded by others. The nymphs loved to fawn all over him, regaling him with songs and braiding flowers in his long hair, bringing him small gifts they plucked from the lands like fruits and pretty stones.

The dryads, the tree nymphs, helped him build a place for himself by that birch tree in the meadow, a small and simple structure made of wood taken from their forest to offer him shelter against harsh winds and heavy rain. The leimoniads, nymphs of the meadow, helped him cut out a garden where he could grow food and harvest. The naiads, nymphs that dwelled in rivers and lakes, taught him how to hunt for fish in the shallow waters. Days went by and Victor never seemed to be without company.

Yuuri did not approach him for a quite a while, instead watching from a distance as Victor basked and delighted in the attention. He wasn’t modest—he prided himself on his beauty and was always happy to receive praise for it—but he was also kind.

He would help plant trees and flowers, would prune them and take care of the meadow where he lived even as he cut out a little space for himself, and as time passed and his garden grew he shared the fruits of his labor with the nymphs in gratitude. Once he learned to hunt, he would not just hunt for himself but offer his largest hauls to Earth who was always pleased to receive them if only because of the effort he had put into getting his kill, a testament to his love for her.

But he did not stay in the meadow for long.

As Yuuri watched and time passed, he noticed Victor starting to venture further and further into the forest, further and further away from the meadow to lands yet unknown to him. He learned to tame a wild horse, soon using it to ride across longer distances, but even as he explored day after day, he seemed unsated.

“What a restless thing,” a dryad sighed to Yuuri as they watched Victor take off at the rise of dawn on his horse again; he wouldn’t be back until nightfall. “Why does he feel the need?”

“You are a tree, you plant your roots and you stay because that is your purpose,” Yuuri replied, though he privately agreed that Victor’s propensity to explore and discover was intriguing. “Victor does not have any roots, he does not have a reason to stay.”

“Sort of like a bird, then.”

Yuuri considered this comparison for a while as he watched Victor come and go, never seeming to follow the paths he had made the days before, always picking a different direction to go towards seemingly at random; even birds migrated in patterns.

Victor, perhaps, was freer even than a bird.
For a long time Yuuri was content to observe this from a distance, Earth’s lingering look still vivid in his memory; something about it told Yuuri she did not want him near Victor. He knew his mistress long enough to recognize her whims, as strange and mysterious as they might be to him at times, and though he was burning with curiosity he knew better than to disobey her.

But it seemed as if Yuuri had no choice, because on a fateful spring day when his flowers bloomed the brightest and he walked by the river where they grew, he found Victor stretched out among his daffodils.

Yuuri stood frozen, silently watching the steady rise and fall of Victor’s chest where his hands rested, eyelids shut against the sunlight filtering through the trees. He looked so warm and comfortable that Yuuri didn’t dare disturb him, but just as he resolved to turn back around and leave Victor to his slumber, Victor stirred.

His lashes fluttered open briefly before his eyes narrowed at the brightness of the sun, turning his face away to yawn into his hand, body stretching wide. Yuuri did not move until Victor’s gaze finally caught him, thawing him out of his petrified state.

“Hello,” Victor said, a gentle smile unfurling on his face.

“Hello,” Yuuri answered, daring to wonder if this shy greeting might end up becoming a habit as he watched Victor push himself upright, glancing over his shoulder at the flowers he had flattened with his nap.

“Oh.” Victor got up to his feet, considering the crushed daffodils with regret and some panic. “I didn’t think this through, did I? I’m very sorry about the flowers, it’s just—”

Yuuri flicked his wrist and with a golden glow the daffodils smoothed back out as if Victor had never touched them at all. “No harm done.”

“What a relief!” Victor grinned at him and Yuuri didn’t quite know where to look. “I love the smell of them and I meant to only sit and enjoy the scenery for a little while, but before I knew it I’d fallen asleep.”

“You chose a good spot,” Yuuri remarked, eyes drifting over toward the riverbank as he realized this exact flowerbed was one where he himself could often be found sleeping. “This is my favorite place to rest.”

“Does that mean I slept in your bed?”

Yuuri blinked up at Victor, startled—even more so when he saw the teasing curve in Victor’s smile and the gleam in his eye that made Yuuri avert his stare once more. He was so bright, it was like trying to stare into the sun.

“I, ah…” Yuuri cleared his throat, unsure of why he had suddenly gotten so nervous and why his hands were feeling clammy. “I don’t mind sharing; there are many other places for me to sleep.”

He heard footsteps in the grass and stilled completely when Victor’s legs came into his view in front of him.

“I was actually wondering when I’d get to talk to you again,” Victor said, and a glance at his face had Yuuri holding his breath for just a moment when he noticed how close Victor was standing. “I’ve seen you watching me so I thought you would approach me eventually, but I admit I became a little impatient, so I decided to follow this trail of daffodils in the hopes of running into you. Coincidentally, of course.”
Victor smiled at him again and Yuuri didn’t quite know what to do, so he just stared for a while until he realized Victor was probably waiting for some kind of response so he finally said, “I didn’t know you wanted me to approach you.”

Granted, it wasn’t the most eloquent response he could have given and Victor was likely looking for something more, but Yuuri had no idea where this was going and whether he even wanted it to go anywhere. Earth’s opinion on the matter, he thought, had been made clear: he was not to get too close to Victor. Evidently she had different plans for him.

But with Victor standing before him and eagerly expressing how he had sought Yuuri out, how could Yuuri possibly turn him away? He couldn’t. All Yuuri could do was be drawn toward him, a tide pulling him deeper and deeper into a vast sea.

“What wouldn’t I?” Victor responded to his question, incredulous. “You’re the first friend I ever made, yet I don’t even know your name!”

Friend.

Yuuri felt his cheeks glow, pleased by the warmth in his chest. “You didn’t ask anyone?”

“I waited until I could ask you,” Victor said cheekily. “So, what do I call you? What is your name?”

“Yuuri.”

“Yuuri,” Victor repeated, and when Yuuri couldn’t help himself and started to smile, he smiled back just as widely. “Yuu-ri.”

Something about the way it passed his lips, the way it curled around his tongue, it was strange. Yuuri had never particularly cared for his name nor disliked it, but the way Victor said it made him love it, love the sound of it like he didn’t know he could.

“Victor,” Yuuri replied, giddy with the feeling and something in Victor’s eyes sparked, a flicker of light flashing like a stone skidding across the water. Yuuri’s heart was arrested by the sight for a single beat.

“Do you like my name?” Victor asked earnestly, as if the answer would determine the rest of his life.

“It suits you,” Yuuri said after a moment of thought. “Victor. I like saying it.”

With a coy stretch of lips and a voice that caressed, Victor replied softly, “I like hearing you say it.”

Yuuri flushed, something—not warm but hot, burning settling underneath his skin, pulling him taut and curling around him at the same time. The sensation was foreign and singular, the only thing he could feel in that moment.

Perhaps Victor realized that he had flustered Yuuri too much to expect a reply, and he mercifully changed the subject, leaning away and shifting the tone of his voice to something lighter. “So, since we’re here, would you like to walk with me? I haven’t explored the forest as much as I’d like.”

Earth would not want him to, Yuuri thought. She was probably watching them right then, hoping he would choose to walk away and leave Victor be.

But as he looked into Victor’s glittering eyes and saw outstretched fingers waiting patiently for him, he admitted to himself that in that moment he did not care much about what Earth might or might not want him to do because his decision had already been made the moment he met Victor.
Yuuri took his hand and smiled.

“It can’t last,” Oblivion cautioned him.

Yuuri was seated at the edge of the riverbank, staring down at Victor who had laid his head onto Yuuri’s lap and drifted off into sleep a while ago. He brushed his fingers through Victor’s long, silver locks, wondering whether Earth was watching.

“I know,” he said to Oblivion, watching them from the river below with her large, black eyes.

“She has plans for him,” Oblivion added before lowering her pale lips into the water.

“I know,” Yuuri repeated patiently.

Oblivion stares at him a moment longer, thin brows furrowing slightly as she glances down at Victor before sinking into the river and disappearing again without a sound, not a glimpse nor a shadow of her below the surface.

A cloud passed across the sun, darkening the forest.

Yuuri watched Victor sigh in his sleep and wondered if it could be worth it.

“What’s it like, being a nymph?” Victor asked as they sat by a bonfire in a small clearing within the forest, the glow of the flames blending with the soft golden sunlight of setting dusk.

Victor had caught a rabbit in one of his traps, plucked it and skinned it and cleaned it to put on a roast above the fire next to a few freshwater fish he had caught with his spear, serving as his supper for the night while Yuuri accompanied him.

It had been strange to watch him eat the first few times—Yuuri did not eat, did not need to—but he had grown used to it quickly even if the act struck him as animalistic, a very base necessity that he had never experienced.

“I wouldn’t know how to explain it,” Yuuri responded after some thought, sitting beside Victor who decided to start carving something from a thick, wooden branch he had found lying around. “I’ve only ever been a nymph. If I asked you what it’s like to be human, would you know how to answer me?”

Victor, having whittled down the branch into a small block with a sharp rock, glanced at him from the corner of his eyes, braided hair draped over his shoulder like a rope. “I suppose not.”

“It seems like it would be very troublesome,” Yuuri said. “Being human, that is.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You need to eat almost constantly it seems like and when you’re not eating, you’re hunting for things to eat.”

Victor appeared amused as he stopped carving the wood to look at Yuuri who continued, “When you’re not eating or hunting you’re sleeping every single night, you get tired and cold and sore—I thought you were supposed to be divine!”

“Divine?” Victor repeated, brows arching. “Me?”
That was unexpected; Yuuri assumed Victor would already know.

“Earth didn’t tell you?” he asked, curious about why she wouldn’t.

Perhaps she did not want Victor to get the impression that he was her equal.

“No, she didn’t.”

“I don’t know all that much about it,” Yuuri explained. “Only that you were touched by Earth’s divinity.”

Victor hummed, a thoughtful expression on his face as he returned to carving, this time in silence. Yuuri was happy to watch him for a while, until Victor lost focus and slipped with his rock, nicking his finger with a small cut that welled up red with blood.

“Ow,” Victor muttered belatedly, staring at the drop that slid down his skin to his knuckle before Yuuri grabbed his hand and drew it towards him.

Pressing his lips to the cut on Victor’s finger, Yuuri ignored Victor’s surprised wince as, when he had finished kissing the wound, it had completely healed.

“How did you do that?” Victor asked in wonder as he looked at where the cut used to be right below his nail, but aside from the smear of blood there was no trace of it left.

“I can heal,” Yuuri answered simply.

Victor looked up at his face, staring intently before he reached up and brushed the tips of his fingers across Yuuri’s red-stained lips. Yuuri remained perfectly still at Victor’s careful touch as he swept up the blood, something of a thrill skittering up Yuuri’s spine and he didn’t breathe again until Victor retracted his fingers.

“How have you seen much of the world?” he asked Yuuri as he wiped the blood off on his robe.

“A little,” Yuuri answered, the ghost of Victor’s touch still lingering on his lips as he wished, suddenly and so fiercely that it left him flustered, that he could feel it again. “My flowers don’t grow everywhere.”

“Would you like to see it?”

Yuuri considered this very briefly. “Not particularly. It might be interesting, I suppose, but I have no real desire to.”

“So if I left,” Victor said, sounding disappointed, “you would stay here?”

“Where would you go?” Yuuri asked.

“Across the sea, maybe.”

“Why?”

Victor grinned at him, shining in the lights flickering from the bonfire, casting shadows around them in the ever-increasing darkness. “I want to see how far I can go.”

Yuuri looked down at the bloodstain on Victor’s robe. “Then I’d come with you.”

“You would?” Victor said, eyes growing wide and hopeful.
“I want to see how far you can go,” Yuuri replied with a playful smile that quickly faded when Victor took his hand in his own.

“To the ends of the earth, then,” he promised. “As long as you come with me.”

“Would it matter that much?” Yuuri could not imagine being that important, but Victor seemed to think differently.

“I am at ease around you,” Victor said, glancing down at their hands and relinquishing his grip to trace the lines on Yuuri’s palm. “I am always restless otherwise, but not when I’m with you. That feeling that I have of longing, the thing that always lures me further and further away from home, it disappears when I’m by your side. I feel at peace, as if I have found what I was looking for.”

Yuuri was silent for a long time, beginning to understand now—all that wandering Victor did before, it was never just about exploration, about curiosity.

All that time, he was searching for something, someone.

Someone like himself.

“Victor,” Yuuri asked softly, Victor’s fingers that had wandered down to the inner side of Yuuri’s wrist going still above his veins. “Are you lonely?”

Victor’s gaze, still fixated upon their hands, turned sad for a while until he looked up at Yuuri’s face, the strain in his expression smoothed over. “Not when I’m with you.”

“I’m not human,” Yuuri pointed out gently.

“But you talk to me,” Victor responded. “You try to understand me.”

“The other nymphs don’t?”

“I am very fond of them,” Victor clarifies, “but they treat me as if I’m a toy, a novelty to be gawked at.”

Yuuri frowned deeply, pulling his hand away from Victor’s and shifting to sit nearer to him, leaning against Victor’s side and resting his head against Victor’s shoulder, eyelashes fluttering across the skin of Victor’s neck when he blinked. He felt Victor’s arm curl around his back, hand settling on his hip and pressing him closer.

The other nymphs always thought of Yuuri to be a little odd from befriending Oblivion, unable to grasp why Earth favored him so above the rest of them. Most other nymphs were spirits of nature, they fathomed very little beyond their elements. They were happy to simply be, whereas Yuuri drew comfort from companionship, from being among others, from loving and being loved.

Earth always told him that his heart was a special one, and now Yuuri finally understood why.

His and Victor’s—Their hearts beat the same.

Perhaps he had been a precursor to what Victor was meant to be. Earth had said that she had tried many times to create something like Victor.

Was that all the nymphs were to her? Failed creations?

Toys, discarded?
“You aren’t,” Yuuri murmured. “Not to me.”

“Then what am I to you?”

Yuuri closed his eyes and basked in the warmth of Victor’s skin. “You are my dearest friend.”

He felt Victor smile against his hair as he kissed it.

One day, finding Yuuri and Victor enjoying the shade of Victor’s birch tree in the heat of summer, Earth approached them with gleaming eyes and a feeling of unease settled in Yuuri’s stomach.

She lowered herself down in front of Victor who was still working on his wooden carving that had taken the shape of a star, or something similar. Even kneeling she towered over both of them, dwarfing their size easily.

“I’ve heard that you were lonely,” she said to him, her long, soft, white robes pooling around her knees, pearls shining off her wrists and her neck and Yuuri tensed beside Victor; Earth could not have known that unless she was listening, and in hindsight, why wouldn’t she be?

Victor glanced at Yuuri from the corner of his eyes before looking back at Earth. “Not anymore.”

“But wouldn’t you like to have more than one friend?” Earth urged. “Even if he is dear to you, poor Yuuri could never understand you completely, not your heart and not your desires.”

Yuuri seldom felt ire toward his mistress as there was little point, but it felt like a breach of trust and he felt wholly exposed in a way he had never before. It distressed him, but it also made him angry.

“I wouldn’t want to befriend the other nymphs,” Victor answered honestly, the tips of his fingers touching on Yuuri’s that were clutching at the grass beneath them.

“What about others like you?” Earth said, stunning both Victor and Yuuri.

“I don’t understand,” Victor said cautiously. “I thought I was the only human?”

Earth smiled widely, rising from the ground and righting herself. “For now.”

She said nothing more than that, continuing on her way and walking past their tree, leaving Yuuri in turmoil as he did not even dare look at Victor’s face. “What do you think she’s up to?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Victor said firmly, drawing Yuuri’s attention to his face and he looked just as determined as he sounded, eyes piercing. “I would never abandon you.”

Even though he should have already known this, Yuuri still could not help but feel relieved at Victor’s assurance.

“What did she mean when she said that I could never understand you?” he wondered out loud, noting the way Victor shifted to sit up straighter and averted his gaze. “Your heart, your desires…”

“It’s nothing,” Victor said, but spoke too quickly and only made Yuuri suspicious.

Was Victor hiding something from him?


Yuuri decided to let the matter rest, although the conversation with Earth continued to plague him for
many days afterwards. He started paying even more attention to Victor’s behavior than he did usually, which he did not think possible since Victor managed to capture all of Yuuri’s focus yet during the small moments in between, he began to notice something he had not spared much thought to before.

Victor liked to touch him, as often as he could. Yuuri wondered why he had never seen this before, but he supposed his own enjoyment had prevented him from questioning it at all.

Whenever they went on walks—when Victor wasn’t busy working the land or hunting or eating or sleeping or any of the other things his human body made him prone to do—he would hold Yuuri’s hand, or link their arms together, or hug his waist or his shoulders.

During the times Yuuri indulged Victor and joined him for a nap, Victor would draw him close, sometimes press a kiss to his hair, always touching some part of him as they drifted off into sleep.

The few times they would separate from each other for a while Victor would embrace him to say goodbye, and when they saw each other again they would embrace again as a greeting.

Once Yuuri started paying attention to just how much Victor liked to touch him and became aware of it, something changed.

Feeling Victor’s fingers intertwine with his own began to make him nervous for a reason he couldn’t articulate. He couldn’t hug Victor without experiencing a fluttery sensation deep inside his stomach, butterflies trying to rise up and spill out of his mouth.

It made Yuuri skittish—Victor finally noticed when he, while trying to nap on one of Yuuri’s flowerbeds, leaned in to kiss his forehead and Yuuri flinched back, feeling his heart skip loudly in his chest.

Victor looked at him with startled and concerned eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Yuuri muttered, the conflicting impulse to both curl into himself and move closer to Victor rendering him completely paralyzed.

Victor seemed unconvinced, but did not press the issue.

Not until a few days later, when he pulled Yuuri into his arms after having been away to hunt for a while and Yuuri, upon feeling Victor’s lips brush across his neck, shrieked.

Victor jumped back as if stung, alarmed. “What?”

“Nothing!” Yuuri exclaimed, feeling his face burn. “Nothing, I thought- I thought I saw a bug.”

Victor stared at him.

“A very large bug,” Yuuri emphasized pitifully. “The kind that eats flowers.”

He had not been ready for that, had not expected the flare of something the mere sensation of Victor’s lips could evoke.

Still, this incident too Victor let go after giving Yuuri a weird look, but the third time he couldn’t ignore.

Yuuri was in the midst of tending to one of his flowers that had been trampled by someone or something, possibly gnawed on by an animal, sitting on his knees in front of it when he suddenly felt
two arms drape across his shoulders and the heavy, warm weight of Victor’s body pressed against his back.

He stiffened completely, feeling his heart speeding up and starting to pound against his ribs as Victor kissed his ear, whispering, “What are you doing?” in a low, rough voice as if he had just woken up, and Yuuri’s blood ran hot.

When Yuuri did not respond, frozen as he was, Victor pulled back a bit.

“Yuuri?”

Yuuri made a noise that came from within his throat, sounding strangled. There was that conflicting urge again, the one that wanted to pull away from Victor and press closer at the same time.

When Victor tried to draw his arms back, the part of Yuuri that wanted to press closer overpowered the other half and he grabbed Victor’s wrists, keeping them crossed over his chest.

Victor didn’t move, staying where he was for a while until Yuuri felt his lips again, kissing right below his ear this time, almost tentative.

Now that his urge had been defined, Yuuri could do little more than to give into it, tilting his head to the side as Victor’s lips slid lower, to the edge of his jaw, then even lower to his neck. Yuuri felt hot, hotter, smothered and overcome with it, a sigh spilling from his mouth as Victor kept kissing him.

When Victor drew back Yuuri blinked, dazed and confused for a moment until he felt Victor pull at his arm and Yuuri quickly caught his meaning, twisting around on his knees to face him.

He had hardly a moment to look at Victor’s face before Victor rushed to kiss his lips and for a moment Yuuri stopped breathing. The sensation was odd and unfamiliar and wet and soft, but not unpleasant, just different. The innocent pecks he had shared with other nymphs before Victor could not compare in any way.

Victor’s hands lowered from Yuuri’s waist to his hips when Yuuri tried to kiss him back—Yuuri’s hands resting on Victor’s shoulders squeezed tightly when Victor sucked on his lower lip and Yuuri felt his teeth.

It was as if Yuuri had unraveled something inside of Victor he hadn’t even known was there. Victor’s kisses became almost frantic, scarcely giving Yuuri a chance to breathe. His grip on Yuuri’s hips drew him closer until Yuuri felt something hard press against him and Victor groaned into his mouth, a deep, hungry sound that made Yuuri think he was about to be devoured.

Yuuri pulled away just long enough to say, “Victor—wait.”

After a last needy kiss and a hum Victor obliged him putting some space between them but not letting go of him.

For a moment Yuuri was too mesmerized by the dark, half-lidded look in Victor’s glazed over eyes and the shine of wetness on his kiss-bruised lips to say anything, swallowing thickly and finally snapping out of his stupor.

“I…” Yuuri hesitated, looking away from Victor’s intense stare. “I’m not sure what… what just happened, or what this is.”

Victor’s brows furrowed slightly, out of confusion it seemed like. “What do you mean?”
Yuuri hadn’t realized that one of Victor’s hands had begun to wander, not until Victor’s fingers skidded across the skin of his arm and it was as if with that single touch he lit a fire inside of Yuuri’s belly, tracing the thin vines wrapped around his wrist up to his shoulder.

“I’m not…” Yuuri looked at Victor’s hand and felt overwhelmed. “I don’t know how to… I’ve never done this before.”

“Neither have I,” Victor replied with some amusement, but his expression was gentle. “Did I go too fast?”

Yuuri almost felt embarrassed to admit it. “A little bit.”

“I’m sorry.” Victor’s hand cupped Yuuri’s cheek, thumb caressing his lower lip. “I’ll try to be more patient.”

“Was this what Earth meant when she mentioned your desires?” Yuuri wondered, trying not to get distracted by Victor’s thumb on his mouth.

It was Victor’s turn to look a little embarrassed, and it looked charming on him. “Possibly.”

At Yuuri’s persisting, questioning look he admitted in a quiet tone, “I may have been a little… ah, preoccupied with it, lately.”

Yuuri raised his brows. “Preoccupied how?”

“I keep thinking about…” Victor hesitated briefly. “About wanting to touch you.”

“You touch me all the time,” Yuuri pointed out, and Victor shook his head.

“Not like that,” he replied, frowning now. “I mean touch you in different places.”

“Like where?”

Victor exhaled hotly, appearing a little frustrated. “Like… just- hold on, I’ll show you.”

Curiosity piqued, Yuuri watched with rapt attention as Victor pulled his hand away from Yuuri’s cheek and lowered it down to the edge of his own robe, slipping it underneath and cupping—oh.

Yuuri did not know where to look: Victor’s flushed face, or the hand underneath his robe he was using to slowly stroke himself with.

That at least was not entirely unfamiliar to Yuuri, although it was not something he, or any nymph that he knew of, did regularly. It was a function much like eating food to them: they were able to do it, but had no real pressing desire for it.

But something about seeing Victor do it made the act suddenly seem far more enticing.

Yuuri reached over and grabbed Victor’s arm, making him halt and look at Yuuri who wetted his lips with his tongue, murmuring softly, “Can I?”

Victor’s eyes widened slightly but he removed his hand as Yuuri shifted toward him, gently pushing Victor to sit back down on the grass so that he could climb onto his lap, drawing closer and closer until his thighs hugged Victor’s hips.

“Have you done it before?” Victor asked in a low voice, one hand skirting over Yuuri’s bare leg while Yuuri slipped his hand underneath Victor’s robe, thrilled just at the feeling of Victor’s skin
underneath his hand.

“A few times,” Yuuri admitted, feeling slightly breathless as he trailed his fingers up to Victor’s hip.
“Only to myself.”

Victor’s eyes were fixated on Yuuri’s lips, but neither of them made a move to kiss the other as Yuuri carefully pressed his hand flat against Victor’s abdomen, feeling his muscles tense underneath his fingers.

“You’re teasing me,” Victor accused.

“I’m savoring you,” Yuuri corrected.

“Would you please—” Yuuri’s hand slipped further down, fingers wrapping around Victor’s cock and Victor lost the rest of his words in a closemouthed groan, hips pushing up as Yuuri slowly began to stroke him. “Oh.”

“Does that feel good?”

“Yes.” Victor leaned his head back, exposing his throat with a breathy exhale. “Keep going.”

Yuuri obliged, eyes wide in wonder as he watched Victor roll his hips into the motion of Yuuri’s hand, breathing harder and heavier. The first time Victor moaned Yuuri almost felt it, his own loins stirring at the drawn-out sound spilling sweetly from Victor’s mouth.

“Yuuri,” Victor sighed, reaching for him with a hand that curled around the back of Yuuri’s neck. “Kiss me.”

He didn’t have to think about doing it, his fingers slowing around Victor’s hardened member that fit so nicely around his hand to lean over and acquiesce to Victor’s needy demand, lips and tongues sliding and slotting together deliciously.

Victor’s hand slipped up Yuuri’s leg, thumb tracing over his inner thigh to where his cock laid swollen and heavy underneath his robe. At the barest touch, Yuuri’s hand around Victor stuttered in its motion, his attention hyperfocused to the sensation between his own legs.

Breaking the kiss, Victor smiled against the corner of Yuuri’s mouth, pressing a peck on the edge of his lips as Yuuri tried desperately to match the motions of his wrist to Victor’s but finding it too hard to concentrate, his strokes clumsy and irregular while Victor’s were steady, building quickly.

“I can’t.” Yuuri could not finish his sentence—it hit him so suddenly he hadn’t even the time to realize how close he had been to his orgasm.

He buried his face into the crook of Victor’s neck, a keening sound tearing from his throat as he pressed his hips into Victor’s grip once, twice, a shuddering exhale and then he was done.

For a moment Yuuri felt limp and dazed, then remembered with a startling clarity that Victor hadn’t yet finished and quickly resumed the motions of his hand. Victor’s fingers came up to curl into Yuuri’s hair and he kissed insistently until Yuuri was certain he was going to die from how little he was able to breathe but not being able to care.

Yuuri sped his hand up and Victor groaned deep from the pit of his chest into Yuuri’s mouth, hips stilling, nails raking against the back of Yuuri’s neck.

It wasn’t until Yuuri felt something sticky clinging between his fingers that he had the presence of
mind to stop, realizing that Victor had just come.

He pulled back a little to look at Victor’s face, feeling some dismay that he hadn’t been able to look at his expression when his climax hit him because Victor had been too busy kissing him. His eyes were still closed, but they opened slowly, lashes fluttering once as if he had just woken from a deep sleep to look back at Yuuri.

“That felt…” Victor paused, considering. “It was good.”

Pulling his hand out from under Victor’s robe, Yuuri hummed in agreement as he wiped his fingers off on the grass. It did feel good, although it was over far too soon.

“I’ve never done it with someone else before,” Yuuri murmured as he lifted himself off Victor’s hips and sat down beside him, lying down with a heavy breath, heated skin cooling slowly.

Victor laid down beside him, stretching his entire body before rolling over onto his side to face Yuuri, grinning mischievously like they had done something they weren’t supposed to. “Me neither! We should do this more often.”

“How often?” Yuuri asked dubiously, already feeling sleepy just from that bit of touching they had done.

Victor shifted, elbow leaning onto the grass and resting the side of his head onto his palm. “Every day.”

“Every day?” Yuuri repeated, shocked.

“Maybe twice a day?”

“Twice?” Yuuri stared disbelievingly at Victor’s wide smile. “You cannot have that much energy.”

“Says who?” Victor replied airily, turning onto his back again and staring up at the branches of the trees shading them from above as Yuuri continued to stare, trying to figure out whether Victor had been teasing him or serious when Victor said, “Want to go again?”

“No!” Yuuri exclaimed, feeling far too sensitive to be touched there again. “I want to rest!”

Victor laughed loudly, shaking his head. “I’m only teasing you.”

“Are you sure about that?” Yuuri said, unconvinced, and Victor gave him a playful smile.

“Mostly.” He closed his eyes, breathing out deep, sounding satisfied. “I might have a rather large appetite.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Yuuri muttered; Victor never seemed to do anything by halves. “Just don’t expect me to be doing this with you constantly, nymphs weren’t made for… for this.”

Victor slipped a single eye open to look at him. “But you feel lust, don’t you?”


“How much lust, exactly?”

“Victor!”

“I’m only curious!” Victor promised with laughing eyes. “Is it the kind of lust that makes you want
to hold me down and rip the robes off my body, or—"

“Victor, please,” Yuuri groaned, feeling his cheeks flush with heat. “I’m not an animal.”

Victor actually looked genuinely disappointed. “In other words, you don’t want to ravage me?”

“You want to be ravaged?” Yuuri asked, arching his brows.

“I think I deserve to be ravaged, yes,” Victor responded earnestly, as if it were an affront to the gods that Yuuri was not in the midst of tearing the clothes off him that very instant.

Yuuri might have dismissed the idea out of hand were it another nymph, but as he said to Victor, it was something about him that stirred something in Yuuri, as if he had been hungry all this time but never realized it until he had tasted Victor.

He wasn’t entirely clear on what **ravaging** Victor meant either, but if it involved more kissing and touching, then he wouldn’t protest. “Some other time.”

“Promise?” Victor teased, though the smile disappeared from his face when Yuuri moved closer to him, leaning in and taking his lower lip between his teeth, grazing over the thin skin before letting go again, Victor’s eyes blown wide.

“Promise,” Yuuri murmured, the only word he could say before Victor dove for his lips and sucked them into a kiss.

In the following days, Yuuri fulfilled this promise ten times over.

---

He did not think he could be any happier than he was with Victor as the seasons passed and they became lost in each other. The earth could have crumbled beneath them and they would not have noticed—that’s what Yuuri thought, discovering that while he might not have been as spirited and enthusiastic as Victor, he was no less starved for him.

It wasn’t until the earth truly crumbled beneath their feet that Yuuri realized how wrong he had been.

They had no warning, nothing to prepare them, Earth’s words from that summer long forgotten as the years had passed, both Yuuri and Victor remaining as youthful as they had always been.

On a quiet autumn morning, when they walked across the meadows together as they often did—Victor had stopped wandering and searching for the moment, though he was insistent that Yuuri join him eventually to explore the world—they found Earth waiting by Victor’s little house beside the birch tree.

She looked serene in her long, flowing black robes, wrapped around her like shadows twisted around her legs, standing almost as tall as the tree, but her smile was sad.

Yuuri felt a stone drop in the pit of his stomach, squeezing Victor’s hand so harshly Victor looked at him in worry. They had not seen Earth for so many seasons they had almost forgotten what she looked like in this form.

“Victor,” she beckoned, reaching out her hand to him. “Come.”

Victor squeezed Yuuri’s hand back and began to walk toward her, and even though Yuuri felt as if they should run, as if nothing but bad could come from this, he followed him.

When they reached her, Earth took Victor’s free hand in her own large one.
“I have humored you for as long as I could,” she said to him, “but it’s time to go.”

“Go?” Victor asked, frowning. “Go where?”

“To the others,” Earth answered. “Humans, like you.”

Victor’s eyes went wide and Yuuri breathed in deep as he realized—

“You’re going to split us apart,” he whispered, Victor turning his head to look at him in a sharp motion, looking stricken. “You’re going to take him away.”

“You have had him for long enough,” Earth said, eyes narrowing.

“No!” Victor tried to pull his hand out of her grip, but she would not release him. “I’m not going anywhere, let me go!”

“You belong with them,” Earth told him sternly, a strange sound coming from below the ground underneath their feet. “You always have.”

The earth around Victor split apart as large, thick roots wrapped around his ankles, the holes from where they had emerged radiating a strange, golden light.

Victor turned to look at Yuuri, eyes wild and desperate and his grip was so strong Yuuri was sure it would bruise for days, and yet it wasn’t strong enough.

Yuuri opened his mouth to scream, beg and cry, but before he could make a sound the roots yanked Victor down into the earth and Yuuri felt his hand ripped from his own as he disappeared into the light below, gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

The light died.

“I am sorry, Yuuri,” he heard Earth say softly as he stood there, staring mutely at the holes in the ground. “You will see him again one day.”

She dispersed into a flurry of leaves, carried away in the cold autumn wind that blew across Yuuri’s skin who remained standing there.

Unmoving.

“It has been a long time,” Oblivion said to him, perched onto his shoulder in her avian body. “Will you not rest in your vigil?”

Yuuri had had no perception of time since Victor went away. Everything had dimmed, faded from his awareness. He stood rooted to the place Victor had left him, as if he had become a tree—he did not speak, did not lift his head.

Many nymphs had tried to speak with him, to move him, but he had refused them all.

“Please, Yuuri,” Oblivion pleaded.

Yuuri did not reply.

He felt nothing.
There was a voice.

Yuuri only noticed because it sounded so strange to his ears, light and small and pitched high, shrieking with laughter.

He did not move, but for the first time in years, he felt the urge to.

“Hello!”

Yuuri said nothing, but he felt the tug at his robes from behind—low, from below his hips. Whoever was addressing him had to be very short.

When he did not respond, the voice said again, “Hello!”

Again, he did not move, he did not reply.

From the corner of his eyes a small figure darted in front of him, standing exactly at the spot Victor had left him, peering up at him curiously—Yuuri inhaled sharply.

A young girl with long, shimmering silver hair.

“I ran away,” she told him and her eyes were not her father’s, dark and brown and earthy, but she had the same mischievous look, the same tilt of her lips.

Yuuri sat on the grass in front of her, unable to keep his eyes off her. She was so much like him, yet so wholly different. His chest ached.

“I’ll have to be back before sunset or grandmother will be very upset,” she said, sitting cross-legged in front of him.

“How…” Yuuri took a moment to clear his throat, voice hoarse from not having used it for so long. “How did you find this place?”

“Father would often tell me bedtime stories about it,” the girl answered brightly. “I went looking for it everywhere, but I couldn’t find it! And then I noticed this hole in the ground in the forest—it was big, and glowing, like water but also like sunlight. When I went to look at it I fell inside and suddenly I was here!”

Earth.

Yuuri twisted his hands into his robes, balling them into fists, and the girl in front of him made a distressed sound.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to upset you!” she said, alarmed at the tears sliding down Yuuri’s cheeks.

He would never, never forgive Earth for this, but if this meant that he could see Victor again, then he would gladly bury it.

“It’s not your fault,” Yuuri said to her, wiping his tears away with shaking hands. “Can you take me to where you found the hole?”

“Mhm!” The girl jumped up from the ground, as if suddenly restless to get going as she took Yuuri’s hand and started pulling at it. “It’s that way!” she exclaimed, pointing toward the forest as Yuuri slowly pushed himself up from the ground.
“Before we go,” Yuuri said, catching the girl’s attention again, trying to keep steady as he took a breath and asked, “could you tell me your name?”

The girl smiled wide. “Narcissa!”

Yuuri stared at her and the girl squawked when he suddenly bent down and pulled her into his arms, growing very quiet as he started to cry again.

Narcissa pet his hair with her tiny hand, shushing him gently. “There, there.”

It took a while for Yuuri to stop crying and gather himself up again, but he had to, because he knew that in spite of all the years that had passed, all the time they had lost, nothing had changed and he had not been forgotten.

Victor was waiting for him.

He looked the same.

Yuuri stood at the edge of the forest as Narcissa darted toward her father whose eyes were fixated on Yuuri, though he still bent down and caught his daughter in his arms almost in a reflexive motion, something he must have done many times before.

All this time, and Victor still looked the same.

Narcissa hugged him tight before the figure of an old woman a short distance away caught her attention, likely her grandmother, and she bounded off again restlessly.

Yuuri did not bother to look, could not look anywhere but at Victor who righted himself again, still staring at him in a daze.

“Yuuri,” he breathed, taking a slow step toward him, but Yuuri could not move—was afraid that if he did, his legs would give out from under him. “Is that really you?”

Yuuri inhaled a shaky breath, cheeks wet again and this time he did not think he’d be able to stop weeping as he whispered, “Victor,” and as if that had been the only thing he had been waiting on Victor rushed toward him, colliding against him and nearly knocking them both over.

The weight of him in Yuuri’s arms felt surreal and for a while he was convinced, even as Victor sobbed against his shoulder and his tears left warm, damp stains in Yuuri’s robe, that this had to be a dream.

But Victor was real and solid and present as he lifted his head to look down at Yuuri, cheeks wet and hair disheveled, his skin warm when Yuuri raised his hand and touched his fingers on Victor’s jawline.

“I didn’t think I would ever see you again,” Victor said and Yuuri could not do anything else but rush forward and kiss him.

Victor gave immediately, pliant but demanding and needy, and when he sucked in a breath Yuuri felt it, felt the twitch of his fingers in his robes and the rumble in his groan when Yuuri took his lip between his teeth. He still kissed the same.

“I missed you,” Yuuri sighed once they broke apart.

“I love you,” Victor replied, whispering it against his lips.
Yuuri kissed him again, whispering it back to him over and over and over until he was sure his heart would burst with the feeling.

This time, he swore to himself, nothing would tear them apart.

Victor lived in a village at the base of a large hill.

The nymphs did not venture here ordinarily, and so when Victor took him along and although they did not approach them Yuuri was still gawked at by many humans, male and female, some very young and some very old.

Narcissa’s mother had already passed away, not being able to survive giving birth to her. Apparently by the time Earth had taken Victor away to the other humans, they had already built a small settlement, having lived there for quite a while before Victor arrived which was when he met Irene.

Victor had liked her very much, he said; Irene had been a dear friend to him, but he had not been able to love her like he loved Yuuri. It was only because Earth demanded it that they conceived a child at all, and it had killed her.

Yuuri listened to Victor tell him all this with grief in his heart, aching for the pain Victor must have gone through and Yuuri had not been there for him, not been able to comfort him.

How many years had passed since Yuuri last saw Victor? He couldn’t tell, Victor looked just as youthful as he had then, but according to Victor’s story it had been nearly a decade.

“I’m different,” Victor admitted to him, fingers intertwined as they walk the road through the small village to his house. Narcissa and her grandmother were walking ahead of them, also hand-in-hand. “Unlike the others, I do not age. I never will. I thought perhaps I might once I was separated from you, but apparently that had nothing to do with it.”

“And Narcissa?” Yuuri asked. “Will she continue to age?”

Victor smiled sadly, lips trembling briefly. “Yes.”

The heartbreaking truth went unspoken: he would watch his daughter grow old and die, would watch everyone he knew grow and die over and over and over while he would remain the same, frozen in time.

“Oh, Victor—I’m so sorry,” Yuuri said softly, thumb caressing Victor’s bony knuckles.

“It’s alright,” Victor replied, looking down at their linked hands. “As long as I have you, I can bear it.”

Yuuri inhaled quietly through the small parting between his lips, working up the courage to finally ask the question he wanted to ask ever since seeing Victor again. “After all this time, do you still… do you still want me?”

Victor lifted his gaze and looked at Yuuri, his eyes so blue and bright, raising their locked fingers and pressing a kiss to the back of Yuuri’s hand. “I never stopped.”

Something inside Yuuri that had not been allowed to breathe for years gasped and pulsed back to life, but they said nothing more to each other. Nothing else needed to be said.

They walked in silence side by side, bathed in the light of the setting sun.
Narcissa was delighted when Victor told her Yuuri would be living with them in their home from then on, which was a relief to them both.

Of course, Yuuri would not be around the house much—he was a nymph, a spirit of flowers, it wasn’t in his nature to be confined to a single space for very long. He preferred to roam the valleys outside the village borders; the villagers were enthused when they discovered a field of daffodils had spontaneously sprouted in the following weeks.

He took particular joy in watching the villagers pick some of the flowers as a gift for their loved ones, others who tucked them into their hair or decorated their robes with them. They still kept their distance from him, perhaps because they had never seen a nymph before as Victor told him this area—although very near where Victor was born—was secluded from the rest of the world by a strange type of magic. Earth’s doing, no doubt.

To the humans, Yuuri had to look otherworldly with the glow of his skin and the way he moved. Graceful, Victor called him, where the humans were still fumbling. Rough-edged yet startlingly fragile. Victor was the exception as, while he was undeniably beautiful, he did not look like a nymph though he possessed the same kind of grace.

Another thing that struck Yuuri was how busy they were.

He was used to spending his time idly, never in a hurry for anything. Yuuri could spend days lying in the same place in his meadow, content just the way he was, even happier whenever Victor deigned to join him.

But the humans always seemed to be in a rush, finishing one task and quickly moving onto the other. Once Yuuri realized how quickly they aged, it all began to make sense.

Narcissa was one of many children in the village and Yuuri could see it reflected in her. A single year passed and she grew startlingly quickly—Yuuri had become so used to Victor’s unchanging youth that he had forgotten Victor was the exception.

“Are you ever afraid?” Yuuri asked Victor as they sat below the shade of a tall tree and the summer heat seemed like an endless wave. “Of how quickly Narcissa is growing up?”

“Yes,” Victor admitted quietly. “Of course I’m afraid, but I’m also proud of her.”

“I wonder what it’s like,” Yuuri rested his head against Victor’s shoulder, watching blades of grass dance briefly in a soft breeze, gone too quickly to be enjoyed. “Do you think they’re afraid, of aging?”

“Everyone ages,” Victor said. “Some simply age slower than others. I used to ask myself whether it would be better to live a short and happy life instead of a long and miserable one, but then you came back to me.”

The implication did not go over his head and with an ache in his chest Yuuri wondered if Victor ever thought to answer that question—if he ever thought to act on it. “And now?”

Victor’s eyes were closed, but he was smiling when Yuuri looked at him.

“Now I think I’ll live the longest and happiest life that I can.”

Neither of them ever considered the possibility of what happened next, which made it all the more
One spring, when Narcissa had grown tall enough to reach Yuuri’s shoulder and the village had expanded into a large settlement with a number in the hundreds and they had discovered other human towns and villages once the magic keeping them secluded faded over time, people began to fall ill.

No one was alarmed at first, not even when the first person died. These things were known to happen from time to time and while it was tragic, there was nothing to be done. Yuuri’s healing powers helped, to an extent, but they could not cure the illness in its entirety. Some humans were simply too weak of constitution to survive—it was mostly children and the elderly who succumbed to it in the first place.

It wasn’t until the number of diseased increased to over a dozen that the villagers became concerned, some even panicked.

Victor, being looked upon as a leader, tried to assuage their worries the best they could. Yuuri tried to heal as many of them as he could. It wasn’t enough.

Some of the villagers became angry in their helplessness, began to blame the neighboring settlements for bringing disease into their lives as the amount of infected and dead steadily rose.

Yuuri tried to talk to Earth numerous times, but she was silent and did not answer him.

“What are we going to do?” Yuuri asked Victor as they watched yet another body—an old woman, her daughter and grandchild weeping—carried out of one of the houses to be burned at a pyre.

Victor looked weary, older, when he replied, “I don’t know.”

Death saw an opportunity.

The first night Narcissa began to cough in her sleep, Victor raced into the fields to fetch Yuuri, wide-eyed with panic.

Yuuri kissed her forehead, sharing his warmth and his spirit as much as he could, but when the coughs did not abate and on the third night she struck a fever, Victor’s panic only increased.

On the fifth night, once Yuuri finally coaxed Narcissa into sleep after she had retched what little food and water they had managed to feed her, Victor left and headed for the meadows without a word.

Yuuri, trusting Narcissa’s grandmother to watch after her, followed him and found him shouting at the sky.

“What are you doing this?” he pleaded—to Earth, or to anyone who would listen. “What have we done to deserve this?”

Above him, the sky rumbled with a voice. It was not Earth who spoke, but Heaven.

“You are wasting your breath,” Heaven said. “She will not answer.”

“Then tell her to answer!” Victor yelled at the god, infuriated.

Yuuri remained at a distance, lingering at the edge of the meadows near the houses as he watched the exchange, feeling that he might be intruding.
Heaven sighed a wind that blew across the fields. “She does not control death and who it befalls, she is merely an instrument.”


A crow cawed in the distance, but the sound—it was wrong, rasping with broken chords and Yuuri shuddered, a chill going down his spine as he spotted the black figure of the large bird land on the branch of a nearby tree.

The leaves of the tree fell down one by one as soon as the crow touched down on its perch, leaving it bare and barren, the wood beginning to rot and die until there was nothing but a husk left.

“Perhaps I can help you,” Death said.

The ground below their feet began to shake, and for the first time in years, Earth spoke. “Do not trust it!”

Victor, regaining his shaky balance and steadying himself, glared down at the ground. “Now you answer? Can you save my people?”

“No,” Earth answered. “I cannot.”

“Then I will hear whatever the bird has to say,” Victor replied insolently, turning to the crow. “You said you could help me?”

“I cannot help you save the villagers,” Death said, “but I can help you save your daughter.”

“Victor, there is always a price!” Earth urged, but Victor ignored her.

“How do I save her?”

The crow, missing one eye, turned its head sideways to look at Victor with its other eye. “There is a flower deep within the forest, a flower that is said to never fade and able to heal any ailment, any sickness, if given to another.”

Yuuri froze.

“It will cure her?” Victor asked, desperation written across his face. “She will live?”

“Yes,” Death said. “She will live.”

But Victor would die. He would die, because the flower has to be given, a gift from its owner to another. Taking it by force, stealing it, would mean death.

Yuuri stepped forward before he even realized what he was doing.

“I know where it is,” he said, and Victor turned his head to look at him in surprise. “I can take you to it.”

“Yuuri,” Earth called to him, “you know you cannot—”

Yuuri closed his eyes. “Please, let me do this.”

Earth and Death both remained silent as Victor approached Yuuri, holding out his hand.

“Show me the way,” Victor asked.
Yuuri smiled, and took his hand.

“Is this it?”

The daffodil Yuuri was born from, shining a soft golden light, sat at the very edge of the riverbank, but Oblivion was nowhere to be found. Yuuri had visited this river often in the hopes of meeting her once the magic around the village had ceased to be and allowed him to return to the place he—and Victor—were born, but she had not appeared.

Perhaps she was still upset at him for leaving, without even saying goodbye.

“Yes,” Yuuri said, plucking the flower as if it were just another ordinary little thing and not his very essence. “This is it.”

“It’s one of yours?” Victor asked quizzically.

“A special one,” Yuuri replied. “I had forgotten all about it, but this should be enough to save her. Place it atop her heart, and she will heal.”

He held out the flower to Victor, his other hand hidden behind his back and squeezed into a fist, trembling.

“Are you sure?” Victor said as he reached for it, taking it gently by its stem and the moment the daffodil left Yuuri’s fingers he felt like he was draining, bleeding out, a sudden weakness in his limbs he could barely hide.

“Go save her,” Yuuri answered, his voice barely above a whisper as he lowered himself to the ground, sitting beside the riverbank. “I need to rest.”

Victor knelt down in front of him, and though Yuuri was terrified of dying, the gratitude in his eyes that were tearing up with emotion was worth it a hundred times over.

“I love you,” Yuuri spoke softly as Victor caressed his cheek—the last words he would say to him then.

Victor kissed him and it ached. “I love you.”

He rose to his feet, hopeful for the first time in days, smiling as he said to Yuuri, “I will be back soon.”

Yuuri watched him leave as he remained there on the riverbank, lying down on his side and feeling something pulling him towards a deep, dark, quiet place somewhere in the distance, slowly growing closer.

It was not as frightening as he first thought. He felt serene as he laid there and faded away, a sense of peacefulness settling over him.

He closed his eyes.
year twenty-one, winter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'We have only one maker.'
So said ungrateful man,
and the radiant Sun became at once resentful
of the Earth and her lowly creatures.
—The Theogonies, line 548-551

“I killed you.”

Memories slot together in his mind, filling up a blank space Yuuri never even realized was there before.

It makes sense now.

Why he’s different, why he feels so at home with nymphs and they with him, why Earth cares so much about him, why she so often referred to him as her little flower, and that scent of daffodils that haunted him the moment he stepped foot into the city, and remembering Victor the moment his name was first mentioned—everything fits.

A tapestry woven from threads of gold, all connected.

“Narcissa,” Yuuri says with a start, remembering that feeling of life slipping from him, of his heartbeat fading and watches Victor’s tears break off his lashes onto his cheeks.

“You saved her.” Victor’s hands are warm against Yuuri’s, their fingers locked. “She lived a full and happy life, thanks to you.”

Yuuri opens his mouth again to speak, but nothing comes out as he finds himself in want for words, lost in the maelstrom of his thoughts that are all overcome with the enormity of this revelation. It has changed everything he thought he knew about himself within the span of a single heartbeat.

This life that he has been living as a human has always been a lie.

“Come inside,” Victor says when Yuuri remains silent, pulling him along and leading him into the mansion standing tall at the center of this hill, pillars framing the doors carved into the likeness of young men, carved with intricate detail.

The entrance hall is grand and cold and quiet, the intense colors of its mosaic floor drenched in orange by the torches hanging off the walls. Yuuri does not see much of it as Victor does not linger here, taking him through an open doorway through various rooms, but Yuuri cannot muster the energy to raise his gaze from the floor.

It’s not a physical weariness, but a mental one. He feels so fatigued in mind that he can hardly pay attention to his surroundings. Once Victor comes to a stop, however, Yuuri does make the effort to take a moment and look around.

They’ve arrived in a bedroom illuminated only by moonlight, little else in it save for the bed and a lone closet sitting in the corner. The room itself appears small, but does not feel oppressive thanks to the wide windows on the left wall. They overlook a courtyard garden with a large pond, various
statues figures standing in elegant poses functioning as rather luxurious décor—reminiscent of the pillars at the front of the mansion.

Yuuri would wonder about the extravagance, had he not remembered who Victor was.

He doesn’t see much else of the garden as Victor sits him down at the edge of the bed, never letting go of his hand while Yuuri mindlessly follows his lead, the urge to curl up and sleep stronger than ever.

“You look exhausted,” Victor mutters, lifting his hand to cup Yuuri’s cheek.

Yuuri leans into the heartbreakingly familiar touch, always so tender, eyes shutting with a sigh. “How long did you wait for me?”

“Centuries,” Victor replies and Yuuri’s eyes open wide.

He should’ve expected the answer, but hearing it said out loud makes it real.

“I’m sorry,” Yuuri says, sucks in a breath and exhales a sob that he smothers underneath the palm of his hand as Victor’s arms wrap around his back, pulling him into a gentle embrace.

“It’s alright,” Victor shushes him, voice soft against Yuuri’s hair. “I’m not upset, I’ve had years to make peace with it. I just wish… I wish you had told me.”

Yuuri can’t say anything, shaking with his stifled cries, and Victor’s voice trembles as he continues, “I didn’t know what to do, how to be. I felt angry and betrayed, I was heartbroken, I was so thankful for Narcissa’s life, but I couldn’t be happy. All I could do was wait.”

“I still remember it, clear as day. You were lying in the grass, fading into a ghost, like you could vanish at any moment. Earth told me there was nothing I could do, but I couldn’t just stand there and watch you die, so I made a deal.”

Yuuri’s breaths slowly calm again and he pulls away slightly to look at Victor, brows furrowed and the wetness of his tears streaked across his face. “A deal?”

“Death told me I would never see you again,” Victor explains, brushing his fingers through Yuuri’s hair. “That once you died, you would disappear forever.”

“It told you the truth,” Yuuri responds quietly, fearing what Victor might have agreed to, what he might have given up. “Without a soul, I should have disappeared.”

“I know,” Victor says, smiling softly. “That’s why I gave you half of mine.”

Yuuri is silent with shock as he stares at Victor and Love whispers to him, as it did before, “I have been here the entire time.”

“How?” he breathes, his hand coming up to his chest, resting above his heart as his fingers curl into his robes.

“I begged Earth to do it,” Victor answers. “She was furious with me at first for even suggesting it, but I… I threatened to let Death take me if she refused.”

“Victor!” Yuuri gasps, pained. “You wouldn’t have—”

“I don’t know, Yuuri.” Victor averts his gaze from him staring down at the ground. “You have to understand, I was watching you die and I was so desperate; I don’t think there was anything in that
moment I wouldn’t have done if it meant saving you.

“Evidently my threat worked, though I suspect the only reason it did was because of Earth’s love for you, but of course it wasn’t without cost. She made me pledge myself to her service as punishment, at least until I would see you again.

“At first I was tasked with taking care of any humans who became too arrogant and sought to overthrow her or usurp her power. Walking amongst them wasn’t without risk, as there are ways to kill even gods, so she needed someone like me to keep an eye out for her.

“Eventually, as the villages grew into kingdoms and order was established, my role as her enforcer turned into gladiator.”

Victor lets out a sigh. “I’m sure she thought it very clever, having to pay for your life by taking the lives of others.”

“She made you wait centuries for me?” Yuuri can scarcely even imagine what that must have been like. “Centuries of killing people?”

Victor smiles wryly. “A mere drop in the ocean to a god, and she assured me every kill I’ve made was in defense of her, though I can’t say whether she was being entirely truthful.”

Yuuri shakes his head, wrapping his arms around himself. Victor assured him that he made peace with it and Yuuri certainly has no right to wallow in torment over the consequences of his own shortsighted decision, but tormented is exactly what he feels.

It’s strange and conflicted. He knows that he shouldn’t have acted so rashly, but he doesn’t regret saving Narcissa. He would never go so far as to say that Victor should have let him die, not after all that Victor has sacrificed to save him in turn, but if there had been a way to spare Victor of becoming Earth’s servant then Yuuri would have surely chosen it.

And more still, there is the matter of Victor’s soul, split apart and gifted to him. Yuuri could never have imagined possessing something so precious and priceless, though he would have done the same for Victor without a second thought.

Tragedy and fortune always seem to be inextricably linked.

“What are you thinking about?” Victor prods him curiously as Yuuri rests his head against Victor’s shoulder again, arms locking around Victor’s lower back.

“You gave me your soul,” Yuuri murmurs, awed at that quiet warmth that glows like a beacon deep within his chest, in the place where Love dwells.

“It’s yours now,” Victor replies gently. “It has always been yours.”

That feeling of completion, of being whole again beats through Yuuri’s whole body as he rests in Victor’s arms, like a weary traveler having finally come home again.

“You should rest,” Victor says.

“Stay with me,” Yuuri replies and feels a kiss pressed to his hair, but it’s Love that answers him.

“I never left.”

When he awakes the following morning and finds the other side of his bed empty, Yuuri rises in a
fully-fledged panic.

He nearly falls off the bed as he wrestles his way out of the sheets wrapped around his legs, unaware of the sunlight filtering through the curtains drawn over the windows.

The only thing he is able to think about is that Victor isn’t here, he has left, he is gone—

“All is well,” Love says to him, breaking through his frightened thoughts. “He is on his way back.”

Yuuri takes a breath, calming himself down as he finally takes the time to look around the room now that he doesn’t have to worry about Victor having disappeared.

It’s much in the same state they left it, save for the messy bedsheets. Yuuri had been so tired last night that he hadn’t even taken off his clothes, falling asleep moments after Victor had urged him to rest.

He quietly paces over toward the curtains and pulls them back to let the light in, squinting against the brightness—from the position of the sun, Yuuri surmises that it must be noon already. How long did he sleep?

Glancing down at himself, he realizes with some dismay that he slept in Victor’s pristine bed in his rather filthy traveler’s robes, although Victor must have removed his cloak for him after he fell asleep. His hair is matted and greasy, dirt collected underneath his fingernails, body smelling rather rank and in dire need of a bath.

As if Victor planned it, he chooses that moment to walk through the doorway and greet him with a wide smile, robes and towels slung over one arm.

“Good morning,” he says as Yuuri approaches him, leaning in for a kiss that starts soft and unassuming before flaring into something more intense.

When Victor parts from him, briefly, he takes the time to look at Yuuri with eyes wide, roaming over his face as if to carve every aspect to memory. “I can still hardly believe you’re really here.”

Yuuri wants to return the sentiment but the desire to kiss him a second time wins and he leans in, capturing Victor’s thin lower lip between his fuller ones—it feels far too short for how quickly Victor pulls back again.

“Oh, before we get distracted,” he says a little breathlessly, clearing his throat and regaining his composure, “I thought it would be a good idea to have a wash first.”

“You have a bathing chamber?” Yuuri infers and Victor looks rather smug as he hands him a towel and a soft-white robe that reminds Yuuri of the one he used to wear as a nymph, though this one has a sheer quality to it.

“Oh, of course,” Victor replies as he leads Yuuri out of the bedroom into a long, marble hallway, two identical busts of the goddess Selene—or the Moon, as Yuuri knows her—sitting across each other on either wall beside the doors leading to what appears to be a large, open-walled salon, providing access to the courtyard.

“There aren’t any servants,” Yuuri notices when they pass through the salon into the entrance hall.

The silence reigning over estate would’ve been almost disturbing were it not for the ambient noises coming from outside, the din of residents passing by in the streets or the chirping of birds, the occasional yowl of a cat or the sound of a cart being pulled through breaking up the monotony.
“I released them, of course,” Victor says as he leads them into yet another hallway winding around the corner of the mansion. “This place wasn’t originally mine, I just told the previous owner to get out.”

“You kicked him out of his own home?”

Victor shrugs. “He’s very wealthy and owns several other estates within the city; he’ll be fine.”

They enter finally enter the bathing chamber once they reach the end of the second hallway, shaped traditionally into a bare, square pool, steam rising from the deep green water. It looks almost pitiful compared to what Yuuri was used to within Earth’s mountain palace, but he’s certain that having a private bathing chamber at all must be a great marker of fortune for humans.

It’s odd not to count himself among them anymore, having lived this life as one.

“How did you heat this up all on your own?” Yuuri wonders as he approaches the edge of the bath, taking off a sandal and dipping a foot inside to confirm that the water is indeed hot.

“Magic, obviously,” Victor answers, appearing amused at Yuuri’s surprised look. “I have had a long time to teach myself many different skills while waiting for you, though I must say I’m not very good at it.”

“You always did seem much more drawn to the physical than the spiritual,” Yuuri notes, frowning when he realizes that if Victor can do magic, then Yuuri must be able to as well.

“I could teach you what little I know,” Victor suggests, as if having read his mind. “But first, this bath.”

Yuuri blinks when beside him, Victor unwraps the sash around his light blue robes, unhooking his shoulder straps and letting the fabric fall to his feet, revealing every bit of his skin save for the cloth wrapped around his hips with string.

Back when he knew himself only to be a human, Yuuri did not know the temptation of another’s skin, the burning need to draw closer coiled taut, the sensation of his heart beginning to pound in anticipation.

It all comes rushing back to him when Victor pulls at the string and drops the last bit of cloth to the ground, revealing himself completely to Yuuri, who is struck mute in astonishment; Victor looks exactly the same. Every curve, every groove, every line of bone and muscle.

He lifts up a hand, placing it on Victor’s chest. Victor remains perfectly still as Yuuri slides his fingers down, avoiding the pink skin and short stub of nipple as he traces his way down to Victor’s abdomen, then around to briefly cup the small dip of his waist where his palm fits perfectly as it always did, sliding down further and gripping his hips with both hands.

“As much as it pains me, we should really bathe first,” Victor says, his voice tense as Yuuri unabashedly trails his gaze down to Victor’s member, not quite erect yet but appearing heavy between his legs. “In the interest of hygiene.”

“Should I clean my mouth first?” Yuuri wonders out loud, delighted at Victor’s ensuing groan.

“Oh, don’t.” Victor’s fingers curl into the fabric of Yuuri’s robes. “Don’t tempt me.”

“But I love tempting you,” Yuuri replies as he pulls at Victor’s hips, drawing him closer and kissing his neck.
Victor hastily yanks Yuuri’s robes down before draping his arms over his shoulders, leaning his head back and exposing his throat with a sigh to allow for more. Yuuri shifts his hands from Victor’s hips to his lower back and Victor presses close, a thrill of satisfaction like a jolt through Yuuri’s stomach when he feels Victor’s length press against him through his robes.

“The bath,” Victor whines while Yuuri continues to mouth at his throat, as they both know they likely won’t be able to stop once they get started, and Yuuri reluctantly obliges, taking his lips off Victor’s neck and resisting the urge to grind his own swelling cock against Victor’s before they go too far.

It’s a miracle they manage to separate at all. Yuuri feels so starved that he’s shocked at his own self-control as Victor helps him remove the rest of his robes until they’re both completely bare, Yuuri carefully stepping down into the pool while Victor jumps into it.

Thankfully the water isn’t so hot as to be scalding, pleasantly warm as Yuuri relaxes into it, dipping under to start cleaning his hair when Victor circles around him and starts doing it for him, fingers brushing through his locks and gently massaging his scalp.

Yuuri notes the careful distance Victor keeps between their bodies, though he wonders how long he can keep it up as Victor presses a kiss to the back of his neck. The heat certainly doesn’t help as Yuuri tries to resist the urge to spin around and grab at Victor to satisfy his desire.

Thankfully it becomes easier when Victor starts rubbing his shoulders and his back clean with a rough cloth after soaping him, up until where he reaches Yuuri’s backside and of course he cannot resist a squeeze.

“What was that about not wanting to be tempted?” Yuuri remarks drolly as he turns around and Victor hands the cleaning cloth over to him.

“In my defense, I am very bad at resisting temptation,” Victor replies humorously as he turns around for Yuuri, though he is much cleaner than Yuuri is and didn’t necessarily need a bath at all—he likely had the opportunity to bathe much more regularly than Yuuri did on the road.

As such, Yuuri goes across his back once with the cloth, then switches to his hands, spreading the soap with his fingers as he massages Victor in turn. It doesn’t take much for Victor to ease into his touch, and by the time Yuuri is done he looks only half-awake.

“You should go dry,” Yuuri says. “I’ll clean up by myself.”

“I can help,” Victor responds eagerly, but Yuuri shakes his head, lips curving slightly.

“What you can do,” he says, “is go find some oil.”

Victor stares uncomprehendingly at him for a moment before it dawns on him, the soft flush on his cheeks from the warmth of the bath darkening. “Oh! Yes, I’ll go do that—”

He has barely finished his sentence when he’s already quickly lifting himself out the bath, flinging a towel around himself.

“I’ll be in the bedroom on the left,” he calls to Yuuri as he all but hurries off in search of some oil and Yuuri watches him go with fond laughter, returning to the task at hand by himself.

He spends nearly half an hour in the bath, trying to be as thorough as he can be. It takes that long only because he realizes that while as a nymph he had plenty of experience, his human body—while identical to what he looked like as a nymph—is entirely untouched.
He wonders if Victor has realized the same as he finishes up his bath and climbs out, taking his time in drying himself off before putting on the loose, sheer robes Victor brought with him. They’re a bit too long for him, reaching several inches past his knees, but that hardly matters considering they’re about to come off again anyway.

Feeling excitement coursing through him, Yuuri paces barefooted into the hallway and opens the first door he sees on the left, revealing a bedroom much larger than his own.

Victor is lying naked on the bed’s blue sheets and staring at the ceiling with a hand behind his head, the other resting on his lower stomach where the towel he brought covers his groin but little else. The way the sunlight falls across his skin is almost making it glow, radiant and beautiful; he could have easily been mistaken for a nymph himself.

He looks lost in thought until Yuuri steps further into the room, prompting him to look up. His eyes flash at the sight of Yuuri and he pushes himself up to sit on the edge of the bed instead, the towel shifting slightly but not slipping off his hips.

Yuuri notes the small bottle of oil on the stand beside the bed as he closes the door behind him and walks to stand in front of Victor.

“The robes suit you well,” Victor says softly as his eyes roam over Yuuri’s body, thinly-veiled by the transparent fabric. “But you should wear them another time.”

He smiles at Victor, grabbing the hand that was on its way to help him take off his robes. “Not yet.”

Instead Yuuri lowers himself down in front of Victor, prying the towel off his hips while a hand cards through his hair as he takes a moment to look at Victor’s length lying flaccid between his legs.

“You didn’t touch yourself at all?” he asks as he puts his hands on Victor’s knees and spreads them open wider to accommodate him.

“It was difficult,” Victor admits, the fingers caressing Yuuri’s hair sliding down and resting on his shoulder instead. “But it’d be painful waiting for you otherwise.”

Yuuri hums as he slides his hands from Victor’s knees up his thighs. “Well, you don’t have to wait any longer.”

He looks up at Victor’s face, watching him suck in a sharp breath before Yuuri looks back down at his member, leaning forward and wetting his lips.

Using only his tongue, he takes the pink head into his mouth and Victor’s hand tightens around his shoulder with a squeeze. Yuuri hasn’t done this in a while—much longer still for Victor—but he still remembers how to do it, how Victor likes it best.

It takes him a moment to get used to the feeling again, though Victor has a point. As lovely as it is to hear him sigh and moan, if he keeps this up they’ll be finished rather quickly.
Yuuri pulls back until only the head of Victor’s erection is between his lips, swirling his tongue over the thin slit and making Victor’s hips twitch with a strangled groan before releasing him with a wet *pop* of his mouth.

He meets Victor’s half-lidded eyes, grinning at the sight of his flushed skin and allowing Victor to lean down and kiss him.

It’s not his intention, but Yuuri loses himself in it for a while. The feeling must be far more intense for Victor, who waited years and years and years to have him again, to taste him again, and Yuuri feels it in the way he kisses now.

There’s a tinge of desperation to it, to the way he keeps kissing and barely lets up to breathe, the way he grips at Yuuri’s shoulders almost painfully and sighs into his mouth.

“Victor,” Yuuri manages to whisper, putting his palm flat against Victor’s chest and prompting him to break away, both of them out of breath.

“Sorry,” Victor says, brows furrowed slightly and appearing apologetic, if not worried—Yuuri pecks him on the lips once before he draws himself up to his feet, ignoring the slight ache in his knees.

“It’s alright,” Yuuri assures him, then slides the robes off his shoulders and lets them fall down his body to pool around his feet.

He’s fully aware of the tight, hot feeling around his own hard length as Victor’s gaze slides down from Yuuri’s bare chest and stomach down toward it, eyes darkened with lust when they flit back up to Yuuri’s face.

Yuuri expects him to pull him onto his lap or tell him to get on the bed, but Victor does neither of those things. Instead he swings his legs up and gets onto the bed himself, fluffing up a pillow to support his back as he reclines against the headrest.

“Come here,” Victor says, tapping on his upper leg, and a thrill of anticipation curls in Yuuri’s abdomen, the sensation concentrated in his erection that twitches as he moves onto the bed between Victor’s legs to do as instructed.

But Victor tuts at him. “No, not like that,” he says, slouching further against his pillow. “Turn around.”

Yuuri breathes in deep as he turns, back toward Victor who places one hand on his back, pushing Yuuri down towards the bed while the other hand on his waist pulls Yuuri’s hips closer to Victor’s face and Yuuri bites his lips almost hard enough to break when he finally realizes Victor’s intent.

He leans his weight onto his elbows on the bed between Victor’s legs while keeping his hips up in the air, resting his forehead onto the mattress while Victor’s hands slide up his cheeks.

“Stay still,” Victor mutters and Yuuri tenses slightly despite himself when he feels Victor’s hot breath touch him. “I want to take my time.”

The way his tongue slicks his skin draws a deep groan that Yuuri smothers against the bedsheets, back arching and hips pushing up against Victor’s lips that are sucking and kissing at him when he isn’t slipping the tip of his tongue into Yuuri.

Yuuri resists the intense urge to touch himself, but feels that if something doesn’t happen soon it’ll build into an ache.
“Don’t take too long,” he pleads breathlessly, eyes fluttered shut and Victor takes him by surprise—Yuuri feels something smooth drip onto his skin, the pad of Victor’s finger spreading the oil generously before dipping the tip inside of him and Yuuri lets out a long, pleased sigh.

They have done this many times and Victor’s movements are sure as he takes the time to stretch Yuuri’s virgin body, the task made much easier due to Yuuri knowing exactly how to relax himself.

Victor finds Yuuri’s spot almost intuitively, and the spark that comes from it feels more intense in this body, the heat and the tension building while Victor gently pushes another finger inside, taking his time just as promised.

“Victor,” Yuuri complains with a moan, the lovely stretch almost burning inside him, not enough to ache because Victor is careful and Yuuri is eager and fully at ease, but he is still tight.

“I know,” Victor replies soothingly as he continues his slow motions. “Just a little patience.”

Yuuri exhales hotly, trying so hard to be patient but he wants it so much it almost hurts. When Victor finally pulls his fingers out he nearly sags onto the bed in sheer relief.

“Roll over,” Victor says and Yuuri, with trembling thighs, sits up and turns over between Victor’s legs, resting his feet slightly wider than Victor’s hips as Victor leans over him.

He looks down at Yuuri and his eyes are shining bright in the light that has slowly turned into a warmer gold, colored nearly orange thanks to the setting sun.

“You’re so beautiful,” Yuuri sighs without meaning to but he can’t help himself as it slips out of his mouth.

Victor must already know how lovely he is—Yuuri has told him so many times before—and yet just like every other time Victor still flushes at his compliment, lashes fluttering, a small smile on his face and this is as close as he ever gets to being shy.

“To me, nothing and no one compares to you,” he admits quietly, hand touching on Yuuri’s chest and trailing down to his stomach, making his abdomen twitch at the featherlight touch.

“I suppose that’s what love does.”

Victor’s lips part to say something, but he looks so overcome that nothing comes out.

It has been so many years.

Yuuri, lying below him and bathing in the warmth of the sunlight, smiles and reaches up a hand to caress Victor’s cheek with his finger, catching a stray tear that falls down.

“I love you,” Yuuri says, a quiver in his voice that he can’t hold back through the choked feeling in his throat and the hot burning in his eyes—he’s trying very hard not to cry and so is Victor, who chooses to lean down and bury his face against the crook of Yuuri’s face instead.

Yuuri embraces him with both arms, clinging to him while Victor hikes his right leg up, shaky breaths smothered in the kisses against Yuuri’s skin.

He pushes inside and a keening gasp tears from Yuuri’s throat, the feeling familiar yet wholly new and it’s perfect, it always feels so good and so right with Victor.

“Never,” Yuuri breathes through every thrust, “never leaving you again, never.”
Victor’s groan sounds strangled against Yuuri’s neck before he pulls up to look down at him, his shallow, slow movements gradually growing faster, hitting Yuuri’s spot quicker and quicker and Yuuri’s moans grow louder and louder and he wants to come, he wants to come so badly.

“Promise,” Victor begs, brows furrowed in concentration as his hips keep moving relentlessly and Yuuri’s toes curl. “Promise me.”

“Yes, I promise,” Yuuri gasps, sobbing without tears, “I promise, I promise—"  

It’s as if his climax is ripped out of him with a single thrust from Victor’s hips, eyes rolling back and seeing nothing, hearing nothing but for the obscene sound drawn out of Victor’s mouth as he comes together with Yuuri and it’s his favorite sound, even through the rippling force of pleasure bursting out of him with every pulse until there is nothing left and he is empty.

Victor’s weight is heavy on top of him, comforting and warm, and Yuuri wishes he could capture this moment in an eternity, a never-ending bliss just for the two of them to bask in.

Eventually though, Victor slowly pushes himself up and pulls out of Yuuri, who feels sticky and slick but enjoys the feeling wholly.

“Are you alright?” Victor asks quietly, seeming concerned, and Yuuri smiles.

“I’m fine,” Yuuri assures him. “You were perfect.”

Victor’s smile in return is slight but sincere as he lies down onto his back next to Yuuri, skin cooling and now feeling chilly—they’re both exhausted and are starting to grow cold.

And hungry, Yuuri realizes when he hears Victor’s stomach growl.

“You should eat something,” Yuuri tells him, and Victor smirks at him.

“I already ate.”

Yuuri’s mouth slackens, his expression scandalized while Victor begins to laugh. “You are obscene.”

Victor rolls onto his side and gathers Yuuri into his arms, still laughing and Yuuri cannot help but grin, giddy with happiness.

Love warms him.

The days pass in a dreamlike blur.

Victor spends the mornings by his side in bed, lazy kisses and wandering hands always leading to more until Yuuri is certain that he will die from it and he will die in bliss at that.

By noon they usually will have cleaned themselves up enough to eat, sharing their meals together as Victor proves to be an expert cook and Yuuri is certain with how much time he has had there is scarcely any skill that he hasn’t mastered by now.

One of these skills happens to be the art of the lyre, songs he entertains and serenades Yuuri with using his deft fingers that ripple across the strings effortlessly. Yuuri is so enamored by the sound that he asks Victor to teach him, and much of their evenings are spent in this manner if they aren’t roaming the city or drowning in each other.
Yuuri thinks they surely will grow tired of this eventually, but that moment never seems to come as days turn into weeks.

In the meantime, Victor has guests over—friends and acquaintances, something to keep them from becoming completely isolated, lost to the world.

His closest friend is a sorceress, an older woman with greying hair named Milena who greets Yuuri warmly when first meeting him, appearing genuinely happy for Victor.

“Ever since I’ve known him as a child, he was always alone,” she tells while Victor regales his many other friends with the story of one of his fights in the Coliseum inside the salon as Yuuri and Milena look on. “I’m glad that you found each other again.”

While Yuuri is certain it wasn’t Milena’s intent, what she says pricks a hole through the wonderful dream he has been having the past few weeks.

As a nymph, Yuuri was nearly immortal, but as a human his time is far more limited.

Earth is still waiting for him in her mountain palace and winter is nearly over, the skies slowly beginning to warm. He will have to inevitably return, and if he wishes to stay with Victor then he will have to accept his role as humanity’s new ruler.

Was this her plan all along?

Victor’s reply to his concerns does nothing to assuage them later that same night.

“It’s possible,” Victor says, thoughtfully rubbing his chin as he peers out over the view of Eirene’s calm streets, the two of them outside on the balcony while Victor’s little party continues inside, the soft sound of music from a harp floating through the curtains.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Yuuri notes with a frown while he watches Victor take a slow sip from his cup. “Did you know?”

“I knew that Earth meant to crown you as her successor, yes.” Victor sets down his cup on top of the thick stone railing of the balcony. “She told me as much years ago, when she first took you away from your family.”

Yuuri falls into silence for a while, something heavy sitting in his stomach as solidly as a stone until Victor’s fingers push a few locks of his hair away from his forehead and stir his attention.

“Are you angry?” Victor asks, a slight wrinkle between his brows as looks Yuuri in the eyes and something alights with realization in his gaze. “No, not angry—”

“When will we be allowed the liberty to choose?” Yuuri wraps his arms around himself, shivering slightly at the gust of wind blowing across the balcony. “No matter what I do I cannot shake the feeling of a chain around my throat.”

Victor slips off the shawl around his shoulders and drapes it over Yuuri’s instead. “We are all slaves to Earth’s whims; it’s the consequence of being ruled by any single deity.”

“I know I didn’t give you a choice when it came to Narcissa, not a fair one, so I should know better than to bemoan my own fate now,” Yuuri says, gripping the edges of the shawl and wrapping it tight around himself. “Still, is it so wrong of me to wonder what it would be like to be free of it all?”

“No,” Victor answers softly, hand on Yuuri’s waist pulling him against his side. “I often think about
what could have been, had Narcissa never gotten sick. Earth is… she is often likened to a mother, but I don’t think that comparison is very apt. She is a being with concerns far larger than the lives of insects that dwell on her body—when humanity has long gone extinct, she will still be here.”

“Yet she created us,” Yuuri points out. “She created you, she favors you. She gave birth to all of us, makes demands of us when it suits her and then leaves us.”

All these cities, entire kingdoms and empires at her feet, worshipping her, just as she wanted. Yet what does she do for them? For the ones suffering, exploited, abused?

She abandons them.

“A bored god is never a benevolent god,” Victor muses, appearing lost in thought, staring at the cup sitting on the balcony’s ledge.

“If I can’t avoid my fate, then I will make the best of it,” Yuuri says and this snaps Victor out of his pondering, meeting Yuuri’s determined stare with a curious look. “I will set us free.”

“I know.” Victor smiles and Yuuri can feel what he feels mirrored in his own heart—adoration. “I know you will.”

The day after Yuuri swears his unyielding vow, they begin their preparations of the journey back to Earth’s mountain palace. Coincidentally, it’s on the date of their departure when they have packed all their bags and are ready to leave at any moment that a last pair of guests knocks at their door.

“Oh!” Yuuri hears Victor exclaim all the way from where he sits on the stone bench in front of the pond in the gardens, moments before Victor comes hurrying outside with a huge grin. “Yuuri, come quick! We have guests!”

He disappears behind the doorway, his long lilac shawl fluttering behind him as he slips out of sight again and the dim sound of his voice, accompanied by two others, floats outside.

Yuuri had just been soaking in the sunshine and enjoying the scent of wildflowers sprouting through the tall grass. It’s the wildness of it that he likes, the cracks in the statues and vines climbing up the pillars surrounding the old courtyard that reminds him of a home of sorts, centuries ago.

He reluctantly pushes himself off the bench and heads toward the open doorway, peering into the salon to find Victor talking to an old man in simple white garb, accompanied by a young boy with a mop of blond hair that Yuuri recognizes.

“Yuri?” he calls, and Yuri looks up at him, blue-green eyes widening at the sight of him.

“Oh, it’s you!” Yuri exclaims tactlessly, then quickly glances up at the old man standing beside him, cheeks flushing red.

“Is this the young man you told me about?” the old man says, curious gaze settling on Yuuri as he approaches Victor and takes his place by his side, trying not to smile at the younger Yuri’s embarrassed fidgeting. “I hear you taught my grandson a few valuable lessons in archery.”

“Only the basics,” Yuuri responds honestly. “He took to it very quickly.”

“Did he?” the old man raises his brows at his grandson. “Usually he is more stubborn than that.”

“That’s because unlike Yuuri, my tutor is an idiot,” Yuri mutters underneath his breath and his grandfather frowns at him, sighing and shaking his head before turning back to Yuuri.
“Pardon my manners,” he says. “My name is Nikolai; I’m an old student of Victor’s.”

“Student?” Yuuri looks questioningly at Victor, who only shrugs.

“I was bored.”

He plays it off nonchalantly, though Yuuri knows very well how tortuous it was in reality to wait and hope they would be reunited, but that kind of sentiment is not meant for the ears of others, so Yuuri lets the lie lay where it rests.

“We wanted to pay our respects before you left,” Nikolai explains, though from the way Yuri glares at Victor, Yuuri suspects there is more to the story.

“You really didn’t have to,” Victor says with a smile and Yuuri knows him well enough to be able to tell that it is a strained one.

“It was the least I could do,” Nikolai insists staunchly, resting a hand on Victor’s shoulder and something passes between their eyes that Yuuri isn’t privy to. “I will never forget the debt I owe you—no matter what happens, your conscience is clear. Please remember that.”

Victor exhales through his nose and seems to almost shrink, head bowed and shoulders slumped, as if the years are bearing down onto his back, a quiet tremor in his voice when he replies, “I’ll try to.”

“Farewell, old friend,” Nikolai says with a smile, and he and his grandson take their leave not long after that, not wanting to delay their departure any longer than they already have.

Victor collapses onto a chair, sinking into the cushion as if he just ran through a pentathlon.

Yuuri lowers himself beside Victor onto a knee, and he can almost see the secret weighing on Victor like a physical presence, draining all the life out of him and for the first time Yuuri truly realizes how old Victor really is.

He takes his love’s hand in his own, wishing he could kiss his burdens away.

“Who was he, Victor?” he asks gently, and Victor pulls Yuuri’s hand up, pressing Yuuri’s palm against his cheek and closing his eyes, resigned.

“My enemy.”

Chapter End Notes

turns out this fic was a soulmate reincarnation AU all along lol

whew, this chapter was a lot shorter than the last one so it was a lot quicker to write! it was kind of a break to deal with the reunion—the next chapter we’ll be delving right back into the plot!

i really appreciate the warm welcome back even after having been gone for like, four months. all your continued kindness and support and enthusiasm for this story means a lot to me!!

(also, if you want, please come yell at me on my tumblr or more recently, my twitter!! i
love searching around and finding people posting reactions to the chapter updates, haha)

catch you guys next time!! <3

Works inspired by this one: [Podfic] Dancing Daffodils by Myniras

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!