

shrike

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32138716) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32138716>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationship:	Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound & Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Toxic Platonic Relationships , Angst , Alternate Universe - Gods & Goddesses , dream team , Found Family , or... is it? , POV , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Passerine Prequel , other warning tags in starting notes , gods get into fun shenanigans , character driven , Fluff and Angst
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Aerie
Collections:	absolute masterpieces , PianoBoos_Pain , Fics I've read , Wani's sbi hyperfixation of (mostly) super hero fics
Stats:	Published: 2021-06-23 Completed: 2022-06-23 Words: 39,935 Chapters: 7/7

shrike

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

“You know, you might be the only thing alive that knows my name. I don’t know how long I’ve been sleeping, but it must have been long enough for people to have forgotten.” The stag finished the last of the berries and stared at George wonderingly. George chuckled, plucked another handful to offer to it, and continued, “I’d gone to sleep tired. And I wake up tired. Tell me, do you think that’s fair?”

The stag, because it was a stag, did not reply.

But George didn’t mind that, either.

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Or, that fic about passerine!Dream Team, but before passerine.

Notes

Trigger/Content Warnings:

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animal death, violence

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

back to the hedgerows (where bodies are mounted)

The forest god woke up tired.

He slowly peeled himself from the ground, shaking off the moss and ivy that had grown over him. How long had he been asleep this time? Months? Years? He raised his head to find a stag staring back at him, its dark eyes curious, its antlers like piercing thorns rising towards the foliage above.

“Hello,” said the god, “do you know what century it is?”

The stag blinked lazily back at him.

The god sighed as he got to his feet, brushing dirt from his clothes and tugging at a particularly stubborn coil of ivy around his ankle. It broke free too suddenly, and the god in his newly recovered wakefulness stumbled forwards. He caught himself just in time against the stag, who made no sound of complaint as the god wrapped his arms around its neck, breathing in slowly and trying to remember his own name.

George.

His name was George.

“Thank you, deer,” he whispered against the animal’s soft fur. “My name is George. I think. I *know*.”

The stag huffed in response.

“You wouldn’t care, of course,” said George, letting his arms slip from the animal and stumbling onto his own two feet. “But I can make you care about me a little.”

George reached for the ground until his fingers brushed against the dewy grass. In a heartbeat, a bush began to spring from the earth, leaves and branches twisting upwards, curling against George’s fingers for a moment as if to say *hello, little god, good morning* before continuing their outward expansion. The stag watched the plant unfurl with apprehension, and then interest, as its branches began to grow heavy with berries.

“Go ahead,” said George, stepping lightly back from his handiwork. “It’s a gift.”

The stag approached, sniffing curiously at the cluster of fruit before turning to George.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not trying to poison you. It’s safe.”

The stag blinked. George blinked back.

“Oh, gods,” George groaned. “The first real conversation I have in years and it’s with an animal that thinks I’m trying to kill it.” He sighed as he settled back against the ground he’d been sleeping on. “I’m a different sort, you know. I’m not like the rest of them.” His mouth twisted with derision. “Sometimes I wonder, too, why so many of us are made for cruelty. Blood god, storm god, god of death, god of war, god of the hunt, what have you. So I can understand your hesitation. You’re not used to kindness without strings attached, are you?”

George reached forwards to pluck a berry from the bush between them. Making sure the stag was watching his every motion, he brought it to his mouth and chewed.

“See?” he murmured, tasting nothing but sweetness. “You can trust me.”

He took another handful of berries and offered his palm to the wide-eyed deer. The stag approached cautiously, its hooves near silent on the soft grass. It ducked its head towards him and the berries; George had to lean back to avoid its antlers. One of its points scratched against his cheek, but George didn't mind the small hurt.

“There you go,” he said as the deer finally, finally took the berries into its mouth. “You know, you might be the only thing alive that knows my name. I don't know how long I've been sleeping, but it must have been long enough for people to have forgotten.” The stag finished the last of the berries and stared at George wonderingly. George chuckled, plucked another handful to offer to it, and continued, “I'd gone to sleep tired. And I wake up tired. Tell me, do you think that's fair?”

The stag, because it was a stag, did not reply.

But George didn't mind that, either.

It was nice to talk, after all his time sleeping with not even the cruel company of nightmares to entertain him. It was nicer still to talk to something that bore no judgement of him. The stag did not care that George had known, from the moment of his first breath, what he was. He'd opened his eyes, and his fate had been sealed. *How* did he know? How did flowers know how to grow? How did birds learn their skyward route? It was nature. It just *was*, a simple truth the universe had whispered into his ear upon his awakening: *you are a god, you are a god, you are a god.*

The stag didn't care that George had walked the earth with flowers and trees and ecosystems growing in his wake, growing from the dents his footsteps made on soil that had known nothing of life before he came along. The stag didn't care that George had known the earliest of humanity, had watched them grow together and then grow apart.

He had been a helpless witness of the first war the world had ever seen. He'd felt the pain of every branch turned arrow, every tree turned trebuchet, every flower crushed under the heels of a marching army. He'd felt it all, and endured it all, and by the end, he'd had to apologize to the universe.

Being a god was a bit tiresome, it turned out. So, he went to sleep. Maybe, naively, *stupidly*, he'd thought when he'd open his eyes again, the world might be different.

It wasn't.

That was how he lived the first few eons. Sleeping without dreaming. Hoping without believing. Waking only for a handful of years, or a handful of minutes, to see if his cynicism might be proven wrong this time around.

Once, he'd woken to find that the forest he'd been sleeping in had been burned to the ground. The fire had left him curled like a child in a crater of dust and ashes, the only survivor of another one of the mortals' petty squabbles. He'd gasped for air through lungs full of smoke and had thought, *Oh. So not this century, then?* before closing his eyes again.

The stag didn't care about any of that. It only knew him as the man who was feeding it, and it was enough. George wanted it to be enough.

“There you go,” George whispered to the stag as it finished the last of the berries from his palm. “You'll be alright now.”

The stag watched as George steadily got back on his feet, its tongue flicking the remaining pulp

from its lips.

“Well,” said George, rolling his shoulders until he heard the satisfying pop of his body catching up to him. “Enjoy my gift, then. This is where we part. I still have to find out what year it is, this time from someone with less fur and a more sophisticated vocabulary.” He gave the deer a little wave. “Bye-bye.”

The stag stared.

“Oh, come on.” George rolled his eyes. “Don’t give me that look.”

In return, the stag bumped the edge of its antler against George’s hip, almost sending him crashing back to the ground. He was more unsteady than he expected to be. He struggled to regain his balance, and decided he couldn’t be seen in the world like this: clumsy and shaking, like a newborn fawn.

The world would eat him alive.

The stag was still staring. He could see himself in the reflection of its eyes: his tussled hair and his exhausted expression, the forest crowding in behind him as if the trees were also waiting for his decision.

“Fine,” relented George with a sigh. “I guess I can afford to stay. Just for a few days.”

He spent years in that forest.

The seasons passed beyond his notice. Spring to winter, fall to summer, back again in cycles that meant nothing to him. He was a god, after all, and months were seconds to him. He could hold a human’s entire lifetime in the cup of his hand.

Most days, he walked.

He found that it took him two weeks to walk the forest from end to end, not counting the breaks he was forced to take on account of the stag that insisted on following him around, lured by the promise of more berries. It probably wasn’t helping matters that George always had some in his pocket. Sometimes, they would find rivers for the stag to stand in while George tossed him berries from the banks, his trousers rolled up to his knees, the cold rushing water almost sweeping him off his feet. On one occasion, he *did* get swept into the currents, and he floated easily downstream with the rest of the forest’s debris. He didn’t struggle, didn’t even try to swim to shore. He could feel the world blurring around him, and was alright. He was alright.

And then he heard the bray of an animal in distress, and opened his eyes to see the stag swimming after him. *You stupid bastard*, he’d thought, even as panic began to fill his soaked chest. He’d grabbed the first low-hanging branch he passed under, and then he’d grabbed the stag, and he’d hauled the both of them to the muddy bank, and said, out loud, “You stupid bastard!”

The stag merely got on shaking legs and pressed its nose against George’s trouser pocket.

George gave it a berry. “You stupid bastard,” he whispered, but he didn’t know to whom this time.

Afterwards, they avoided rivers.

They kept to themselves, George and his deer. They walked and ate berries and took shelter under trees that were almost as old as George himself. Often, when he was lying on the grass with his

cheek pressed against the soft belly of the stag, George thought about how easy it would be to slip into another long sleep. But then the stag would sigh or huff in its own fitful slumber, and George would keep his eyes open.

And when their walks brought them to the edge of the forest, George's bare feet just a step away from the sun-warmed grass of the open fields beyond, he thought about how the world ahead would disappoint him in all new ways, and he would run his hand over the stag's warm fur, and they would go to find another tree to rest under.

The stag never brought him back to its herd, and it didn't take George long to realize it was just alone as he was. And so they went, god and animal, living and lonely together. For days. For weeks. For years.

Until the world came to collect.

It came in the form of a distant war and soldiers on their way to answer the rallying call of some foolish mortal king, another in a long line of human hubris at the expense of human lives.

George had felt murmurs of it through the uneasy earth, but had been too preoccupied with keeping his stag away from ravines and poison berries and other methods of untimely death to notice that the soldiers had set up camp in the field right beside their forest.

And soldiers, as George knew well, needed to eat. They needed to hunt.

He heard the shouting before he saw the fires.

The sound stopped him in his tracks, and the searing glow of a dozen torches passing between trees stopped the beat of his immortal heart.

"Hey," he warned the stag, pulling it behind the nearest tree.

It was supposed to be a normal nighttime walk. He had just wanted to go on a godsdamned walk with his godsdamned deer.

George put a hand on the animal's snout to keep it from braying in protest and drew it down between the tree's large roots. It was not the best hiding place, especially for an animal whose intricate bone-white antlers stood out starkly against the dark brambles. George ordered the branches to crowd towards them, but even that would prove to be insufficient cover.

George pulled the stag close to his side and held his breath. He listened to the forest, to every twig breaking under the boots of the intruders, every animal disturbed from sleep.

"There's something there!" A gruff voice, too near, too close—

The fires were on them.

The stag began to thrash against George's hold, trying to break free and sprint into the dark, but George didn't let go, even as a torch was thrust right against his face, the flames licking his cheeks before drawing back.

"It's a... a man," another voice said in confusion.

"Hey!" the first voice demanded. "Who are you? A spy?"

"Leave," George croaked, burying his face against the stag's trembling side. "Just leave us alone."

“A deserter?” a third voice chimed in. “Or just some poor shmuck lost in the woods?”

I am never lost here.

He knew every tree and rock and pond, every insect and beast. And they knew him in turn.

“Leave this forest,” George said. “Nothing here—none of this is for you.”

A scraping laugh. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

George raised his head, at last, squinting against the firelight to find a dozen men caging him against the tree behind him. The man who had spoken was closest to George and looked to be their leader, his coat emblazoned with more medallions than the rest. He had an indistinguishable face, as unremarkable as all the other faces that swam in the muddy swirl of George’s memory.

“Just go away,” George said exhaustedly, noting the swords strapped to their waists. The bows and quivers of arrows. His grip on the stag tightened. “Find another forest to destroy. Not this one.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” the leader said, nostrils flaring, as arrogant and as pathetic as all the mortals that came before him. “Grab the bastard’s little pet, boys. We’ll be having roasted venison tonight.”

They grabbed the stag first, and that was how George lost.

If he’d been any other type of god, he could have fought, could have called down fire or lightning and end it before it could begin. But he was only George, god of the forest, and he was not meant for this.

So he could only watch as four of them dragged the stag by its antlers, threatening it with fire and sharp blades to keep it docile as they marched it out of the forest. They made George follow with a sword at the nape of his neck and several arrows pointed at his still heart. As if that could break him. As if he wasn’t already broken.

At the very edge of the forest, the stag began to resist. It pulled and flailed and groaned, trying to make its way back to George, trying to return to their forest. Because beyond the last line of trees was a wide, unfamiliar place: rolling hills dotted with the tents of an entire army, scattered like white beads from a snapped necklace. In the distance, the jagged points of the mountain range loomed menacingly.

One of the hunters dug his knife into the stag’s side to silence it, but it only made it scream louder.

“Don’t hurt it,” George said, trying to keep his voice from cracking. “Tell your men to not hurt it.”

The leader, who kept pace with George, grunted. “Worry less about your animal and more about yourself.”

“I could—I could give your army all the food it needs,” George began. “If you let it go, I’ll grow your food for you. Let me prove it.”

George tried to reach towards the earth, to show him what he could do, but instead the hunting leader pulled him roughly upright by the scruff of his tunic.

“Bargain all you want,” the man said roughly. “No one’s listening.”

With a single push, George was out of the woods.

They led him and the stag to the heart of their camp, drawing a hungry crowd.

George could feel their eyes on him and on the animal, already cutting and weighing it. He could hear the whispers, staking claim on its thigh, its marrow, its antlers for decoration. George's hands curled into trembling fists. He'd heard these words a thousand times before.

They kicked him to his knees in front of a roaring bonfire. A rope went around the stag, pinning it to the ground beside him. A god and his deer, presented on a silver platter.

The leader began to speak about the spy or the deserter or whatever he'd decided George was. He spoke loudly, arrogantly, to the gathered crowd, detailing how exactly he would make an example out of George.

George couldn't bring himself to care. There was only him and his frightened, trembling stag.

"Don't be scared," George murmured, reaching slowly to put his hand against its warm fur. "I'll get us out of this. I always get us out things. I've never failed you before."

The stag grunted as if it understood, as if it believed him.

The hunting leader turned to George with a sharp glare, his inane speech interrupted. "Tell your dumb beast to be quiet."

It is smarter than you and all your men combined. "I am not a spy," said George. "Or a deserter. But I can be useful to you. I can be everything for whatever cause you're fighting for, if you only let the stag go."

The leader's eyebrow quirked upwards. "You? You look like you're one strong gust of wind away from keeling over."

"And you look like you couldn't lead a pack of toddlers down a straight road, let alone an army, and yet here we are."

A small laugh from the crowd, quickly silenced by a sharp look from its subject.

"Oh," George said. "Did I hit a nerve? Struck too close?" He met the leader's hard stare without flinching. "You look young. Let me guess, this is your first war, your first big role, most likely given to you by your rich father or by all other qualified candidates valiantly biting the dust. Don't look so surprised—I can smell your inexperience from a mile away. Your men expect nothing from you, and so you have everything to prove. And you think the way to your army's heart is to make big, bold threats against some random man with no armor, no weapons, no ill intent. But, let me make this clear."

George stood. The leader, on instinct, drew his sword.

At least he had enough smarts about him to understand what a threat looked like.

George ignored the sharp blade pointed straight at him. He stepped as close as he could, let the tip of the sword just graze the front of his tunic. This close, he could see how brown the other man's eyes were, how wide, how pitiful.

George had to smile.

Gods, he'd missed being a god.

“I have seen better men than you stand alone on battlefields, abandoned by even their most loyal soldiers. What makes you think yours won’t do the same to you? What makes you think you’re big enough, great enough, *good enough*, for these people to die for you?” George cocked his head to the side and levied the man with the weight of his full attention. “Go on. Ask. Ask them if you’re worth dying for.”

The man’s eyes shifted, seeking out a defender, his arrogance dissipating with the answering silence of a hundred soldiers. George watched with mild curiosity as the leader’s expression went from dismay to frustration to fury. His lips drew back from his teeth as he turned back to George.

He shoved him with his sword, its point digging into George’s chest and sending him crashing backwards onto the ground. George caught himself against the stag, just as he had all those years ago, when only one of them had been young and the other exhausted with the world.

“Who *cares*,” the hunting leader snapped, spittle flying, blade poised to deliver on his promised punishment. “They’ll do it anyway, because I said so. Because this is *my* army—”

“Ah,” said a distant voice, cool as the night air against George’s skin. “Has anyone ever told you you look absolutely pathetic when you’re lying through your teeth?”

The crowd that had gathered to witness George’s execution parted with the sound of shuffling feet and nervous murmurs. Just a minute ago, they had been wondering if there was anything worthwhile in George’s pockets to pilfer after he’d been drawn and quartered, and now they looked like chastised children, ducking their head to hide their embarrassment. Coming up through their ranks, cutting through them like a plague-bringer no one dared approach, was a lone man, dark-haired and dark-eyed.

Watching him walk towards them, George knew he’d been right. All the hunting leader’s posturing was all so he could prove something to someone, and George was looking right at it.

The newcomer stopped between the hunting leader and George, his mouth a thin line, his arms crossed against a chest that bore no gold medals, though it was immediately clear to George that he outranked everyone around them: from the gathered footsoldiers to the man who’d falsely claimed them as his to order around.

“Who the hell is this?” the man demanded of the hunting leader who, to his credit, didn’t flinch.

“Found him in the woods. Spy, or deserter, or some sort.” The hunting leader mimicked the man’s stance, perhaps in an attempt to salvage some of his bravado, but the result was akin to watching a child wearing his father’s too-big clothes. “And you have some nerve, strutting around like you own the place—”

“I *do* own the place,” the man said, utterly unimpressed as he looked down his nose at the hunting leader. “It’s a bit sad, really, that you still think you’re in control. That you were ever in control. Your father hired to me be a glorified nursemaid, and even *that* job you managed to make difficult.” The man scoffed. “I guess it’s on me, thinking a little walk in the woods would be enough to keep you pacified for the night. I tell you to get food and you get me—” A cursory glance at George. “—some random bastard that looks like he hasn’t bathed in weeks and one stupid antelope?”

“Hey,” George protested weakly. “It’s a *stag*.”

The man turned to him again, this time with more curiosity and focus than before. “I should be apologizing for the inconvenience my court jester of a subordinate caused you, but loathe as I am

to say it, he does have a point. If you're a spy or whatever it is he thinks you are, then I won't waste another word stopping these people from tearing you apart." His dark eyes gleamed in the firelight. "I might even give the order myself."

"I'm not anything," George said. "I just want to go back to my forest."

"Wait." The man cocked his head to the side as he considered George with narrowed eyes. "Do I know you?"

"I..." George blinked, suddenly unsure. "I think you did," was the closest answer to the truth, even if George didn't exactly know what that truth was.

"Huh." The man shrugged as he turned away from George, dismissing the odd sense of familiarity that had passed between them like a bolt of lightning—sudden and fleeting. "Well, you heard him. He just wants to fuck off into the woods."

"And you just believe that?" The hunting leader sneered.

"Wouldn't be the first of your bumbling messes I had to clean up."

"You fucking—"

"I am general of this army." The man crossed the little space between him and the hunting leader, and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "And frankly, I'm getting tired of you forgetting that. I came to fight a war, and I don't care on which side, so unless you want to make an enemy of me tonight, just shut your mouth and do as I say."

"You would commit treason?" the hunter—not a leader of anything, as it turned out—demanded.

"Treason only applies if I'm from the fledgling shithole you call a kingdom," the man—the general, the true beating heart of this army—spat back. "I'm from nowhere, and I owe you nothing."

"We *paid* you."

"Do you want a thank you?" The general scoffed. "Fine, here it is: thank you for wasting three months of my lifetime." He let go of the hunter's shirt and shoved him backwards with almost enough force to toss him straight into the bonfire behind him. "Save whatever's left of your dignity and go find me meat I can actually consume." He turned to George with a raised eyebrow. "No offense to your buffalo, but it's not exactly my taste."

"It's not a—" George sighed. "Never mind."

With an amused smirk, the general tossed George one of the daggers from his bandolier. "Cut it free. Then, run and never let me see your face around here again."

George made quick work of the ropes they'd tied around the stag. It rose on shaky legs, with George supporting most of its weight as it struggled to regain its footing.

"Told you I'd get us out," George murmured, trying to hide his relief.

It began in his periphery.

A flickering shadow, a trick of the light, a single movement across the valley. Then the shadow became a man became whirling limbs became raised sword.

The dark-eyed hunter, driven by his shame and fury, hurtling towards its prey.

Not the general.

Not George.

With a guttural cry of a man unused to losing, the hunter swung his blade down towards the stag.

Once again, the world proved to be a disappointment.

There was no hesitation in George's immortal heart as he swung an arm outward towards the would-be killer, and with a flick of his wrist ordered something to *grow*. A single bamboo shoot sprang from the earth between the hunter and the stag, quicker than a breath, its sharpened culm piercing straight through the man's wrist, halting his killing blow just inches away from its target's antlers.

The man dropped his sword. And then he began to scream.

Slowly, with all the time in the world, George bent to pick up the discarded sword. His numb fingers wrapped around the hilt and then raised the blade for his own inspection. It was not the sharpest weapon he'd ever wielded, but it would have to do.

"Bargain all you want," George said as he turned to the screaming hunter, feeling nothing beyond the weight of the weapon in his hands. "No one's listening."

There was more screaming, coming from all around him. The very crowd that had gathered to witness his punishment had instead witness his reawakening.

He'd tried to tell them. He could have been everything to them. They could have worshipped him.

Instead, they were drawing their swords against him. Not to come to the defense of the foolhardy hunter, of course. They thought they understood George, but they did not, and their own ignorance made them afraid. So they did what fearful humans did best.

They attacked.

"All I wanted," George whispered to the hunter as the angry mob closed in, swords and spears and arrows cutting through the night, "was to go back home."

The stag broke away from George's grip as the army descended on him.

He did not reach for it.

Instead, he reached further, towards the distant forest that had sheltered him for years. He reached for every prowling beast and every taloned bird of prey, every thorn and heavy branch and choking rope of ivy, every ant of fire and deadly hornet and venomous snake.

The forest heard his call, and it answered.

In the end, George didn't see how the stag died.

He found it lying on the ground, eyes still wide open in panic, its legs splayed like broken twigs. Had it taken an arrow for him in the heat of battle, or had it simply been caught in the crossfire as it tried to escape back to their forest? With its final, rattling breaths, did it call for the lonely god that had feed it berries from his palm?

It no longer mattered.

George stood over the stag's cooling corpse, just another body in the valley he'd made a graveyard. Where once tents of a proud army stood, there was only disturbed earth and scattered bodies. There were so many ways a mortal could die. Caught in a stampede, stung from the inside out, clawed or mauled or cut down by an embittered immortal.

George looked down at the sword still in his grip. It was more blood than blade, but between the splatters of red, George could see his own countenance. It held no remorse.

He was made for cruelty, after all.

That was how the other survivor found him: standing silently over a dead deer with a dead man's sword in his hands.

"Did it have a name?" the general asked.

George glanced at him. Like George, the general was covered in blood and gore, but bore no injuries. He flicked his sweaty hair from his face, more annoyed than anything else, and George understood.

The forest had ensured only a god could have survived its fury. It just so happened there had been two gods on the battlefield tonight.

With an exhausted sigh, George turned back to the stag's body. "What does it matter?"

"Well," said the other god, moving to stand beside George, "usually, people have names for things they deem important."

"We're not strictly people, though, are we?"

"Fair point." A silence passed between them, filled only by the howling wind. "You gave me a hell of a fight tonight. Been a while since I've met a god that could keep up with me."

"Let me take a wild guess," George said wryly. "God of war, then?"

"The one and only."

"What were you doing, throwing your lot in with this army?"

The war god shrugged. "Immortality gets boring after a while, you know? Had to find entertainment where I could. Didn't expect *you* to take center stage, though." George heard, more than saw, the god's smile as he added, "Not that I'm complaining."

"Well, find some other way to pass your time. There won't be any encores from me," George said. "I'm going back to sleep."

"*Sleep?*" The war god whirled on him, brows drawn in confusion. "Why would you waste your time on that?"

"Because, unlike you, I don't revel in watching mortals burn this whole wretched world to the ground."

The war god scoffed. "That's not all they do."

"What happened tonight would prove otherwise."

“They can surprise you, sometimes. If you stick around, you might even get a laugh out of their little lives.” He felt the war god’s dark eyes settling on him, piercing and calculative. “You look like someone who could use a good laugh.”

His words coming out oddly strangled, George said, “I doubt there’s anything for me out here.”

“Leave, then,” the war god replied easily. “Go back to your trees and bushes.”

But George remained rooted on the ground.

“That’s what I thought.” The war god pointed north. “The war we were heading to is that way, but I’m sure we could go any direction we want and find another anyway.”

“Is war all you know?” George asked quietly.

“What else is there worth knowing?” The war god grinned at him. “It will be fun. Or, at the very least, it won’t be boring.”

“I don’t even know what century we’re in.”

George stared down at the animal he’d first said those words to. Just another deer, indistinguishable from all the rest. *Stupid little thing, why didn’t you run away faster?*

George’s pockets were still full of berries.

“I’ll tell you all about it,” said the war god. “You didn’t miss much.”

George took a deep breath. Beyond the field of bodies, the sun was beginning to rise, the purple night fading into gold as the world spun on, indifferent to all the lives that had left it. The war god was telling him there was something beyond the distant mountains, something worth his while.

His lungs ached with the memory of forest-fire smoke.

He sighed it all out.

“I guess I can afford to stay,” George said. “I have nothing better to do, after all.”

The war god’s grin widened, the edges of it like knifepoints.

What the hell did I get myself into? George thought.

“Great,” said the war god, clapping George on the back so forcefully it would have dislodged his heart if he’d been a mortal. “But first, let’s try to see if any of the horses survived, then let’s find the nearest river to wash all this blood off.”

“Wait,” George ordered.

To his surprise, the war god obeyed. He watched in silence as George kneeled before the stag. With one swing, George buried the point of his sword deep into the ground beside the stag’s head. And from the sword grew the flowers.

Blue petals unfurled over the stag, growing under and then over its still body until it was buried in morning glories.

George stood, brushing dirt from his knees. Then he faced his new companion, who was looking back at him with an expression George was sure was mirrored on his own face. But the moment

passed, and they were slowly picking their way across the ruined camp as the sun continued its loyal dance through the pink sky.

The next time they would be in this valley, one of them would not have slept in years. He would have laugh lines set into the corners of his eyes and he would have known what it was to love and be loved in return.

The other would be dead.

when I met you (my virtues uncounted)

Chapter Notes

Trigger/Content Warnings:

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depiction of violence, background character death,

"You," said George, "are actually the worst thing that has ever happened to me."

George felt the war god strain against the ropes that bound them together, back-to-back.

"I sense some underlying hostility in your words," the war god said slowly.

"Oh, pardon, I meant it to be *overlying*."

George jerked forwards, making the tight rope dig into the other god's skin. The war god retaliated by thrashing around until his elbow connected with George's side. In response, George forcefully threw his head back; their skulls connected with a dull thud.

"Ow." George gritted his teeth as pain reverberated through his bones. "Should've expected you to have a head of bricks."

"Boo fucking hoo," the war god spat. "Maybe instead of whining, you can help me get us the fuck out of this mess."

"Do you mean the mess *you* started?"

"That is irrelevant to the conversation at hand."

"Irrelevant to the fact that it's definitely *your damn fault* that we're tied over a pit full of spikes that will definitely *skewer* us if we fall?"

The war god was quiet, possibly as he assessed the aforementioned pit of spikes far below them. As far as pits go, George had to admit it was formidable; it was deep enough that even the fall would deal a lot of damage, not even mentioning the stakes sharpened so thoroughly that George couldn't help but begrudgingly admire the handiwork.

Whoever made this pit was very dedicated to making people suffer. And it was only George's luck that his godly companion made it his life's mission to piss them off.

They had only been traveling together for six days before everything went to shit.

The days before that had been filled with polite, even friendly, conversation. Easy laughter over campfires, exchanging stories about their long, *long* lives. They spoke of adventures, the war god with excitement and George with curiosity. The only adventure George had ever been on was only

a few days old, after all.

It was, despite their rocky start, a good companionship. No. Not good. *Easy*.

It was like they had done this a thousand times before.

“You know,” George had said to the war god as they followed their directionless path, “I thought we would have killed each other by now.”

The war god had looked over to him, an eyebrow raised. “What makes you say that?”

George shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never really been with another god for this long. I thought it would be like... like putting a lion and a tiger in the same enclosure, and we’d have to fight for dominance or something.”

The war god’s laugh had been like an explosion, coming deep from within his gut. “*Please*,” he said, breathless with amusement. “As if I’d ever be threatened by you. You’re not exactly an apex predator in our circle.”

“What do you mean?” George didn’t know if the prickling sensation behind his eyes had been irritation at being underestimated, or bitter agreement.

“Trust me,” the war god said, stretching his arms over his head, as if preparing for a fight. He was always preparing for a fight. “You’ve been sleeping for years. You’re terrifying in your own right, but out here, with the rest of us? You’ll need a few decades of practice before you can go toe-to-toe with, say, the storm god, for example.”

“Have *you* beaten him?” George couldn’t help his challenging tone.

And the war god couldn’t help his arrogant grin. “What do you think?”

George had rolled his eyes. Something told him he might be doing that a lot.

And then, a day later, they found the castle. It was in the middle of nowhere, and the thorns that grew over its walls and entrances further emphasized that nothing good would come out of trespassing.

“Let’s rob it,” the war god said at once.

“You have got to be kidding.”

The war god spun on his heel to level his dark-eyed gaze on George. “Listen. Abandoned castle like this? Think about the wine cellars.”

George was unmoved.

“Okay.” The war god ran a hand through his hair as he thought. “Think about the hidden treasures.”

That, at last, got George’s attention.

The war god almost choked on a laugh. “Treasure. *That’s* where your interests lie?”

“What can I say?” George shrugged. “I like shiny things.”

“Like a fucking magpie.”

“Actually, magpies don’t really care for—”

“Alright, I get it, you have a thing for lonely little animals.”

The war god shifted his weight from one foot to another as he stared impatiently at George, the castle looming over his shoulder like a threat. George considered its imposing walls; the thorns would bend easily enough to George’s will, allowing them safe passage inside, but anything beyond that would require George to trust in the war god’s protection.

With a weary sigh, George turned back to the war god.

“How do we even know if it’s abandoned?” he asked, even though he knew he was going to follow the dark-eyed god into the belly of the beast no matter what his answer was.

“Look at it,” the war god said exasperatedly, flinging an arm towards the ivy-grown turrets. “*Of course* it’s abandoned.”

It was not.

Inside, they found a crowd of mercenaries, outlaws and common bandits that had been using the castle as some base of their criminal operations and—because the universe wasn’t quite done with George yet—they had gotten to the castle’s armory first. Which meant the moment George and the war god stepped through the gates, they were greeted with a wickedly sharp hatchet burying itself into the wall right behind where George’s head had been just a second before.

The war god seemed to be more than happy to launch himself into the crowd of very angry, very dangerous, very well-armed people, his deadly grin only matched in ferocity by his own drawn blade, but George was unarmed, tired, and—most importantly—completely uninterested in another bloodbath.

Bloodstains took too long to wash out, and his cloak was new, *godsdamn it*.

So he grabbed the war god’s wrist, ignore his shout of protest, and dragged him right back the way they came.

With a wave of his hand, the wall of thorns closed over the entrance again, though George had no doubt their pursuers had other means of, well, pursuing them. He kept running, even as the war god threatened to cut off his hand if he didn’t let go.

“I have a reputation to maintain!” the war god spat as George dragged him deeper into the forest bordering the castle.

“And I have fresh clothes to maintain, too,” George shot back.

“I swear, if you don’t get your hand off me—”

But George would never know what brand new threat the war god was going to launch at him, because in that moment, one of them—*definitely* not George—sprung a trap hidden on the forest floor. There was the quick snap of the rope, a short scream, and suddenly George and the war god found themselves in their current predicament: hanging from a tree, back-to-back, over a pit of deadly (or, for gods like them, painful) spikes.

“I don’t know about you,” George said as they spun slowly above the spikes like a pig on a spit, “but I’d rather not spend the better part of the century acclimating to being the world’s first immortal pincushion.”

“Agreed,” the war god said dryly.

In the distance, George could hear the sound of pounding feet as their hatchet-wielding devotees broke free from the castle and surged into the forest, seeking their flighty gods. *Well*, thought George with a wry twist to his mouth, *it feels good to be wanted again*.

“Okay,” the war god said suddenly. “Start rocking.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Rock back and forth,” he explained impatiently. “Look, see, the rope is frayed already. If we apply enough pressure, we can get it to snap, but our momentum should be enough to fling us clear over the pit.”

“Or it could snap right as we’re above it,” George said, “immediately impaling us.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. And it’s not like you have any better ideas.”

George opened his mouth to protest. But a grudging sigh was all he that came out.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But when you’re picking splinters from your skin well into the next century, don’t blame me.”

So they began rocking. Back and forth and back again; the forest god pulled, the war god pushed, twin tides in an ocean of desperate self-preservation. The war god must have levelled cities, torn whole kingdoms apart with his bare hands. And now, here he was with George, made helpless by a pathetic trap a better god would have seen a mile away.

He should have just let George go back to sleep.

The branch above them groaned with their shifting weight.

“It’s working,” said the war god.

But even at the height of their swing, George was too far from safe ground.

“I’m not going to make it,” George said.

“Don’t worry,” said the war god. “I won’t let anything happen to—”

The rope snapped.

George felt it loosen around him as he flew through the air, untethered to anything or anyone. For a brief moment, the world became terribly slow, each second extending into infinity as George watch the war god make it to safety, boots thudding heavily on earth just as their pursuers appeared from between the trees. George heard the hiss of blades being drawn, a shout of challenge, the war god answering.

But George was still falling.

“Hey—” he called, only to realize he did not know the war god’s name.

The last thing George saw before he fell into the pit was his companion walking away from him, spinning his sword in a wicked arc before he plunged it through the heart of his first attacker.

Oh, thought George, fury shooting through him, *you stupid bastard*.

At the last moment, George flung out a desperate arm and managed to catch himself against the mouth of the pit, fingers digging into dirt as he hung over the pointed spikes.

The sound of fighting exploded through the forest, the war god's laughter high above the clash of steel. All George could see was dirt and certain doom waiting for him below. The earth under his fingers was dead and dry, and it would take only one wrong move for it to crumble under his weight.

He could call for the war god again, like a mortal praying at an altar for help, for salvation. But that sort of devotion was hardly ever answered. George would know; he'd mastered the art of disregard so very long ago.

So, instead, it was only him and the earth. Thankfully, that had always been enough for him.

A cluster of ivy sprung alive beneath his fingers, curled around his arm, and hauled him over the edge just in time for an axe to come swinging down on him. With a strangled yelp, George rolled away just in time to avoid his second attempted murder of the week.

His attacker pulled his axe from where it had embedded itself and swung towards George again. George managed to jump to his feet, curling his hands into fists before he realized the person coming towards him was ridiculously, impossibly taller. He wore an armor of bones to match his grim smile, and George could only hope that wasn't a human skull as his helmet.

"Hold on," called George, ducking to avoid the next brutal swing. "Hold *on*, this isn't even my fight!"

As if that excuse ever worked for anyone.

They lumbered towards George, who stepped backwards with his palms up in surrender until his back hit the tree behind him. He was cornered, with nowhere else to go.

His enemy knew it, too. They threw their axe, the blade spinning straight towards George. He threw himself to the ground, narrowly missing decapitation. When he looked back, he saw the axe sticking out of the tree where his head had been moments before. He met the confused eyes of his would-be attacker—now unarmed. They could only stare at each other like wide-eyed birds, the sounds of distant battle still crashing around them. A beat passed.

Then, at the same time, they dove for the axe's handle.

His attacker had longer limbs and a longer reach, but George was closer and also more desperate. His hands wrapped around the carved-bone handle and pulled it effortlessly from the trunk. He turned, new weapon in hand, just as the axe-less axeman reached him, bloody murder in his eyes.

Without thinking, George swung the axe—but not towards his attacker.

There was a sharp snap as the axe cut through the heavy branch above them, followed by a dull thud as it fell directly on top of his enemy, bone armor clattering as he disappeared under leaves and bark.

George stared dumbly at the mess he'd created, clutching the axe close to his chest.

"Well," he said, slowly stepping over the axeman's unconscious form. "Thanks for the axe, I guess."

George looked up to see a man crashing through the shrubbery, followed closely by the war god,

face split by a wicked grin. With effortless grace, the war god ran towards his target and planted his boot into the man's chest before flipping backwards onto his feet again. The man flew backwards, straight down into the very pit that they'd dug for George and the war god.

George grimaced and looked hurriedly away, but not before he heard the wet squelch of twenty spikes slicing straight through skin and bone. The man didn't even have time to scream.

"Really?" an unimpressed voice drawled. "You massacre an entire army overnight, but *this* is too much for you?"

George turned to glare at the war god, who was coming towards him while cleaning blood and gore off his sword with his cloak.

"You left me," George said with measured fury. "You *left me*."

A flicker of irritation crossed the other god's face. "Oh, come on," he said. "You took care of yourself, didn't you?"

"That's not the point." George stalked towards him. "*You* invited me along. *You* threw yourself headfirst into this stupid fight. And then *you* left me behind because it's always about what *you* want." George curled his fingers tightly around the handle of his new axe, almost tempted to bury it into the war god's thick skull. "I knew I shouldn't have followed you."

The war god's eyes darkened. "You can't mean that."

George barked out a strained laugh. "You don't know me enough to say that."

"Then what *can* I say?" the war god demanded. "Do you want me to apologize?"

"That would be a good start," George snapped, "if I thought you were capable of it."

"I'm sorry," the war god said.

George blinked. Then he blinked again.

"Okay," he said slowly, his brows furrowing with disbelief. "But that's not—"

"I'm sorry I got caught up in the fight," the god continued, still striding towards George, hands still smeared with red. "I'm sorry I left you behind. I'm sorry I dragged you into this. And I'm sorry about your deer."

He was close enough now that George could see the freckles dotting the bridge of his nose like dust on the cover of a forgotten book of fairy tales. Close enough for George to inspect his features for any sign of deception. Close enough for George to find only solemn sincerity.

Close enough for George to see the large gash running up his left forearm, dripping blood down his fingertips.

Six days.

They'd only known each other for six days—if what was between them could even be called *knowing*. It was a brittle, fragile thing. And yet, strangely, it was something George didn't want to give up on just yet.

George sighed. "Come here," he said.

The war god cocked his head to the side. “What?”

“Your arm. It’s injured.”

He looked down at the wound. “Huh. Must be getting rusty, if one of them got me like that.”

“Just *come here*.”

They found a space under a tree, far from the stink of blood and death. George drew the war god down onto the grass where they sat like children, knees touching and heads bent together. George pulled the war god’s wounded arm closer towards him, assessing the damage under the dim sunlight dancing through the foliage above.

“It’s not that bad, really,” said the war god. “I’ve shrugged off worse.”

In response, George summoned a patch of white yarrow flowers under his fingers. He plucked a handful of its leaves and crushed them into dry poultice. “Hold still,” said George, holding it over the war god’s wound.

“Oh, please,” he scoffed. “What can you ever do to—*fucking shitbag*.”

The war god struggled to free himself from George’s grip, but George held him still as he pushed the herbs against the war god’s skin. Then, even as his bothersome companion cursed his name to high heaven and hot hell, George ripped a piece of cloth from his own cloak and wrapped it tightly around the war god’s arm.

“There,” George said, neatly tying the makeshift bandage. “Was it really that bad?”

The war god glared at him. “I will snap you in half like a twig.”

“Consider it payback.”

“You’re a vindictive little thing, aren’t you?”

“Hey,” George said, “at least that means we’re equal now. You leave me to die, I use my skills and expertise and kindness to save you from potential infections.”

“Humble, too.”

George rolled his eyes, but as he settled against the tree trunk behind him, gazing over the still and silent forest that was both familiar and unfamiliar, old and new, he had the oddest feeling that he’d been here before. Or that he’d always meant to be here. It just took him a while to find his way.

He reached out towards the sunlight above, letting the rays slip past and around his pale fingers. Like golden rings.

“You had a point,” said George softly.

The war god shifted beside him, but George was still playing with the sun. “Hm?”

“About the deer,” George continued. “You pointed out, before, that I didn’t name it. Does that mean it never mattered to me? That it wasn’t important? Maybe. Maybe not.” George drew his legs under him and smiled, just a little. “I think... I think names can be heavy, sometimes. Heavier than we give them credit for. Like stones in your mouth.”

“That’s...” The war god sighed through his nose. “That’s fucking stupid.”

George shrugged. “I don’t know how else to explain it. It’s like... if I gave you my name, it’s like giving you a secret.”

“Well,” said the war god, “my name is Sapnap. So. There. Who cares? It’s not a secret or a rock or whatever. It’s just a fucking name, idiot.”

George laughed.

“Mine is George,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you, Sapnap.”

They made their way through the world, Sapnap and George. They made a strange pair, found curious—and angry—eyes on them wherever they went. George could hardly blame them, not when he had a bone-handled axe half his size strapped to his back, and Sapnap made it a point to keep at least four blades on his person at all times. It wasn’t their fault that mortal men took that as a challenge.

Often, they found themselves at the heart of bar fights or alleyway ambushes. Even a war or two. George let Sapnap handle the worst of it; he was, after all, made for battle. But that didn’t mean George gave just as much as he got, sometimes even *more*. George blamed it on the war god’s influence, his bloodstained glee infectious. It grew on George like heavy moss.

One time, in the aftermath of war, they stood on a hill overseeing the wreckage. There was no real reason to linger. The white flags of surrender had been raised, the enemy lines—or, what was left of it, after the gods had done their work—had retreated, and all that was left was the grim cleanup. But still, inexplicably, the two of them stayed for longer than they should have, watching silently as soldiers dragged their dead onto carts and wagons to be taken home for burial.

George really didn’t see the point of it. Whether under marble graves or by the side of some random road, bodies still rotted the same.

He glanced at Sapnap, but the other god was, for once, absolutely still, only his hair shifting slightly with the warm wind.

“You look like you’re thinking,” said George. “Thinking actual *thoughts*.” He gasped dramatically. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Shut up,” Sapnap grumbled, the usual edge gone from his voice. “You’re actually so annoying, did you know that?”

George grinned, but they quickly fell back into the quiet.

Then, quietly, George asked, “Would you bury me, if we were mortals? Would you mourn?”

Sapnap scoffed. “Definitely not.”

“Because I don’t think I’d mourn you,” George said, turning back to the carnage they’d left in their wake. “I mean, I’ve never really mourned anything, ever. I wouldn’t even know what that would feel like. Maybe one day, I’ll feel it, but I wouldn’t have a name for it, and it’ll pass under my notice.”

“George,” Sapnap said softly, “what the fuck makes you think I’ll ever bite the dust before you do?”

George choked back a laugh. “Well, screw me for being vulnerable for once in my life, I guess.”

“You’re vulnerable every minute of every godsdamned day. I had to pull you back from a hail of arrows today because it never occurred to you that the enemy archers might actually try and, you know, *shoot* you.”

“My hero,” George said wryly. “What would I ever do without you?”

“Die, probably.” Sapnap turned and began walking away, his dark cloak making him look like a living shadow under the setting sun. “Honestly, George, sometimes I feel like I take care of you more than you take care of you.”

“You’re one to talk,” George said, following Sapnap with an exasperated roll of his eyes. “I’m not the one who got us trapped over a pit of spikes for a bit of treasure.”

“Oh my *gods*. That was years ago,” Sapnap protested. “Let it fucking go.”

It was not easy all the time. Far from it. Sapnap was stubborn to a fault, and loud, and took more risks than he could afford to, often at George’s expense. In turn, George dragged his feet everywhere they went, only incensing Sapnap further. They fought—constantly. Sapnap threatened to toss George over a cliff, and George threatened to pull him down with him. One time, they followed through with that threat. It by sheer luck that a river was waiting for them at the bottom.

Sometimes, George wanted to leave.

Sometimes, George knew Sapnap did, too.

And then, other times, they would have their backs to each other, George with his axe and Sapnap with his weapon of the week, and in the middle of a bloodthirsty swarm of bounty hunters out for their heads, George would feel the safest he’d ever been. And he’d think maybe it was all worth it.

George saw him first.

Centuries down the line, when he was alone with his old bones, George would think of that moment and wonder what would have happened if he’d looked away. If he’d walked the other direction. If he’d taken Sapnap’s sleeve and lead him down a different road. Knowing how it would end, would George still have held his green-eyed gaze? Would George still have let curiosity get the better of him?

Would he still have followed him into that forest and doomed them all?

This was how the ending began: with two young gods following the stars north, aimless but not lost. With George blowing out air and delighting in the way his breath became mist in the cold air. With Sapnap explaining the stars to him.

“The mortals gave them names,” he was saying, his boots muffled on the light dusting of snow beneath them. “That cluster over there? They call it the Wishing Well.”

“It doesn’t look like anything to me,” said George.

Sapnap shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what *we* can see,” he said. “It’s not meant for us.”

George widened his eyes exaggeratedly at him. “Why, Sapnap,” he gasped. “Are you, perhaps, *sympathizing* with the mere mortals you detest so much?”

“It’s not sympathy,” Sapnap scoffed. “It’s just the way things are. There’s things only we can

understand, and things only they can.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” Sapnap gnawed absently on his lower lip before adding, “I mean, we’d never understand death, not the way they do.”

George tilted his head to consider him in the silver moonlight. “We can still die.”

“But it’s not a certainty for us. Not a promise. More like... a suggestion.”

“Fair enough.” George pulled his cloak tighter around him as the temperature dropped lower. The landscape was pure white, glittering like a sea of diamonds. Nothing marred its perfect surface except the two sets of footprints George and Sapnap left in their wake, and the trees of a dead forest standing like silent sentries ahead, their branches skeletal and bare. “Really, who are we to decide what they should do with the little time they’re given.”

Sapnap kicked a stone over as he walked; it skidded over the snow and stopped against the roots of the first of the trees. “We have better things to do,” he agreed. “It’s nice having someone to talk to like this. Obviously, no mortal could understand.”

“No god, either?” George asked with a faint smile.

Sapnap chuckled. “Yeah, definitely not,” he said. “Burned those immortal bridges before they could even be built.”

“Lion and tiger in the same enclosure?” George said as the trees began to close in around them, like they were fireflies caught between the fingers of a young child.

“I guess. But I’ve also never really felt the need to get into the enclosure in the first place, you know?”

George remembered the soothing call of the earth, telling him to curl up and sleep the decade away. He remembered soft fur warm beneath his fingers. Uneaten berries in his pockets.

“Yeah,” George whispered. “I know.”

This was how the ending began: with the sound of splintering under a heavy foot. Tragedy heralded not by applause and triumphant trumpets, but by the gentle snapping of a fallen twig.

George met Sapnap’s eyes.

They were not alone in this forest.

Instinctively, Sapnap reached for his sword. Instinctively, George stepped closer to him.

This forest did not know him. It was full of dead and dying things, and they answered to a higher power, or perhaps to no power at all. They would not tell him their secrets or come to his rescue, and that made George horribly, pitifully *useless*.

“Sapnap,” George breathed, scanning between the bone-white trees for any movement, any shadow out of place. “I can’t see—”

“Quiet,” Sapnap snapped. “Just stay by me.”

George opened his mouth to protest, and that was when he caught sight of something. It wasn’t

shadow.

It was *light*—golden and brilliant even against the glistening snow.

It darted between the trees, too quick to be entirely human.

Something in George screamed at him to run—away or toward, he didn't know.

And as he pressed close under Sapnap's protection, he caught the bright green eyes of a smiling boy, gleaming with amusement as he held George's gaze for a heartbeat before he disappeared behind a withered tree. That was all it took, really.

George had always liked shiny things.

His feet were moving before he could think better of it. He grabbed Sapnap's wrist and pulled him deeper into the forest, following the footsteps of a ghost.

“What the *fuck*, George?” Sapnap demanded.

“Listen—”

They crashed into a clearing, the ground dusted by snow and sky open above them, spilling moonlight over their shoulders as they spun, looking for any trace of the boy who seemed to have vanished into the mist. There were no footprints on the ground anymore, not a single indication that he'd ever existed at all.

Sapnap sheathed his sword, glaring at George. “Care to explain your sudden loss of all sense of self-preservation this time, George?”

George felt the cold all the way down to his fingertips. “I thought...” He searched the quiet trees. “I thought he'd wait.”

As Sapnap said, there were things reserved for mortal understanding, and things reserved for those who would never know what it was to live numbered days.

But bitter disappointment was a universal sentiment.

“Never mind,” George said, releasing Sapnap's hand. “Guess I was just seeing things.”

A laugh—soft and quiet and delicate in the night—replied.

“Okay,” a voice followed, “I didn't think you'd give up *that* easily.”

Sapnap and George whirled towards the voice.

They found him standing on a high branch, hand braced against the trunk for balance that he didn't really need. Green eyes. Golden hair. A smile that George had seen a million times before, even without knowing it.

It was an unearned familiarity, but it still took George a long moment to remember that.

And, it turned out, it took Sapnap even longer.

He stepped between George and the stranger, his face clouded.

“Is this a dream?” he said, voice sounding far away. As if he was shouting the words from some

distant place.

“I could be,” the stranger said, the smile never leaving his mouth.

Sapnap shook his head, as if to clear it. George could see the tension in his shoulders, the same rigid stance he took when he was facing down an army. He could feel the same mistrust building in his gut.

But neither of them drew their weapons.

The stranger—the dream—leapt from the branch, landing soundlessly on the snow below. He walked towards them with his empty hands held high.

“No.” Sapnap’s rough voice cut through the silence. “Stay there.”

He stopped with an easy shrug. “That’s fair, I guess.”

“Who the hell are you?” Sapnap demanded.

“Oh.” The dream with the green eyes and too-familiar grin and snowflakes melting in his soft curls chuckled. “Weren’t you listening? The universe said I’m going to be the best thing that’s ever happened to you.”

dragging along (following your form)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Funny thing.” Sapnap’s voice was as biting and cold as snow beginning to fall around them. “I don’t remember the universe telling me *shit*.”

The stranger, who was a dream, who was a boy that was almost blurry around his edges—as if he would vanish if George looked away—lowered his palms of surrender. George found it didn’t make much of a difference; hands up or hands down or hands tied behind his back, the dream would find a way to be a frightening thing.

There was no doubt about it.

This was a god.

The dream-god’s eyes found George’s, green as the spring this frozen wasteland had not tasted in centuries. “Come now,” he said, almost exasperated, like he was getting bored waiting for them to get to the point he’d already concluded for himself. “There’s no need for hostility, right?”

George didn’t know why he was addressing that to *him*, as if George was in any way the biggest threat here. As if he was a danger to be examined and neutralized, something to look out for. He found he liked it, just a little bit.

“I don’t know,” George said honestly, earning a confused glance from Sapnap. “I guess that’s up to you. Dream, was it?”

Dream smiled. “Sure. Let’s go with that. Let’s go with *Dream*.”

Sapnap, still standing between George and Dream, reached for his sword again. “Look,” he said, “leading us on a wild chase around this cold as shit forest didn’t exactly make a good first impression.”

“But it was *funny*,” Dream said in defense.

“It was definitely not,” Sapnap replied.

“Well.” They both turned to George, who shrugged at the sudden scrutiny. “It was a bit funny.”

Sapnap glared, utterly betrayed, while Dream threw his head back in laughter, shoulders shaking with the force of his own glee. George watched him a heavy feeling in his gut. It wasn’t as simple as wariness or curiosity. *Dream*, he named him, and George supposed it was only fitting. It had been a long time since George slept soundly enough to dream—dreams and nightmares both were a distant memory from his younger days, when his mind still had room for imagined goodness and awfulness. And then he’d lived long enough to outgrow imagination. All the good, and the bad, he *lived* them. What use were dreams, then? What use were nightmares?

But even after all these years, he still remembered—not what he dreamt about when he was a young and stupid child, but how they *felt*. It was like moving through water, every movement impossibly slow, every gesture warped and just a little bit... wrong. That was it. Dreams, and Dream, felt strangely *wrong*, but in a way that George couldn’t name. It was a wrongness only observed through hindsight, a wrongness only known by those awake, but George—

A thought formed in his head, too selfish to be given voice.

He looked at Sapnap, the snowflakes melting against his cheeks as he crossed his arms in annoyance.

“It’s your call,” George said, because he didn’t trust himself to make it.

Dream had stopped laughing, but traces of his joy lingered in the corners of his mouth. “It’s simple, really. You don’t kill me, and you earn yourself a new friend.”

“*Friendship?*” Sapnap scoffed, as if it was the most absurd thing. “Is that what you’re offering?”

“You’re making me sound like some street merchant hawking his wares,” Dream said. “But, yes, I suppose that is what is on the table here.”

“You *have* to know how questionable that is, right? You show up in the middle of some random forest, talking about the universe and some other nonsense, and you expect us to just, what, befriend you for it?”

“It does sound a bit like a surefire way to get smothered in our sleep,” George agreed.

Dream made a sound of protest. “If I wanted to kill you, I’d be more creative than that.”

“Good to know,” George said wryly.

Sapnap ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Okay, this is going nowhere.” He grabbed George by the arm and began hauling him away. “We’re leaving. Goodbye, creepy stranger! Thanks for wasting our time.”

But even as they walked away from the clearing, George could hear the steady footsteps following. He glanced back and saw Dream a few paces behind, smiling politely and tilting his head to the side as if asking, “*Yes? What’s got you so curious?*” When George turned around, he found Sapnap staring straight ahead, his brows drawn together, his jaw clenched tight. His hand was still around George’s arm, as if he’d forgotten it was there, or as if he didn’t trust George enough to let go.

George shrugged Sapnap’s hand off him. *I can take care of myself*, he wanted to say, but instead he drew his cloak over himself, letting it swallow him whole. They continued walking, neither of them willing to acknowledge the extra set of footsteps shuffling behind them, even if it made George’s skin crawl to turn his back on something like that. It must grate on Sapnap, too, but he’d already made up his mind to ignore Dream and leave; if there was anything stronger than his instinct for self-preservation, it was his pride. He wouldn’t be turning around if his life depended on it.

“So,” said Dream from behind them, “lovely weather we have tonight, huh?”

And Sapnap surprised George by stopping in his tracks and saying, “I’m just going to kill him,” before unsheathing his sword and making a wild dash back towards Dream.

“Sapnap, *wait*—” George whirled around just in time to see Sapnap swing at Dream. Dream ducked, and the sword passed harmlessly over him. Sapnap swung again, this time aiming straight for Dream’s legs, but Dream merely jumped, reaching for the branch above their heads, and in one smooth motion, hauled himself into the trees. He crouched on the branch, his smile turning sharp and taunting as he looked down at Sapnap and George below him.

“Come on, war god,” he said. “Is that the best you can do?”

“How do you know who I am?” Sapnap shouted up at him. “And don’t say some cryptic shit like the universe whispered it into your ear or something.”

Dream pouted mockingly. “I can’t help it if I’m the universe’s favorite, can I?”

“Oh, for the love of *fuck*,” Sapnap spat, and flung his sword, point-first, towards the boy in the tree.

Dream jumped back, finding another branch behind him. He landed on it gracefully, like he was sure nothing on this earth would ever let him fall. George couldn’t help but be transfixed by his easy movement, the sheer confidence and arrogance in it. It was a hubris reserved for young gods, those that could still claim invincibility and mean every word. He’d seen it, sometimes, in the way Sapnap fought, but even Sapnap made mistakes. There was no mistake in Dream. George thought maybe there was a little bit more god in Dream than the rest of them.

Dream caught George’s stare, and waved.

“What do you want?” George asked with resignation; it felt like the only thing he *could* ask.

“I told you,” Dream said. “I want to be friends.”

“But *why*?”

Dream shrugged. “Just to see what it’s like.”

Sapnap and George exchanged incredulous glances. Dream noticed the look between them and sighed, settling down on the branch until his legs were dangling over the edge. He looked almost sheepish, like a boy caught in the orchard with stolen apples stuffed down his pockets.

“I heard stories about you,” he said, “and I thought maybe it would be fun to tag along. Heard you won a war. I could help you win the next one.”

“Not interested,” Sapnap said immediately, crossing his arms as he glared up at the other god. “Offer denied. You can go fuck off now.”

“I could help you,” Dream repeated, and it felt more like a threat than a bargain.

“Look,” Sapnap said, running a hand down his face in frustration. “We don’t fucking know you, and we don’t want to know you. Whatever game you think this is, we don’t want to play.” He moved to grab his fallen sword from the ground, brushing snow from its polished blade before returning it to its sheath. When he returned to George’s side, his face was clouded with an emotion George could feel forming inside his own chest. *Hesitation*. There was something in this dead forest that did not want them to leave. “George?”

George blinked, suddenly very aware of the snow falling slowly between the bare branches. There was that odd feeling again, like he was wandering the world half-asleep, and no step was his own. He looked up at Dream, who was still staring down at them, waiting for something, green eyes bright against the silver moonlight.

“You,” George said quietly, “are not used to being denied, are you?”

For a moment, George thought he saw Dream’s ever-present smile slip, just a bit. And then the moment passed, and George dismissed it as a trick of the light.

“What have you got to lose by keeping me around?” Dream asked, sounding so earnest George almost pitied him for it.

But then Sapnap’s hand was on his shoulder again, gentle this time, not a vice but a reminder.

“Let’s go,” Sapnap said, shaking off whatever it was that tried to keep them here.

George nodded. He raised a hand towards the boy in the trees, a careless farewell, before turning away.

He almost expected to hear that third set of footsteps again, but instead there was silence.

“That was... weird.” George glanced at Sapnap as they trudged through the snow. The war god’s face was impassive, more serious than George had ever known it to be. It was like looking at a stranger again. “That was *weird*, right? I wasn’t imagining things?”

“No,” Sapnap said slowly, the first word he’d bothered to grit out since they left the forest in the horizon behind them. He was not one for pensive quiet—or any sort of quiet, really. Whatever that was, with the green-eyed god, had rattled him down to his bones, enough to chase him into the most terrifying place of all: his own mind. George would have never let him live it down, if only he didn’t feel that exact same fear, breathing down his neck. “No, you weren’t imagining things. That was fucked up. Something was—Something was *wrong*.”

“Did you...” George almost swallowed down the question, but then he saw the desperate hope in Sapnap’s eyes, as if he was waiting and begging for George to say it first, just so he wouldn’t have to. “Did you almost want to give him everything he asked for?”

Sapnap sighed, and George pretended not to hear the relief in his exhale. “Yeah,” he said. “Almost.”

“*Who was that?*”

They were the only two souls for miles; the snow was their only company bitter and cold and inanimate. But when Sapnap spoke again, it was in a whisper, as if something here might sell their secrets to the highest bidder.

“I don’t know.” Sapnap tipped his head back, his dark eyes scanning the sky for the constellations that had been his guide all night. But the sun was rising somewhere in the east, washing out the stars until the only ones left were those that burned brightest, alone in their brilliance. In the light of dawn, the war god almost looked sad. “Whoever it was, I fucking hope I never see him again for the rest of my life.”

They found a town by noon.

It was small, fledgling, with flimsy fences demarcating half a hundred houses at most. The locals said it used to only be a trading post, until someone had the idea to build an inn, and then a tavern, and then a church.

“A tavern before a church?” Sapnap asked with a wry grin. “Sounds about right.”

The snow was coming down in earnest now, piling against wooden doors and on the packed-dirt trail that served as the town’s main road. Parents were hurrying their children inside, and what few storefronts there were were being boarded up by frantic hands. With their heads ducked against the

wind, George and Sapnap made their way through the town, intending to leave it behind as they'd left most towns behind. There were few places that welcomed strangers, fewer still that didn't balk at their weapons. This was not a place meant for staying.

But then the wind blew stronger, almost knocking George off his feet. Sapnap managed to grab him by the front of his cloak just in time, hauling him towards the closest awning of what looked to be the town hall. They caught their breaths for a moment, watching the snowfall turn violent. George could barely see two feet in front of him, just a feeble suggestion of distant buildings in a world turned white.

"It's a blizzard," Sapnap shouted over the howling winds. "We have to find somewhere to sit this out."

George gestured to the town hall behind them. "What about this?"

"Are you kidding? It looks like it's made out of driftwood. Might as well just be a coffin."

"This whole town's made of driftwood!"

"There has to be somewhere that won't collapse on us. Something built to survive—"

And then they heard it. Somehow, above all else, they heard it.

"Oh," said Sapnap. "You can't be serious."

George laughed. "It seems the universe heard you, Sapnap."

In the distance, church bells were ringing.

They found the church in the heart of the town, the only thing made of mortar and marble instead of wood and rusted nails. Sapnap could say what he wanted about mortals and their misguided faith, but there was something to be said about how—for better or for worse—this town with its slipshod houses and rickety fences believed in something enough to build it to be permanent. The snowstorm could bury the rest of them alive, but their belltower would keep ringing. How devoted they were, and how George pitied them for it. How George envied.

Two gods stumbled into the church, and George thought it sounded like a joke, or the beginning of a tragedy. Either one, he wasn't laughing.

He shrugged off his heavy cloak and tossed it over the back of the nearest pew. Sapnap followed suit before rolling his shoulders back, sighing at the satisfying *pop* of his bones settling in place.

"Gods, how long have we been walking?" Sapnap asked, jumping over the pew to drape himself over it, boots kicked up against the back of the next bench.

Ignoring his question, George began wandering between the aisles, keeping his eyes on the stained-glass windows that ran the length of the church. They told some sort of story George couldn't follow—some other god's life and miseries, memorialized but rendered unrecognizable by time and fickle memory. Beyond the multicolored panes, the storm raged on.

"How long do you think this town will survive?" George asked. His voice bounced off the high ceilings, echoing loudly over the empty church.

"Hard to say," Sapnap said from his seat. "It could collapse in a week, or it could be an empire if

it's stubborn enough."

"Are those the only choices?" George stopped at a window and saw himself in the scarlet-stained reflection, his mouth twisted with bitterness. "To be forgotten, or to be great?"

"Yes," Sarnap said simply.

George whirled around, only to find Sarnap exactly where he'd left him, still sprawled across the pew. But he was looking at George.

"Do you really think that?" George said. "That you have to be great, or nothing?"

Sarnap shrugged. "I mean, that's what we're doing, aren't we? We're being great."

"Until I go," George whispered, the church walls carrying his confession to Sarnap. "Until I sleep again. And then I'll be forgotten. Is that it?"

Sarnap stared unblinking at George for a long moment, his expression unreadable. And then he said, "Are you planning on going soon?"

The truth caught in George's throat.

Sarnap watched him struggle with it, something like disappointment flashing in his eyes. "You've never grown roots of your own, have you?"

The smoke of a burning forest, clinging to George wherever he went. "Can you blame me?" he croaked.

"I'm not blaming you," Sarnap said, and George thought maybe he meant it. "I'm not some starry-eyed idiot, George. I know this won't last." He swung his feet back on the ground, his boots thudding dully against the marble floor. He stood and made his way over to George, so they were standing shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the windows. They watched the snow pound against the stained glass, and it was the closest they would ever come to a shared worship. "You'll go your way, and I'll go mine, and maybe, if we're lucky, we'll see each other once or twice before some random fuck gets a lucky hit on us and the curtains fall. Maybe even by then, you'll already have a name for mourning."

"I can't believe you remember that conversation. I didn't even think you were taking me seriously then."

Sarnap scoffed, but didn't retaliate.

"You know," George said softly, "I don't think I'd mind you leaving, but I also don't think I'd mind knowing you for the rest of my life."

"That's a long time."

"A lot of time to rethink what is undoubtedly a stupid decision."

"No," Sarnap said, grinning sideways at George. "Too late. You're stuck with me."

"Unfortunate," George said, but he was smiling back.

They stayed by the window until the storm passed. They made their plans, not really knowing if either of them had any intention of keeping it. They'd head west, maybe, George suggested. Or east, or wherever it was that seemed most promising. He was tired of the cold. He missed the

forests.

“I’m not sure I’m meant to be here,” George said, as the last of the snowflakes settled on the ground outside.

“In this church or in the north?”

“Both, I guess.” He cast his gaze around the marble hall, feeling something inside him crumble and give way at the silent altar, the empty pews. There was a pathetic-looking bouquet of flowers, already wilted, sitting at the foot of a statue in the corner. An offering to the god this place was built for, maybe. Perhaps even a prayer against the storm that went unanswered. George wanted to believe there were kind gods out there, but this church’s patron was not one of them. “There’s nothing for me here.”

“Okay,” Sapnap said easily. “Then let’s find something for you.”

As Sapnap went to collect their cloaks, George found himself wandering towards those flowers. They were barely more than twigs, really, with a few young buds only half-sprouted. George passed his fingers over them, watching them slowly unfurl into white petals. They would still rot, in the end, but at least they’d be beautiful for a few days more. George considered it his one good act of the decade.

“George?” Sapnap called from down the aisle.

“On my way.” As George turned to go, the sun outside broke free from the clouds, igniting everything with daylight. It burst through the stained glass, and for a moment, the world was alight with color. A flash of green slanted over George’s eyes, drawing his attention to the windows that told the story of some nameless god. But now, in the fresh light, he found it was not nameless at all. On the window, drawn in broken glass, was the boy he’d met just the night before, his green eyes burning through George.

And in his cupped palms, he offered a spider.

It took them three years to find him again.

It was an accident, really. A coincidence. And, as many things in George’s life did, it started in a forest.

It was not a dead forest, with its trees half-buried in snow. It was *alive*, and it called to George like a light in the dark. After years of crowded port cities, sleepy towns, and camps of soldiers that looked at him and Sapnap as if they were the last lifeboats on a sinking ship, it was a relief to walk under the foliage, hearing nothing but the distant rumble of a river, and birdsong, and Sapnap’s incessant nagging.

“—lost,” he said, continuing a rant that George hadn’t realized he’d started. “We’re *lost*, and you’re too stubborn to admit it. I told you, I *told you*, we took a wrong turn at that outpost a few miles back, but did you listen? ‘Trust me, Sapnap,’”—and here he took on a laughably inaccurate imitation of George’s voice—“‘I know what I’m doing, I can feel the plants underground.’ Well, maybe your plants are wrong and stupid, have you ever considered that, George?”

“You weren’t complaining when those plants kept you from dehydrating in that desert.”

“The desert *you* got us lost in!”

George passed under a branch, ignoring Sapnap's yelp of pain as that same branch whipped back and connected with his forehead.

"You *fucker*," Sapnap yelled after him. "I should have let you die in that sandstorm."

It was a familiar thing, a reliable thing. Over the years, George had come to tolerate it and—though he'd never say it out loud, even under whatever threat Sapnap could spend all his creativity concocting—he'd even come to enjoy it. It was a simple, petty truth: it was fun, annoying Sapnap, and it made George laugh. What other reason did he need to do it?

Still ignoring Sapnap's shouting, George made his way through the forest, breathing in the cool air. He let his fingers trail over the trees as he went, finding comfort in the way the rough bark scraped against his skin. This, too, was a familiar thing. George wondered at what point he'd begun to think of Sapnap and the forests with the same affection.

He found the river easily enough. It was a stiller and smaller than George expected, but he didn't mind. When he walked to the edge, shook off his boots and sunk his feet into the water, it was still as cold as he wanted it to be. He let himself sigh and lay back against the grass of the riverbank, thinking one word, over and over, like a prayer. *Home, home, home.*

His eyes open, he saw Sapnap standing over him.

"If you wanted to find a forest," Sapnap said, "you could have just told me."

"We could build a house here, you know," George said quietly, watching Sapnap's face carefully. "Just somewhere to put our things in. Somewhere to return to. We could call it a shed, if that makes it less sentimental for you."

He thought Sapnap would laugh at him, and George would have accepted it. But Sapnap's brows only furrowed as he contemplated George's words.

"It would be good, having somewhere to put all my weapons," Sapnap said.

"Of course that would be your first thought."

"And what do you mean by that, George?"

"Nothing. Just that I know you well."

And Sapnap rolled his eyes, and laughed, just as George knew he would.

"Move over," Sapnap said, kicking his own boots off.

"There's enough riverbank for the both of us, Sapnap."

"I don't care. Move over."

George scoffed, but rolled aside to give Sapnap his room. Sapnap sat down on the bank, plunging his feet into the water with George's.

"*Gods*," he sighed. "That's nice."

"You ever think it's weird?" George asked idly, crossing his arms below his head to serve as a pillow. "We say 'gods' when we curse as if that isn't what we are. It'd be like if mortals went around saying '*humans*' every time they knock something over."

“You say very useless things sometimes, George.”

“It was just an observation.” George closed his eyes, letting the quiet crashing of the river wash over him like a lullaby. It was almost enough to rock him to sleep, if it weren’t for Sapnap’s steady breathing, right beside him. There was something worth staying awake for now, George reminded himself. Someone worth keeping his eyes open.

“Hey,” Sapnap said quietly.

“Yes, Sapnap?”

“Do you remember that night in the north, with the forest? When we met that god that was just creepily familiar—like maybe you’d seen his face in a nightmare you can only vaguely remember, or something.”

“And you lost your shit on him, and you said you never wanted to see him again,” George finished. “Yes, I remember.”

“Okay, good,” said Sapnap, “because I’m pretty sure that’s him across the river.”

George’s eyes snapped open, and he hauled himself up to stare at the man standing on the opposite bank.

“*Dream?*” George said incredulously, and the other god had the audacity to wave.

He looked just as George remembered him, his golden hair windswept and his grin mischievous. In George’s memory, he was always in the snow, a splash of violent color against the white landscape. It was strange now, watching him move between trees, their foliage the same color as his eyes, *alive*, in George’s domain. George felt his chest lurch, everything in him protesting at Dream’s casual reappearance. He had the urge to grab Sapnap by the shoulders and run.

But he couldn’t bring himself to move at all.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Dream called. “Must be fate.”

“Must be,” Sapnap said, his words laced with mockery. “How’d you find us, Dream?”

“It’s a small world.”

“No, it’s not.”

“For us, it is,” Dream said, striding across the river. When George and Sapnap recoiled defensively, he paused, right there in the middle of the river with the water coming up to his knees. It could have knocked him over. It *should* have knocked him over. But he stayed where he was, looking beseechingly across the river at George and Sapnap, and George felt that tug again, starting deep within his chest. It was—It was like something had reached in for his heart, and *pulled*, without mercy. “Hear me out. Can you give me that?”

To his own surprise, George said, “Fine.”

Sapnap glanced at him with a look that asked him if he knew what he was doing. George’s shrug replied he did not.

“I think,” Dream said slowly, “it would be fun, wouldn’t it? You think you two have seen the world, but you don’t even know the half of it. I can show you, if you’d let me. So, let me.” He

spread his arms wide, as if presenting the whole world to them. *Look at all I can give you. Let me give it to you. "Please."*

George would turn that moment over and over and over again in the long years that followed: how Dream had said that final word, and how it had sealed their fates; how George had heard Sapnap's sharp intake of breath, as if he'd been struck, and how George had felt the same; how he suddenly realized how little he truly knew, how he suddenly remembered how small he'd felt standing under the stained glass window of an empty church; how easy it was for everything else to fall away, distrust turning into a fierce loyalty as he remembered Sapnap's words, from half a hundred years ago, whispering back to him like a late echo, *you have a thing for lonely little animals*; how Dream, in that moment, with his knees in the water and his face seemingly unguarded, seemed like the loneliest of them all. George would try, desperately, to make the moment make sense, to reconcile the chaos in his head with what he said next.

"Go on," George said.

Dream tilted his head to the side as he considered George. "We gods have to stick together, don't you think so? I meant what I said. I'd help you win a war, if that's what it will take."

"Are you really that desperate?" Sapnap snapped, but his voice had lost its edge. He sounded dull. He sounded lost. He sounded like someone George didn't know.

The water rushed in. "Maybe," Dream said, with a shrug that tried to be nonchalant. "Or I'm just bored—take your pick. But it'll be worth it. I can prove it."

And in the end, it was George who threw the doors open for him. It was George who let him in.

It was George who fucked it all up.

"You have six days," George said.

Dream began to smile.

Chapter End Notes

yeah lol sorry for being late. *gestures vaguely* college, you know?

but anyway here it is! it's mostly fluff this chapter, because im an angel wooooo

anyway. yeah. see u next chapter, whenever that is lol and thanks for your patience and lovely comments :) they mean the world to me

i was housed by your warmth (thus transformed)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“He’s going to kill us.”

Sapnap’s boots thudded after George, crushing fallen leaves and tangled bushes with each step of misdirected anger. George didn’t have to spare him a backwards glance to imagine the look on his face, brows pulled low over scorching eyes, like a line of storm clouds hanging above twin active volcanoes. George thought maybe some of that fury would do him good, but when he searched his chest, there was a haze thrown over everything, muffling even his own heartbeat.

When he looked down at his hands, he did not know to whom they belonged to.

“George.” Sapnap’s voice, close behind him. “Did you hear me? He’s going to lead us into some cave somewhere and roll a boulder over the entrance or something—”

“You don’t know that,” George said, even as his eyes scanned ahead for the green-eyed god, making sure he had not altered his course. There he was, steady as always: walking far enough ahead to give Sapnap and George some semblance of privacy, but close enough for George to follow his footsteps on the well-worn path through the trees. It was an old path, almost completely overgrown, but it cut stubbornly through the forest still, almost daring the weeds to grow over it. How long had it been undisturbed? And why had Dream decided to disturb it now?

“And what do *you* know?” Sapnap challenged. “You picked this—this *stranger* up from the middle of the river, and you give him six days to, what, to prove himself? Six days to plot how to kill us?”

“It can’t hurt,” George replied evenly. Even then, he’d known he’d someday be proven wrong about that.

“Six days of pretending he doesn’t make my skin crawl,” Sapnap continued, ignoring George. “Six days of keeping a rabid wolf around, just because sweet George with his bleeding heart can’t help but drag wounded animals around. Fucking six days of trying to tame something that could bite your head off. Why even six days, George?”

“Because that’s how long it took with you.”

George heard Sapnap pause behind him. George continued walking.

“But he’s not me,” he heard Sapnap say quietly. “He’s not—I’m not like him.”

“Hey.” Dream sounded so nonchalant, George could forget he’d heard each word said about him. George didn’t think he cared, though. Dream seemed to him like the kind of god who reveled in heresy as much as worship. “We’re almost there, by the way.”

“Where?” Sapnap demanded, as he’d been demanding all afternoon.

After shaking off the strange fascination that had overtaken them by the riverside, the mistrust had settled in quickly, and Sapnap made his anger known as Dream, with a simple tilt of his head, led them deeper and deeper into the forest. When Sapnap had asked, “For *what*,” Dream had smiled that smile that looked like he was hiding gritted teeth underneath, and said, “It’s a surprise.” And for all his petulant protestations, Sapnap had let himself be led anyway. George could spit that

back in his face, just to shut him up, but George knew it wouldn't be fair.

He was not a lot of things to Sapnap, but he was always fair.

And now here they were, being led, following someone neither of them trusted, unable to answer the simple question of why.

“You'll see,” Dream said simply.

From the corner of his eye, George could see Sapnap trying to get his attention. But instead George made a vague gesture towards Dream, pulled his coat closer around his body, and said, “Go, then. We're right behind you.”

They walked for a few minutes more in silence, broken only by Sapnap kicking over a handful of moss-covered rocks that had been meticulously stacked on top of each other by the roadside. The rocks disappeared into the dim, each echoing clatter stabbing at George. George glared back at Sapnap, who merely arched an eyebrow, clearly looking for another fight. George wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Besides, he wouldn't expect a god of war to find sanctity in something as mundane as a tower of stones, made by hands that were most likely long gone—a special kind of immortality, cut short by Sapnap's temper. *Sad, sentimental George with his bleeding heart*, he'd call it again, *weeping for pebbles*.

Another minute, and the smothering darkness of the forest ended in a bright clearing.

George blinked rapidly in the new light, and when his vision cleared, he saw Dream first, his outline stark against the house that stood right behind him.

“What—” George said, unsure if the building wasn't some illusion. But when he blinked again, the house was still there. It wasn't too impressive—most of it had been swallowed by ivy, weeds, and other consequences of time. Its door had rotted away, revealing a dark interior overrun with cobwebs. Rubble remained of what used to be the chimney.

Optimists would call it cozy, enough for a family. But Sapnap, coming in behind George, scoffed and said, “That looks pathetic.”

Ignoring him, George turned to Dream, who looked so damn proud of himself, and asked, “How did you know this was here?”

Dream shrugged. “It belonged to an old friend. I'm sure he won't mind us using it.” At George's blank look, Dream continued, “You said you wanted a house. Here's a house.”

“When did I say that?”

“This afternoon, by the river.”

“You were eavesdropping on us?”

Dream waved his hand dismissively. “That's not the point. You said you wanted a house,” he repeated firmly. “So, I found you one.”

“Oh,” Sapnap said, “so you're going to be like that, huh?”

It turned out they had to worry less about Dream smothering them in their sleep, and more about Dream smothering them with unwanted generosity. *If this is even generosity*, thought George, glancing mistrustfully at the dilapidated building then back at Dream. There were strings attached

here, but George couldn't figure out *where*.

"Here," Dream said, reaching for George and Sapnap. When George recoiled and Sapnap stepped purposefully between them, making the divide clear, Dream drew back quickly, shaking his head as if telling himself no.

George thought he looked almost sad. Almost.

"Here," Dream repeated, walking backwards towards the house, his hands in his pockets. "Let me give you a tour."

That was how three gods found themselves in the middle of a broken house that creaked and protested with each step they took, each rusty nail and splintered banister making it perfectly clear that they were not welcome here. George found himself lingering by the door, watching Sapnap pass in and out of the rooms, undoubtedly looking for signs that this was all a trap. Dream placed himself by what used to be the kitchen, keeping his hands behind him, letting Sapnap burnt out his suspicion.

"It needs a bit of work," Dream said, kicking at a pile of termite-ridden wood that could, in another life, have been a dinner table.

"A *bit*?" Sapnap said, stopping at the foot of a staircase that had lost most of its steps. Staring unblinkingly at Dream, Sapnap curled his fingers into a fist and slammed it at the nearest wall. It went right through without any resistance. His hand still in the wall, Sapnap sneered and said, "Yeah, I'd say it needs *a bit* of work."

"Great," Dream said, looking unimpressed, "you just made more broken things for us to fix."

"*Us*?" Sapnap said. "Oh, no, this is all you. That was the deal, wasn't it? You'd do anything, wasn't that right? Anything to let you stay with us?" Sapnap drew his hand back and began shaking it free of debris. Brushing dust from his fingers, he met Dream's gaze and said, "Prove it. Fix this house. From the doorway to the roof. Make it nice and pretty. And maybe, *maybe* then, we'll consider giving you the time of day."

Something dark flashed behind Dream's eyes, something that made George step forward and warn, "*Sapnap*—", something that made Sapnap begin reaching for his own sword. But it was over quickly, gone in the next second, replaced by an easy smile, and George was left reeling in the wake of the first emotion of Dream's that he believed to be true. George had no name for it, but whatever it was, he didn't want to see it again.

"Okay," Dream said, sounding terrifyingly composed. "Fine. I'm a man of my word. Do you want flowers in the vases, too? Silk curtains?" He stepped towards Sapnap. "Warm blankets? Go on. Tell me how to build your safety net."

"And what the hell do you mean by that?"

Dream considered Sapnap at length before quietly saying, "I think, one of these days, you'll find a problem you can't solve with your sword, and you'll thank me for offering you a soft place to land."

Sapnap stared at him for one long moment. Then, "You know, Dream, I prefer my threats upfront. If you got something to say, say it loud and clear."

"Okay," George said, still standing at the threshold, his hand curled around the tear in the wood

where the door looked to have been half-ripped off its hinges. It was a strange, violent scar on a place that George would otherwise have thought died a natural death. It could have been the bite of splinters against his palm, or the way Dream and Sapnap looked at each other, but George had the strangest feeling that something bad had happened here, and something bad would happen again. “*Okay*. Nobody’s threatening anyone. Sapnap, come here.” When Sapnap only dug his heels in, glaring at Dream like he was determined to get the other god to flinch first, George repeated, “Sapnap, *come here*.”

Something in George’s voice got Sapnap’s attention. With one last dark look at Dream, the god of war rolled his eyes and stalked glumly towards George. Dream watched him go silently, still standing in the kitchen with the broken windows and broken table and broken everything.

“*You came to us*,” George reminded Dream. “We have all the power here.”

He wished he didn’t feel like he was lying when he said it. He wished Dream didn’t look like he knew it, too.

“Sapnap’s right—you have to prove what you’ve been saying. Six days, right?” George looked around the house once more. Beneath the dirt and weeds and rust, it had good bones and was not beyond salvation yet. “You’re not off to a great start, but you have six days to make it up to us. Fix this house. Earn two friends. Sounds like an easy enough deal.”

For a moment, George thought Dream would do what gods usually did: scoff and roll his eyes and walk away, muttering about all the other grander things he could be wasting his time on. Maybe if he was like the others, George and Sapnap would be free of him, and he’d remain a strange memory both of them would dance around for the rest of their immortal lives.

But Dream had to be different.

He took a deep breath, sighed it all out. “Fine,” he said, his green eyes flitting between George and Sapnap like he was trying to sing along to a song that had changed its tune halfway through a verse. “If that’s what it takes.”

“Great.”

“*Great*.”

George turned and grabbed Sapnap’s arm, leading him out of the house. “We’ll be watching. Have a fun week, Dream.”

“Whatever you say, George. Oh, and Sapnap?” Dream called after them. “In case you didn’t notice, I don’t really like being talked down to. I’d appreciate it if you never do it again.”

Sapnap waved without looking back at him. “And I’d appreciate it if you shove it.”

“I’d appreciate it if you shove it?” George repeated, when they’d found themselves a tree far enough away to be out of Dream’s earshot, but close enough to still see the clearing. George watched Sapnap began to scale the trunk, grunting with effort and cursing every time his boots slipped down the bark. Eventually, Sapnap found enough of a foothold to hoist himself up the branches. He leaned down to offer George a hand, but George just stared up at him blankly.

“What?” Sapnap demanded.

“*I’d appreciate it if you shove it*,” George repeated again, more forcefully, biting out each

syllable.

“What’s your problem?” Sapnap asked.

“You’re acting like a child, that’s my problem.”

“I’m acting like—? George, you aren’t seriously taking *his* side, are you?”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side.”

“What?” Sapnap looked stricken. “That’s not... You’re supposed to take *my* side. George, what the hell?” Again, more desperately, “*What the hell?*”

“You’re antagonizing him for no reason. He’s trying, can’t you see that? At least give him a chance. That’s all he wants. Just give him what he—”

The words caught in George’s throat. He considered Sapnap’s hand, still outstretched towards him, and he had the strangest feeling of falling forward. As if he’d been straining against something that suddenly snapped, leaving him stumbling. Slowly, hesitantly, George curled his fingers around Sapnap’s, and the warmth of it was unfamiliar. George’s brows furrowed, and he felt panic grab hold of him.

Why couldn’t he remember the feeling of Sapnap’s hand?

“George?”

George blinked up at him, his head still reeling.

It was there. Memory—trickling back in, like a banished dog creeping its way back home, slinking quietly in the dark, careful not to make a single noise. It was there. *It was still there.* George wrapped his hand more securely around Sapnap’s.

“Pull me up,” he said.

Sapnap did, without question.

They settled on the highest branch, shoulders brushing, their legs dangling over the edge. George looked down. It would be a long, painful fall.

He was not afraid.

“I’m sorry,” George said, after a moment of silence. “I’m not on his side. Of course I’m not taking his side. I’m taking *our* side. I’m sorry for hesitating on that.”

Sapnap made a vague sound, but he wasn’t meeting George’s eyes.

“Come on. Sapnap. Look at me.”

“Why,” Sapnap said, “does it seem like I’m already losing you to him?”

George blinked. “You’re what?”

Sapnap looked exasperated to even be discussing it, but he continued, “If you’re giving him a chance to be our friend, or traveling companion, or whatever the fuck, I need you to promise me it won’t always be like this. I need you to promise you won’t gang up on me. Fighting you alone is already pretty fucking annoying; I don’t want to have to deal with two of you.”

“Oh.” George sighed. “So, you’re just making sure you’re always the winner.”

Sapnap glanced at him, and for a second, George thought he was going to say something more heartfelt than, “Yeah. That’s it.”

“Alright, Sapnap,” George said, surprised that he still had room in him to be disappointed. “You win. Is that what you want to hear? You’re always right and Dream will always be wrong, and you’ll always have my vote.”

“You sound pissed.”

“I’m not pissed. I’m just wondering if you’ll even do the same for me.”

“Of course I would.”

“You don’t trust my calls, Sapnap,” George snapped. “Do you think I don’t notice you dragging your feet on every decision I make? It makes me feel *stupid*.” Sapnap opened his mouth to interject, but George was a forest fire, raging on. He didn’t even know who he was angry at: Sapnap, or himself. “It’s always been you leading the way. On the few times I try to take the reins, you’re always fighting for it back, like you’re afraid I’m going to send us hurtling off a cliff.”

“Well, to be fair—”

George threw his hands up. “One time! We fell off a cliff *one time*! And that wasn’t even my fault entirely, but you still act like it was. I’ll be the first to admit that I don’t always choose the best road, but it would be nice if, *for once*, my best friend still followed me down it anyway without whining every five seconds.”

A heavy silence fell over them.

And then, with a smug grin spreading over his face, Sapnap said, “I’m your best friend?”

“I will throw off you off this tree. I will have you trampled.”

“Aw, come on, you wouldn’t do that to your *best friend*.”

“Sapnap, I’m serious.”

“And *I’m* your *best friend*—”

Even if Sapnap did not mean to, his mockery sliced across George’s skin like a sword. George turned away before he could see the bitterness on George’s face.

He remembered Sapnap’s hands clearly now. They could be the steadiest thing, keeping George upright, keeping George alive. But sometimes—*gods*, sometimes, he could be so cruel.

And there went George’s heart, bleeding again.

Finally noticing George’s silence, Sapnap’s laughter subsided to halfhearted chuckles, then to an uncomfortable quiet. “George?”

“Just let me have this one thing,” George said softly, leaning against the trunk of the tree, watching the forest spread out beneath him. He could see the house, half its roof caved in. He could see Dream wandering outside, looking up at the damage. “Can you not doubt me for this one thing? I could be wrong about him. Gods, I’m *sure* I’m wrong to give him a chance. But we’ve always done your bad ideas. This time, can we let *me* make the mistake?”

Neither of them spoke for a long time. They were watching the same thing now: Dream, down in the clearing, walking the perimeter of the house he'd found for them, looking so small from this height that it was difficult to imagine ever being afraid of him.

"Is that what this is about?" Sapnap asked. "You just want me to be less of an asshole about your bad decisions."

"A tall order, I understand," George said dryly.

"George, you know I'm just trying to keep us safe."

"I'm not asking you to stop doing that. I'm asking you to trust me, even when I'm being unreasonable. Even when I don't trust myself at all. I'm asking you to treat me like how I treat you." George wondered at what point in his life, exactly, had he begun to care about the way he was being treated. But the answer was sitting right beside him.

Sapnap made him care. For better or for worse.

"This isn't about *him*," George said, gesturing to the golden-haired god below them. "But, fine, since he's here, let's make him the example. Give me the six days I promised him, just to prove you're capable of giving *anything*."

Too far, George realized, the moment he let the words fly. He saw them land heavily, saw Sapnap try to hide his flinch, saw his eyes lose a little bit of their light. *I've gone too far*.

And still, something in him, something dark and ugly and divine, wanted to push further.

"Okay," Sapnap said softly. "I hear you."

"Good," said George, "that's all I wanted," and this time it didn't taste like a lie.

"You know," Sapnap said, "he's just trying to buy our affection, luring us in with a pretty house. What's next? Jewels? Poetry? An ode to our many triumphs?"

Just like that, the anger and frustration and hurt dissipated around them like smoke. It lingered, on their clothes and on their skin and on the tight edge to Sapnap's voice. But they could leave it behind, wash it off, soon enough. For now, they sat in the thick of it, with Sapnap swinging his legs idly back and forth, and George thinking, *This is why gods don't make good friends*. Whatever they did, they did in extremes. Sapnap would kill a kingdom for him, but Sapnap wouldn't listen to him. Sapnap could be loyal until the bitterest end, but Sapnap couldn't be *nice*.

And someday, that wouldn't be enough to keep George still.

"Yeah," George said, smiling, hesitantly joining in on the joke. "Shiny things for your magpie heart."

"I thought you said magpies didn't care for that shit."

"I can forgive a little inaccuracy now and then." George looked down, finding the clearing, finding Dream. From up in the trees, everything looked new and full of promise. "Do you think it'll work? If he's trying to buy our affection, do you think we'll have a price?"

Sapnap knocked his shoulder against George's. "Guess we'll have to wait and see."

It didn't take them long to realize that whatever Dream was the god of, it definitely was not

construction. Or patience. By sundown of the first day, they'd gotten bored of watching him pace around the clearing. He'd sometimes head into the house, then out again, then in, and by the fourth time it happened, Sapnap had choked on his laughter and said, "He doesn't know what he's doing."

"He still has a few days," George had reminded him. "Maybe he'll get things in order by tomorrow."

He had not. Nor the day after that.

By the fourth day, George was feeling more and more like he was watching a sinking ship.

"He's *pathetic*," Sapnap said, sounding absolutely delighted. They were leaning on opposite sides of a tree just paces from the clearing, not even bothering to make themselves scarce. "What's he doing now? Oh, gods. He doesn't know how to use a hammer."

George glanced at him warily. "Do *you*? And war hammers don't count."

"I mean, it's the same philosophy, isn't it? Just swing until you hit the right spot."

"I can't argue with that." George watched as Dream tried wrestling a rectangular slab of wood against the threshold of the house. They'd watched him make it the day before; it had taken them an embarrassingly long time to realize it was meant to be a door. "Oh. It's going to fall over."

The three of them—George and Sapnap and Dream—watched as the door slipped from Dream's hands and topple backwards into the house, landing with a heavy thud. Dream stood with the hammer in his hand, staring at the door-less doorframe.

"He's going to cry," Sapnap said.

"He is *not*."

"George, look at him. Look at the *house*. He hasn't even fixed the door. If it were *me* getting knocked on my ass by a *door* after all my big talk, I'd be so humiliated I'd just never show my face again"

"I can hear you," Dream said, still not moving.

"I know, you little bastard," Sapnap called back, eyes wild with triumph. "How's my safety net looking, Dream?"

"It's looking fine, Sapnap. A little broken and frayed around the edges, just like you."

"See, I'd get angry at that, if only it was coming from someone whose doors don't look like dried dog shit."

At that, Dream finally turned to face them. George expected him to be angry, but he just looked resigned. His shoulders slumped, his eyes heavy, Dream confessed, "I'm not built for this."

"Oh, boo *hoo*—"

"Sapnap," George said quietly.

Sapnap rolled his eyes, but closed his mouth anyway. George stepped forwards, moving towards Dream and the house, knowing without a doubt that Sapnap was right behind him, begrudgingly following.

“Dream,” George said. “Do you want help?”

“Are you offering?” Dream said, tossing the hammer into the air over and over again. George watched it spin in the air, the sunlight glinting off its iron edge. It was a mesmerizing blur, almost enough to distract from Dream’s question.

“Hey, come on,” Sapnap said, “that wasn’t the deal.”

George ignored him. “It’s getting a little embarrassing, watching you flounder,” he said, shrugging his battle axe off its sheath at his back. The bone handle slipped easily into his hand, a familiar weight. “Consider this me putting you out of your misery.” He turned back to Sapnap to add, “You don’t have to help.”

Sapnap held his gaze, a challenge igniting between them, before rolling his eyes and stomping towards Dream. He grabbed the hammer from Dream’s hand, and for a moment George thought he might hit Dream over the head with it, just to end this strange dance they’d found themselves in the middle of. But then Sapnap stalked over to the doorway, grabbed the fallen door and set it against the threshold.

Without looking at Dream or George, Sapnap crooked his finger at them.

“Nails,” he demanded.

Dream and George glanced at each other, and George thought maybe he saw Dream smiling. But then Dream was turning to a small box—pilfered from somewhere inside the house, though how Dream knew where to find it, George didn’t know—and took out a handful of iron nails that had miraculously avoided rusting. He handed them over to Sapnap, who began working on the door like it had done something to offend him. He hammered the nails in with more force than it warranted, settling some strange vendetta, but when he stepped back, the door was still standing.

He glared at Dream and tossed the hammer back to him. Dream caught it out of the air, his eyes on Sapnap.

“There,” Sapnap gritted out. “What else do you need help with, Your Highness?”

And this time, when Dream smiled, George knew for sure it wasn’t a trick of the light.

“Well, you know, there’s this hole in the roof...”

There were many things George would remember for the rest of his life. The first time he’d ever woken up. The first time a flower had bloomed between his palms. The flicker of firelight in the distance, growing closer and closer towards his forest, and him, young and sweet and naïve, thinking, *I have visitors?* The burning. Smoke in his lungs. Warm fur against his cheek. Berries rotting in his pockets. Meeting Sapnap. Losing Sapnap.

But that afternoon on the fourth day he promised Dream was a fractured thing, a mosaic of indistinct memories that didn’t quite fit together. He would remember heading into the forest, axe in hand, and apologizing to a tall birch tree before sinking the axe’s blade into his trunk. He wouldn’t remember it falling, but he’d remember Sapnap helping him haul it back to the house.

He would remember Sapnap saying, “I thought you were against harming nature.”

He would remember responding, “This is different. They understand their purpose.”

He would remember the silence, the rustling of fallen leaves against the grass. Then, “Sometimes, George, I don’t think you’re aware of how callous you can be.”

Hypocrite, hypocrite, hypocrite—but George didn’t know which of them he was saying that to.

There were gaps in his memories after that. He wouldn’t recall the labor. They were dragging fallen trees towards a waiting Dream, and then the memory skipped, like someone had reached in and unraveled some threads straight in the middle of the tapestry. The day moved too slow. Too fast. Not at all. He was making a table. He was climbing the broken roof. He was looking straight down at the ruined house below, and Dream was looking back. A blink, and he was back on the ground, standing in the middle of newly made furniture, shoddily done but it would be enough for now. Chairs, a table, a chest for Sapnap’s weapons. *Somewhere to put our things in. Somewhere to return to.* Another blink, and he was watching the sun set on the fourth day, and Sapnap was sitting across Dream from a campfire George didn’t recall anyone lighting.

When did that happen? George thought, watching Dream offer Sapnap a single berry, watching Sapnap swallow it down without hesitation. *When?*

He wouldn’t remember the joke Dream told Sapnap that had him laughing like he hated himself for it, but he would remember feeling like he was watching them from somewhere very far away.

And when they carried on their work by torchlight, George found himself drifting towards Dream, a question dying on his tongue as he watched Dream hammering away to patch the hole Sapnap’s fist had made on the wall. Dream turned to him, his face half-shadow, his hammer hovering mid-air.

“George?”

“You know how to use a hammer,” George said numbly.

Dream looked down at the hammer in his hands, his mouth twisting as he realized he’d been caught.

“Well, would you look at that,” Dream said. “I guess I do.”

And there was nothing left to be remembered of that night, nothing left to look back on and wonder about, no scarred tissue to run his fingers against and think, *This is where he cut it out of me. This is the exit wound of his strings. This is the beginning of the end.*

The fifth morning found them standing outside a house that actually looked like a house. It needed more work still, inside and out—the chimney, the roof, the walls, the rooms inside that they’d eventually have to divide between three people.

“I mean,” Sapnap said, cocking his head to the side, “if you maybe squinted, it doesn’t look too awful.”

“Yeah,” Dream said. “If you also ignored how the chimney is definitely leaning to the side.”

“Hey, that was George’s job.”

“No, it wasn’t,” George said, lying through his teeth.

“Whatever,” Dream said, throwing his hands up. “It’s a start. It’s a *start*, okay?” He turned to grin at George, and that was when George realized Dream was standing between him and Sapnap.

And again, *When did that happen?*

“And I still have a day and a half,” he continued. “How am I doing, George? Have I proven myself yet?”

“You still have a day and a half,” George repeated back at him.

Dream smiled like he knew George had already made up his mind.

Sapnap stretched his arms over his head. “Ask *me* if you’ve proven yourself.”

“Sapnap, have I proven myself?”

“No,” Sapnap said at once. “Fix George’s shitty chimney and then ask me again.”

“I’ll ask you as many times as I need to.”

They stood in the quiet clearing for half a thousand heartbeats, George and Sapnap and Dream between them, three gods in the forest with splinters in their palms from building a house. Just somewhere to put their things in, and somewhere to return to. Not a home, but something close to it.

“Let’s name it,” George said.

Sapnap looked around Dream to meet George’s gaze, grinning at a joke only both of them understood. That was one thing Dream couldn’t take away from them.

“The Shit Shack,” Sapnap suggested. “Crap Cottage. Lopsided Lodge.”

They looked, without knowing why they looked, to Dream.

“You know what?” Dream said, his face flushed under the sun, his hair curling around his face like flower petals. “Let’s call it the Community House.”

“That’s stupid,” Sapnap said. “I like it.”

And George thought he maybe loved it, too.

Chapter End Notes

im a fluff writer now apparently (for now)
thanks for reading and always for your patience with me :) this might be the last
update until my finals season ends, so im hoping for your patience again <3 thank you
<3

i couldn't whisper (when you needed it shouted)

Chapter Notes

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Potential content/trigger warnings:

- Depictions of violence
- Minor character death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the back of the shop, there was a mirror. It hung on the wall, perfectly mundane compared to the shop's other wares hanging right beside it: spiked clubs, flails, a set of knives that George could swear was rusted over with blood. Behind him, he could hear his companions, their footfalls near-silent on the wooden floors, their voices low. Every now and again, he'd hear one of them exclaim excitedly over some weapon or another, calling out to the other to share the new discovery. George was tempted to join them.

But the mirror.

It had been a long time since George had looked in one. For years, between traveling with Sappap and finding the House, he'd only ever seen his own face in the distortion of a pondwaters or in a brief glimpse at his reflection on the blade of his battle axe before he plunged it into someone's chest.

The god looking back at him was unrecognizable. His hair was longer, curling over his ears and the nape of his neck. He'd gained a faint scar or two, from all of his and Sappap's misguided misadventures. But that wasn't it. That wasn't what had changed.

Gods didn't age, but George thought he looked older. And, *hell*, he looked absolutely exhausted.

"George?" Sappap's voice, sounding far away. "George, we're ready to go."

I'm not, George said, still standing, still staring at the mirror and trying to figure out who used to look back at him in it.

A flash of green in the corner, and George found Dream's eyes in the reflection as he rounded a corner. Dream smiled when he saw him, and strode forward.

"There you are," Dream said. "I thought we lost you."

"I'm just here," George said. "Waiting."

Dream came to stand beside him, so now there were two gods in the mirror.

"What's so interesting, George?" Dream asked, the quirk in the corner of his mouth betraying no

real curiosity, just amusement.

“I look tired,” he replied, without thinking. “I shouldn’t look tired. There’s nothing to be tired of.”

And that was the truth. The past few months, since they’d finished the Community House, had been... good. Quiet. George spent his days exploring every inch of the forest, regaining his footing in a world that he’d neglected for so long. It was his homecoming, and the forest welcomed him back easily. He let himself wander, aimlessly, often barefoot, just to feel the forest floor against his skin. He followed birds to their nests, grew bushes of fresh berries for the foxes that had taken to following him around, and thought once he might have spotted a stag, roaming between the trees. But it was gone before George could chase after it.

And George would go back, at the end of the day, to a house. Not a roadside inn with beds that still smelled of the stranger that had occupied it before him, not the cold hard ground, not a tent of some army Sapnap had decided to join on a whim. A *house*. A home. He’d find Sapnap and Dream outside, sometimes, sparring. And he’d sit on the grass and watch them until dark. It was a routine, and George had fallen into it seamlessly.

It was *good*. These were kinder times than George had ever found himself in.

So why did he still look so *tired*?

“I look like I’ve been fighting for my life,” George said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dream said breezily, dismissively. “You look like George to me.”

“You don’t understand.” George could hear how he sounded: petulant, defensive. He hated it. “What am I fighting against, Dream? What’s making me look like this?”

Dream met his eyes in the mirror. Unlike George, Dream hadn’t changed since the first time they met. He was always going to be that boy in snow, strange and familiar, offering the world for just a little bit of companionship. Even now, when he’d gotten what he’d so desperately wanted, every time George looked at him, he could still feel the bite of the northern cold.

“You’re thinking too much into it,” said Dream, and that was that. He turned and began walking away, throwing George one last glance over his shoulder. “Come on. We’ve still got a lot to do.”

George went to go follow, but something gave him pause. He watched Dream disappear around the corner. And then he turned around and grabbed the mirror from the wall.

They found Sapnap standing in front of a glass case at the front of the shop, with the sullen-looking shopkeeper standing watch behind the counter.

“Hey, Dream,” Sapnap said without turning, “look at this.” When they stood on either side of him, he cut George a glance. “George,” he added, almost like an afterthought. “What do you think of this?”

He waved a hand towards the glass case. Inside it was a sword, sharp and menacing.

Dream whistled. “Now, *that’s* a blade. What d’you think it’s made of?”

“Obsidian,” Sapnap breathed, near reverent. He reached out and laid a hand against the glass. “Pure obsidian. They don’t make these anymore.” He turned to the shopkeeper, giddier than George had seen him in a while. “How much will you take for it?”

The shopkeeper was a tall man, towering over even Dream. He looked more suited to the fields of war rather than behind the counter of a humble weapons shop in a village so quiet George wondered if there was ever a need for his wares. He scowled at Sapnap's question, and George could see in him all the hard-bitten generals Sapnap had ever upstaged.

"Not for sale," the shopkeeper huffed. "Pick something else."

Sapnap raised an eyebrow. "If it's not for sale, why is it here?"

"Bragging rights, probably," Dream said coolly.

"Damn right I'm bragging," the shopkeeper said. "That one there's a relic of one of the northern empires. Rare as shit. Cost me someone else's arm and leg, if you take my meaning."

Sapnap and Dream glanced at each other, both equally unimpressed.

"Everything has a price," Dream said, stepping towards the counter. "Name yours. I'll triple it."

The shopkeeper looked at Dream from head to toe, tilting his head as he did, just as baffled by Dream's audacity as George first was. Who was this green-eyed boy with the cocky smile, who thought he could buy his way into anything? What heaven-high arrogance did he possess to believe it would work?

Well, George thought, bittersweet, it worked on me.

"There is no price," the shopkeeper spat. "It's decorative. Just like that mirror your friend has tucked under his arm."

Sapnap and Dream both spun around to look at George, who shrunk under their bewilderment.

"What?" George said, tugging the mirror closer against him. "It's for the House. It barely has anything in it."

"We bought that table from that market a month back," Sapnap said. "That's something."

"Sapnap, that's the *one* thing in our entire first floor. We don't even have *chairs*."

Sapnap blinked at George in confusion. "Why would we need chairs?"

And George remembered. Despite what they called it, the House was never meant to be a permanent thing. A shed, he'd told Sapnap. Somewhere to return to. Not somewhere to stay in. How had George forgotten?

But George was more stubborn than they'd give him credit for. He set his jaw and said, "I don't care. I want something to hang on the wall." He stomped towards the counter and fished a stack of coins from his pocket. "You won't miss a mirror. But you would miss gold, wouldn't you?"

The shopkeeper snatched the coins from a George's hand with a grunt. "No need for that look in your eyes, kid. It's just a mirror."

At that, George turned and walked straight out of the shop. Outside, he leaned against the wall and breathed out slowly, feeling something resettle within him.

The village was quieter than they'd found it. This was the furthest they'd ever traveled away from the House. Every time they left the forest, they went further and further, stayed away for longer. It was, like everything else, *good*. Fine. Nice. They followed unfamiliar roads, rested under scattered

stars. They got in random fights in random taverns and laughed about their bruises the next morning. Nothing had changed from the time before the House, except now they had a third person with them. And wasn't that what George had wanted?

The shop's door opened, and Sarnap stepped out.

"Where's Dream?" George asked.

"Inside," Sarnap said, bumping George's shoulder so George would make room for him. George shuffled back, allowing Sarnap to lean beside him. "Still trying to haggle."

"And why aren't you?"

Sarnap shrugged. "Didn't think it was worth it."

"Oh, come on."

"What?"

"I know you. You want that sword more than anything."

"Well, yeah, maybe. But something was clearly bothering you, so I came out here." Sarnap cut him a glance. "Don't look so surprised. You may not know this, George, but I *do* know when I'm being an ass. Though maybe not how." He knocked his knee against George's. "So, tell me, what did I do to break your heart this time?"

George scoffed. "Don't flatter yourself."

"What?" Sarnap said, grinning. "Am I not enough to break your heart, George?"

"No one's ever broken my heart," he said, when what he meant was, *No one's gotten close enough to try*. Sarnap nodded like he understood.

"Personally," Sarnap said, "I never saw the appeal of heartbreak. You know what those mortal bards say about it? *It's worth it.*" He rolled his eyes. "What a load of bullshit." He kicked at a stray pebble by his feet; they both watched as it knocked against the wall of a building across the street. "But you didn't answer my first question, George."

"It's nothing. Leave it alone."

"Horseshit. Tell me the truth."

But what could George say? He couldn't say he'd foolishly fallen in love with the idea of staying put. He couldn't say he'd liked it, the slow days with nothing to do. He couldn't say that the past few months had been the best of his life, and he didn't want it to change, but it was—slowly, inevitably. He couldn't say it hurt that Sarnap didn't seem to feel the same way.

He couldn't say that sometimes, he'd sit back and watch Dream make Sarnap laugh, effortlessly, while George had to fight for the same honor, and George would feel something close to jealousy, because he'd known Sarnap first. That shouldn't matter. But it did, and there wasn't anything George could do to stop that sick feeling in his gut that he was losing something that used to be his alone.

He couldn't say any of that. So instead he said, "If we start making our way back now, we'll be home before winter sets in."

“George—”

He broke off at the sound of the door opening again, and they both turned to see Dream walk out of the shop. He grinned at Sapnap and then tossed him a heavy-looking scabbard. Sapnap’s arms closed instinctively around it, and he didn’t have to pull it out for George to know what it was. The obsidian sword. A gift from Dream.

“No,” Sapnap said, wide-eyed and ecstatic. “No fucking way.”

“Yes fucking way,” Dream said, absolutely pleased with himself.

“How’d you get him to budge?”

Dream’s grin stretched wider as he shrugged. “What can I say?” he said. “I’m a master of persuasion.”

Sapnap gave Dream a playful punch to the shoulder, and they fell against each other like long-lost brothers, laughing and cooing over Sapnap’s shiny new toy. As they began heading towards the village gates, neither of them looked back to see if George would follow. They both knew he would. To the end of the world.

He fell into step beside Sapnap, who’d unsheathed his sword and was lunging with it every few steps, skewering some invisible enemy. They found a field south of the village, where Sapnap managed to convince them to stop to watch him practice. That was how George found himself sitting beside Dream, their heavy bags and George’s mirror stacked between them, both of them watching as Sapnap’s sword arced elegantly through the air, over and over, a study in brutality.

George drew his legs up towards him and rested his chin against his knees, trying to ignore Dream’s attention sliding from Sapnap to him. He could feel it like a physical thing, the weight of Dream’s eyes. It burrowed under his skin, invasive, tearing through him from the inside out. But when he finally gave in and turned his head to meet Dream’s gaze, he found Dream smiling at him. *Always smiling.*

“What?” George asked.

“What?” Dream echoed.

“Why’re you looking at me?”

“Am I not allowed to do that?”

“Well—you’re allowed. It’s allowed. But I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know, George?”

“A lot of things,” George said, “like what you’re the god of.”

That was almost enough to knock Dream’s smile off his face. “You don’t trust me.”

It wasn’t a question. It was an accusation. George felt shame, unbidden, rise to his face, and he had to look away before Dream could call him out on it.

“I thought we were already friends, George,” Dream said, his voice quiet. “I thought I’d already proven myself to you.”

“We *are* friends,” George said. “But it’s just, sometimes, I forget why.” Out of the corner of his

eye, he watched Dream recoil. He almost felt bad for it. “Sometimes, I look at you, and I see a stranger.” He placed his hand against the dirt beside him, watched as small white flowers grew between his fingertips, climbing over his knuckles like shackles keeping him rooted to the earth. “I know Sapnap. Sapnap knows me. But who are *you*, Dream?”

“I’m your friend, George,” Dream said, his voice sounding strained. “Isn’t that enough?”

“I fought for you to stay,” George said evenly. He wrenched his hand from the hold of the flowers, let them scatter upwards into the wind like backwards snow. Then he turned to Dream and said, “Some part of me is still waiting for the day I’ll regret that decision.”

Dream looked at George with a curious glimmer in his eyes. It reminded George a bit of how mortals parents looked at a misbehaving child, not with anger, but as if they were asking themselves, *Where did I go wrong? Why won’t you obey?*

And then the first arrow came.

It struck the ground between them, making George scramble away. But Dream was already on his feet, a blur of motion as he gathered their things, thrusting George’s bag into his arms before calling out Sapnap’s name. Sapnap whirled towards them, his face a mirror of George’s confusion.

“What’s going—” He was cut off as the second arrow flew past, missing Sapnap’s face by mere inches.

This time, they could follow the arrow’s trajectory, down the path they’d taken, and right to a man on horseback, already knocking the third arrow. And this time, he was aiming for George.

“*Fuck*,” Sapnap said, sheathing his sword and grabbing George by the arm, hauling him upwards. “*Fuck, fuck, George, duck!*”

George felt Sapnap’s hand against the back of his head, pushing him down halfway. He heard the arrow whiz by, felt Dream’s hand around his wrist, pulling him forwards, and then they were running. They were a whirlwind of limbs, and George couldn’t tell who was ahead of him and who was by his side, only that they were all heading towards a cluster of trees at the very edge of the field.

Another arrow flew past, this time nicking George’s cheek. He hissed at the pain, but didn’t stop running.

“Go!” Dream—or Sapnap, or maybe it was George himself—yelled. “*Just go!*”

So close. There were so close to the trees, they’d lose him there—

There was another whistle, another arrow flying, and George waited for the silence of an arrow that failed to find its mark. But instead there was a shout.

He watched Sapnap go down, clutching at his leg. It was not the worst injury the god of war had ever suffered; George had inflicted worse himself, in those earlier days when they argued more than they spoke, and mistrust filled their veins like venom. It wouldn’t be enough to kill him. It wouldn’t be enough to leave a scar.

But it was enough to make him stumble.

It was enough for the rider to catch up to him.

George spun, his movements slow, in time to watch the rider rein his horse to a stop and jump down. Sapnap was on his knees, still struggling to stand, and he couldn't see the rider behind him, unsheathing a sword and raising it.

George tried to move, to lift his feet, his hands, scream, *anything*. But he found himself frozen, his body disobeying every order. He was not in control.

Sapnap was going to die.

George was going to watch Sapnap die.

He waited for it, the sound of the sword meeting immortal skin, the sound of his entire world shattering, the sound of loss.

But it was Dream's voice he heard.

"Sapnap!" Dream yelled. "*Behind you!*"

That should have been George's job. That should have been his duty. But instead it was Dream, spurring Sapnap to action, warning him to turn around, giving him enough time to kick out with his uninjured leg, catching the rider's knee. It was Dream running forward as the rider buckled. It was Dream unsheathing Sapnap's sword and swinging.

It was Dream who stood over the rider as he fell backwards. It was Dream who dealt one last blow. It was Dream, sword bloody and eyes wild, who turned to crouch beside Sapnap, his hand on his shoulder, asking, "Are you alright?"

"Damn right, I'm alright," Sapnap said, falling onto the earth, "just as soon as someone gets this fucking arrow out of my leg."

Dream grinned down at him, then at George, who stood, *useless, useless, useless*, a couple of paces away. "Come on, George," he said.

The threads inside George snapped, and he found himself able to walk again. He moved towards Sapnap, who stared up at him from the ground, blinking slowly.

"Hey, George," he said. He moved his arm from his chest, and that was when George realized what Sapnap had been crouching over, what he'd been carrying, what he'd protected. "Please tell me it's not broken, or I'd have taken an arrow to the knee for nothing."

In his arms was George's mirror.

"You," George breathed, "are such an idiot." It was the closest he'd ever get to love.

They picked him up, slung each of his arms over their shoulders. George and Dream with Sapnap bleeding between them. Brothers, maybe. In another life.

They helped Sapnap over to the fallen rider, whose familiar face stared lifelessly into the sky.

"The shopkeeper from the village," Sapnap said, his brows drawing together in confusion. "Why the hell would *he* want us dead?"

There was a cut on his temple that didn't look to be made by a sword, the blood around it already dry; it was an old wound. As old as the last time they'd seen him.

Sapnap and George turned to Dream, who looked aghast by the accusation.

“Okay,” he relented, “so maybe my skills in persuasion involved knocking him out cold and stealing from his shop. But, hey,” he added, that easy smile returning, “at least it got you this wicked sword.”

Sapnap shook his head, caught between exasperation and begrudging respect. “You’re insane.”

“You once joined a war on a drunken dare,” George pointed out.

Sapnap narrowed his eyes at him. “Meaning?”

“Meaning,” George said, meaning Dream’s gaze over Sapnap’s head, “birds of the same feather, and all that.”

“Birds of the same feather,” Dream repeated, smiling at George, “flock and fly together.”

And fall together, too, George thought. But instead he said, “And, look. The man left us his horse when he died. Isn’t that just so nice of him?”

They named the horse Spirit.

After Dream pulled the arrow out of Sapnap’s leg (which involved aggressive cursing and threats of violence) and George grew some herbs for a poultice (“It’s either this or infection,” George warned after Sapnap told him to fuck off), they wrapped bandages around the worse of the damage and then helped Sapnap onto Spirit’s saddle. More cursing and threatening followed, with Sapnap proclaiming he didn’t need to be treated like some helpless waif who rode around not doing anything.

“Who says you’re not doing anything?” Dream asked, before tossing most of his things at Sapnap.

Sapnap caught them with a grunt, careful to keep George’s mirror safe, before leveling Dream with a glare. “You’re lucky I owe you my life.”

“We can talk about owing when we get back to the House,” Dream said, taking Spirit’s reins and leading them home.

It was not a quiet journey. With them, nothing ever was. Sapnap complained, George shot back, and Dream rolled his eyes until they pulled him into the argument. They argued over everything and anything: whether or not they were lost (they were, for a little while, thanks to Sapnap’s insistence that they’d passed by the same boulder twice), whether or not it was morally correct to steal a dead man’s horse (“Obviously immoral,” Dream said. “With gods, there’s nothing else to be.”), and whether they’d locked the Community House’s door before they left.

“George was the last one out,” Dream pointed out as they walked an increasingly familiar landscape. George could almost see a suggestion of a forest in the horizon, so close his fingers ached to reach out and pluck it out of the sky. “If the door’s unlocked, it’s on him.”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” George said with a roll of his eyes. “Even if somebody miraculously finds some random house in some random forest, what’s there for them to steal?”

“My weapons are in a chest in the kitchen,” Sapnap said defensively.

“Right,” George said dryly. “How could I possibly forget.”

“You’re being very inconsiderate of my feelings right now, George.”

“What does it matter to you, anyway?” George spat. “It’s a house. A shed. You have nothing to lose there.”

Sapnap pulled Spirit’s reins, halting all of them in their tracks. George was ready with a half-hearted jab at Sapnap’s theatrics, but the words died on his tongue when he saw the look in Sapnap’s eyes.

“What do you mean by that?” Sapnap said, coldly.

George felt like he was treading dangerous territory. But he’d never been one to be careful. “The House doesn’t mean anything to you. Just a house with a table that doesn’t need chairs, that’s what you said before. It doesn’t need to feel like a—” A *home*, he almost said, betraying the heart that Sapnap once called too soft. “Like anything. It’s nothing.”

“A house that *we* built,” Sapnap reminded him, his words measured. “Don’t presume to know all the things I have to lose. You don’t know shit, George.”

“Easy now,” Dream said, hands raised placatingly, stepping between them. Always the hero. “It’s just a lock on the door, alright?”

“It’s never ‘just’ anything with George,” Sapnap said, and spurred Spirit on, leaving George in his wake, wondering if he was meant to feel known, or hurt.

Sapnap rode ahead with his anger, and all George had for company was the spring-eyed god of who-knew-what. He wanted to feel that envy again, that fury that Dream seemed to so quickly earn both George’s curiosity and Sapnap’s trust. He had to remind himself of that, every now and again. He had let Dream in. Now it was a question of what Dream had to steal.

He reached for his distrust. His hand closed around air.

“I suppose,” George said quietly, looking anywhere but at Dream, or at Sapnap’s distant form, “I should thank you.”

Dream hummed. “For what?”

“For saving Sapnap,” George said. “Thank you.”

There was a beat of silence. And then Dream chuckled. “So,” he said, and George could hear the smile in his voice, “*that’s* what it takes to get you to love me.”

“Love?” George scoffed. “Sure. Call it what you want to. Whatever makes you happy.”

“Now, I wonder what it’ll take to make you hate me.”

At that, George finally looked at him.

“I wonder, too,” he said.

The forest came alive at George’s return, but he barely noticed. All he knew was to follow the road home.

In the clearing, he found Spirit grazing alone. The Community House’s door was open.

“Sapnap?” George called out as he stepped into the threshold, afraid of the silence that came in response. “Sapnap, where are you?”

The bags Sapnap had been carrying were littered across the floor, but that wasn't what made George's chest tighten. Hanging in the hallway, right across the door so it was the first thing anyone would see when they came in, was George's mirror. He looked at his own reflection, saw Dream hovering behind him, and called out again, "Sapnap?"

"Here," Sapnap called out faintly.

George rushed into the kitchen and found him sitting on the table, pursing his lips in that way he often did when he was forced to admit he was wrong. He cleared his throat, and the small movement made the table creak under him.

He met George's eyes.

"We need chairs," he said, and that was it. There was nothing more to be said.

They built a home, just like George wanted. They still left on their adventures, but every time they came back, they returned carrying things that would be worth stealing: vases for flowers, display stands for Sapnap's collection of axes and bows and swords, books that looked old enough to crumble under their fingers and none of them would ever care enough to read, maps of the world that gradually filled with tally marks of all the places they'd been.

The shopkeeper would not be the last of the people they'd kill for each other. Over the years, George would lose count. It was a strange ritual they all had a bloody hand in: with every life taken, it was a promise. *I'll kill for you*, they said with every swing of their blade. *That's how much I love you*. They still joined Sapnap's silly wars, still picked fights with everyone who looked at them wrong. They were gods, after all, and they had to spend their immortality *somewhere*. They simply chose to spend it together, angry at the world and willing to take it out on everyone else.

Sapnap and Dream were merciless on the battlefield, twin soldiers carving their way through the enemy army. *I'd help you win a war*, Dream had promised them, all those years ago, and he'd fulfilled that vow a dozen times over, each kingdom toppled and each empire burned to the ground just another offering to the war god's altar. And George could tell Sapnap reveled in it. And if it was enough for Sapnap, it was enough for George.

They'd stand in the wake of their war, hear the thunderous cheering of the victors, the groaning of the half-dead. War was everything to the mortals. To George and Sapnap and Dream, it was just another week. They kept their heads down, stacked their spoils of war on Spirit, and made their way to wherever they wanted.

Once, on their way to someplace else, George asked Dream, "If you could only save me or Sapnap, who would you save?"

"You," Dream said.

"Wow." Sapnap, leading Spirit ahead by his reins, turned to raise an eyebrow at Dream. "You could've at least hesitated."

"Sapnap, you can survive without me," Dream said exasperatedly. "You don't need my help."

"And you think George does?" Sapnap's grin turned cocky. "You really don't know George, huh?"

"I'm a bit hurt, Dream," George said, clutching his chest dramatically. "You should know better by now. How long have we known each other? Decades?"

With an odd smile, Dream said, “Maybe a bit more than that.”

“No, definitely just decades,” Sapnap said, patting Spirit’s muzzle affectionately. “Your friendship’s about as old as trusty Spirit here.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re using a horse to measure how long you’ve known me.”

“When Spirit dies,” George said, “our friendship dies, too. That’s the rule.”

“So it is written,” Sapnap said, nodding solemnly. “In the great rulebook of life.”

“*What rulebook?*” Dream exclaimed exasperatedly.

George met Sapnap’s eyes, shining with glee, and their laughter escaped from them like a prisoner freed, tasting freedom at last.

It was easy to forget they were living on borrowed time.

He could pinpoint the exact moment things went wrong.

He’d found Sapnap lying outside the House, staring up at the clouds above. He barely acknowledged George’s shadow slanting over him, only patted the ground beside him and said, “C’mere.”

George laid himself on the grass, resting his head against Sapnap’s stomach. He could feel each and every one of Sapnap’s breaths, in and out, in and out, steady as his own heartbeat. The trees seemed to close over them, blanketing them from the sun, and for a while, they indulged themselves on the silence. It had been a while since it was just the two of them. Which reminded George—

“Where’s Dream?” he asked.

Sapnap made a vague motion with his hands. “Somewhere. Probably promising a pack of wolves his unwavering loyalty if they’d only be his friend.”

George snorted. “He isn’t that desperate anymore, now that he has us.”

Sapnap scoffed. “Come on. You don’t really think we’re enough for him, do you?”

“You don’t? I thought you liked him.”

Sapnap was quiet for a long while. Then he said, “Of course I do. He’s like—Well, meeting him was like meeting you, I guess. I don’t believe in fate or destiny or all that garbage mortals talk about, but, you know, it feels that way sometimes. Like we’re right for each other. Kind of like how you just know when a weapon is the right weight for you?”

“Always weapons with you,” George said, but he didn’t disagree.

Another vague gesture with Sapnap’s hands. “He fits with us. Perfectly. You were perfect. Dream is perfect. But I’m not going to fool myself into thinking he doesn’t want more.”

“More?” George asked. “More of what?”

“I don’t know. Just *more*, I guess. It’s like he’s still looking for something, and he’ll leave us

behind the moment he finds it.”

“Like that time he left me in the dust because he thought there’d be wine hidden in some castle.”

When Sapnap spoke again, George could hear the thoughtful frown in his voice. “That wasn’t with Dream. That was you and me.”

“No,” George said, “I could’ve sworn—”

“Dream!” Sapnap sat upright, accidentally knocking George off him.

George straightened, glaring at Sapnap before turning to where he’d seen Dream. He was ready to demand where Dream had been, but the sight of him stopped George in his tracks. Something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

“Dream?” Sapnap said again, more cautiously this time. “Dream, what’s going on?”

Dream had stopped at the very edge of the clearing, his face hidden by the shifting shadows. He leaned against the tree, his chest heaving, his head bowed low. Over the years, George had seen Dream take an arrow to the shoulder, get tossed back by a war hammer, face down whole armies and, sometimes, Sapnap when they were both in a mood. But he’d never seen Dream this... *broken*.

When Dream finally raised his head, George could swear his eyes looked haunted. Or hunted.

“He knows,” Dream said, “and he’s coming for me,” and then he fell to his knees.

Sapnap and George were on their feet in a blink of an eye, surging towards him, joining him in the shadows.

“What’s wrong?” George asked, placing a hand on Dream’s trembling shoulder. “Who? Who’s coming for you?”

And that was when George realized Dream wasn’t trembling. He was *laughing*.

It was a triumphant laugh, the laugh of a man who knew his pieces were finally falling into place. George and Sapnap met each other’s eyes, concerned and baffled.

Dream straightened, still laughing, and caught both of Sapnap and George’s hands. He squeezed, tight enough to hurt, and leaned towards George until he was all George could see. His eyes were so, so green.

“The beginning,” Dream whispered, his breathing ghosting over George’s skin, “*my* beginning. The reason for everything. He wants to be my end, too, George, but you won’t let him, will you?”

“Fucking hell,” Sapnap said angrily. “Let go of him. You’re hurting George.”

But Dream only squeezed tighter.

“George,” Dream said, “Sapnap. The Angel of Death. The Angel of Death is coming for me now. But we’ll come for him first. You and me.” He smiled, and it was a twisted smile, unrecognizable from the god George had come to know. But that wasn’t right, George realized. He didn’t know Dream after all. Dream was unknowable. “It’s us. Always us. Until your bitter fucking ends.”

Chapter End Notes

we're really in it now, besties

the shrike (to your sharp and glorious thorn)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George watched them from across the room, a silent observer to their grim affair.

They stood over the kitchen table, their heads bent together, murmuring in quiet tones. Across the table's surface was a spread of maps and books opened to pages that had turned brown with age; once in a while, Sapnap would say something that would make Dream frown and flip furiously through one of the books, pointing roughly to a passage that would make Sapnap's cheeks turn red with embarrassment. And then Sapnap would glance up at George, and George would see something like an accusation in his eyes before he looked away again, back to the one thing he had always been made to do.

It should not have been a surprise, that the god of war would be so quick to plan it. But still George watched, and waited, and judged quietly.

It was supposed to be an easy choice to make: an Angel of Death was coming after Dream, and Dream was their friend, so they had to protect him. *We'll come for him first*, Dream had said, and Sapnap had agreed so quickly, even as Dream's fingers dug bloody indents into the skin of George's wrist. And George had almost fallen for it, too. He'd almost replied, *I'd do anything for you*. He feared that if he'd said the words out loud, he might have meant them.

He was afraid of this strange loyalty to Dream. It had come so quickly. Too quickly, and too much.

There was no explanation for it, no rationality. Was this what devotion meant? A blind and desperate obedience? Did all friendships feel so all-consuming, to the point that it would be death to let go? Did all the poets lie about it being easy?

“George?”

George lifted his eyes, found Sapnap staring at him with worry.

No, George thought. *The poets didn't lie. Not about him.*

“What?” George scoffed, raising an eyebrow and crossing his arms over his chest. “Glad to see you still remembered I was here.”

“I didn't forget,” Sapnap said. “Come over here. Dream needs your opinion on something.”

George walked cautiously over to their makeshift roundtable. He had to tiptoe around all the other things they'd filled their small kitchen with. They'd always meant to organize. Every now and then, they'd look around the floor strewn with discarded trinkets and stacks of books both stolen and bought, and one of them would say, “We should clean up a bit.” And the other two would nod, and by nightfall they'd all have forgotten the exchange. George thought it was because they always had the promise of a later date, of more time to sort through the evidence of their shared life, of a future far-off day where they could sit down and do something as mundane as spring cleaning. And now they were starting a war against an immortal angel. George thought that may take precedence over a messy kitchen.

He found himself by Sapnap's side, looking down at a map covered with Dream and Sapnap's handwriting.

The man coming after Dream was once the ruler of a kingdom in the south. George had heard of it in passing, once or twice. They said it was a peaceful kingdom, with a peaceful king. It had not seen war in decades. A few years ago, maybe two, he'd heard of the queen's untimely passing, and the past king's sudden disappearance. Their heir had been crowned too young, and in the wake of the loss of both his parents. George had sympathized with him, just a little bit.

And now Dream was saying the king's lost father—the Angel of Death—was coming for a vengeance long overdue. And his kingdom would pay the price for it.

George traced the broken lines that marked the kingdom's borders, the small stars that marked its towns and cities. *These poor people*, George thought, with an unfamiliar pang of pity. *They have no idea what's coming.*

“What do you need me for?” he asked Dream.

Dream ran his fingers through his hair as he considered the map before them. “Where will you be strongest?”

“*What?*”

A look of annoyance crossed Dream's face as he repeated his question, “Where will you be strongest? Which of the forests will listen to you?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I'm taking stock of our assets, George. I need to know where you'll thrive as a fighter. Here?” Dream tapped a finger against a large portion of the map, marked with a crude drawing of trees. “This is the largest of their forestland. You can do a hell of a lot of damage there. Sappnap's good everywhere, but your use to me fluctuates with the area, doesn't it? You'd be useless in northern battles.”

George stared at him for a long beat. And then he said, “You're terrified.”

Dream blinked slowly at him. “Excuse me?” he said, his voice laced with a subtle warning. Since the moment he'd let go of George's wrist and stomped back into the Community House, wild-eyed with ideas about how to make his one shot *hurt*, he had not stopped feeling like a powder keg about to explode.

George's sense of self-preservation told him to step back before he cut himself on Dream's sharp edges, but instead he said, “You don't think you can win this, can you?”

“Don't be stupid. Just tell me where you can help me best.”

“You wouldn't be asking that if you were confident you could do this. All those other wars we did—you didn't even think about it. You threw us into the thick of it without all this—this *strategy* nonsense. Because you didn't have anything to be afraid of then. But this is different.” George didn't flinch at Dream's glare. “What's your plan again, Dream?”

“Come on,” Sappnap said, “we don't have to do this right now—”

But Dream only ignored him. To George's question, he said, “Hit him where it hurts, make him come running back to save his little country. Shove a sword through his heart, and then be back home in time for dinner.”

“Well, see, that's the problem, Dream. You sound nonchalant enough. But this—” George gestured

to the mess of maps, to the little wooden soldiers that stood for the armies he planned to raise. “This isn’t what a nonchalant person does. You’re like a child throwing a tantrum to get his father’s attention. But what will you do the moment he turns around, Dream? You don’t seem ready for that.”

“You don’t understand,” Dream said, his green eyes bright with an anger barely held back. “You think this is some silly grudge? You think this is a spur-of-the-moment thing? You think this hasn’t been *eons* in the making?” He stepped forward until he towered over George, his face clouded. “You don’t know *anything* about me and him. This isn’t a tantrum, George. This is me throwing the chessboard away before he can call checkmate.” When George didn’t step back, Dream’s expression softened into something kinder and easier to trust. “This is beyond you. I wouldn’t expect you to understand, but you will someday. Maybe before this all ends, I’ll tell you the whole truth of it. Him, and me, and the fucked-up game we’ve been playing before you even existed. Maybe you won’t forgive me for it now. But you’ll learn.” And an unsaid promise after that: *I’ll teach you.*

The silence stretched, infinite and heavy.

And then George asked, his voice like a stranger’s, “Who do you think you are?”

Dream pointed back to the map and said, “Just tell me where you can be of use.”

At that, George scoffed, spun on his heels, and walked away.

It was a miracle that he could still walk away from them.

Over the years, it had gotten increasingly difficult. They’d grown around him like ivy around a tree, and to leave was to remove a part of himself that he could never get back. And to think, once upon a time, he’d gone his whole life without needing anyone. Now all there was was need.

George hated it. He hated it more than anything.

Everything on him wasn’t his alone. It was Sappnap’s cloak around his shoulders. His boots were a gift from Dream. Strip all that away, and what would be left?

He was no one without them.

No one and nothing.

George blinked, and found himself on the roof of the Community House. He didn’t recall the climb, but there he was, his knees drawn to his chin and the scarlet dusk falling around him. The forest was alive with the screaming of a thousand cicadas, announcing the inevitable night. George shook his head, once, and they all fell quiet, all at once. The forest was his. That was something no one could take away.

By the time Sappnap found him, it was well into the night.

“Took you long enough,” said George, trying not to sound bitter. “You know, there was a time once when you would’ve been right behind me.”

“We had to finish planning,” Sappnap said defensively. “You know, George, sometimes you aren’t the center of the universe.”

George rolled his eyes. “I don’t care about the universe. I care about why exactly it seems like I’m

the only one who thinks this is a bad idea.”

“We’ve always had bad ideas, George. Never stopped us from doing them anyway.”

“This is different. You can’t pretend it isn’t. *Dream* is different.”

When George glanced sideways at Sapnap, he was surprised to find him angry. He leaned back on his hands, his jaw set and his shoulders tense and George thought, *What the hell did I do?*

“How’d we get here?” Sapnap said quietly, looking up into the darkening sky. “I thought it was always us three against anything. That was the deal, George.”

“Sapnap, it’s just—”

“Just what, George?” At that, Sapnap finally looked at him, his dark eyes like burnt-out charcoal. “Just that you’re scared? You can say it. You can say you don’t want to fight, that this one’s too big for you. I won’t blame you. Just say you’re a coward and stop blaming us for it.”

George drew in a sharp breath. The look of surprise on Sapnap’s face made it clear that even he had not expected to say what he’d said—or, at least, that he had not meant to say it out loud.

“Why?” George asked. “Why do you want to throw yourself into this with him so badly?”

“Because he’s my friend,” Sapnap said simply, like that was truly all that mattered to him. “I’d do it for you, too.”

“The difference is I wouldn’t ask you to.” George shook his head. “If this Angel of Death ends up being the end of you, just don’t forget I told you so.”

“George,” Sapnap said, and this time, he sounded a bit like the Sapnap George knew. “Come on. Have a little faith in me.”

“I have nothing *but* faith in you, Sapnap. It’s *Dream* I’m worried about.”

He was scared *Dream* wouldn’t know when to stop. And that *Dream* would throw everything he had at this, without caring where they landed. He’d break himself against this war of his, and George didn’t want to be close enough to get caught in the aftermath. Absently, he reached for his wrist, the one *Dream* had held so tightly, he’d felt his bones scream. He ran his fingers where *Dream*’s nails had punctured his skin. He wasn’t surprised to find faint scars already forming in the shape of four crescent moons.

“He said he’d throw the whole board away if he couldn’t win,” George said. “He’d do it even if we were still on it.”

Sapnap blinked, and it looked like he was waking up from a long, long dream.

“Do you think we’re just pawns to him?” Sapnap asked quietly.

George faced him fully. “When it came down to it, if he tossed me to the wolves, Sapnap, would you still take his side?”

Sapnap looked stricken. “He wouldn’t do that.” But he sounded unsure. “If he did, I’d—” He took a deep breath, and the next words out of his mouth were grounded in something deeper than his loyalty to *Dream*. “I’d kill him.”

“This war of his, Sapnap,” George said. “It’ll be the end of us. I don’t know why I know that, but I

believe it. I believe it down to my bones. And I'm not ready to lose you just yet."

Below them, Spirit grazed quietly. He was old now, older than a wild horse usually lived. George didn't know who was keeping him alive, George or Dream or Spirit himself, but he was glad for the familiarity of Spirit's shadow slanting over the grass in front of the House. They watched him in silence for a long while, and then Sapnap stood.

"I'll talk to him," Sapnap said resolutely, looking over the home they'd built together. "Maybe I can get him to reconsider. I'll make him leave you out of it, if that's what you really want." He nodded, almost to himself. "I'll make him change his mind, alright?"

Oh, foolish little war god.

He really did think he had that kind of power. That was the tragic part.

"Okay," George said quietly, putting his life in Sapnap's hands, as he had done a million times before. "I'll be here."

Sapnap nodded again, and then he turned to make his way down from the roof. At the roof's edge, he glanced back at George.

"Hey," he said. "It's all going to be okay. We'll laugh about it this someday, just you wait."

George didn't say anything back. If he'd known it was the last time he'd get a chance to talk to Sapnap before everything fell apart, he would have. He would have said, *Don't leave me*. He would have said, *Don't make me go back to who I was before you*. He would have said, *Please, please, please, don't leave me alone with him*.

He would have said anything to get him to stay.

But, as it was, the next thing George heard was a distant crash, a single shout. Instinct kicked him and called him back to Dream's side. He slid from the roof and hit the ground hard. Spirit was nowhere to be seen. So George threw the door to the Community House open and ran inside, his heart already broken, already mourning, as if something had warned it in advance of what he would see around the corner.

"Dream?" George called out as he stumbled back into the kitchen, and found chaos.

And, as always, he found Dream at its center.

"George," Dream said softly. "He took Spirit."

Dream sat with his knees pressed to the ground, like someone in prayer. Around him, the kitchen had been torn apart. A stack of books had been so violently kicked towards the corner where George had been standing just an hour before, their pages had all been torn from their covers. The kitchen table they'd all bent their heads over had splintered down the middle.

And the crash that George heard had been his mirror, once hanging proudly in the hallway, now laying in a hundred shattered fragments across the kitchen floor. Light bounced off them in a thousand different directions, and in a different time, George might have found it beautiful, like he was standing in a shower of starlight. But at the sight of the blood mixed in with the glass, George only had room for fear.

There was a cut on Dream's cheek, freely bleeding.

“Did Sappnap do that?” George asked quietly, afraid of the answer he already knew.

Dream stared up at him, breathing heavily. He offered George his hand, and George, without knowing why, took it. Dream pulled him down to the floor with him. Broken glass dug into George’s knees, but he didn’t try to stand up.

“He’s gone, George,” Dream said. “He said his piece, and then ran away when he couldn’t get his way.”

George was shaking his head before Dream could even finish his sentence. “Sappnap wouldn’t do that,” he said. “He wouldn’t—not to *me*. Dream, what the hell did you say to him?”

Dream’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You think I drove him away? You think I didn’t try to get him to stay?”

“I think Sappnap would’ve just *leave*,” George snapped. “What the hell happened?”

Dream barked out a bitter laugh. “You tell me, George. What the fuck did you say to him?”

George drew back. “You think this is my fault, somehow.”

“Sappnap never acts out, not unless it concerns you.”

“Don’t talk about him like he’s some damn *dog*.”

“What did you tell him this time, George?” Dream asked, and the room around them blurred around the edges. It was hard to focus on anything that wasn’t the angry fire in Dream’s eyes, or his grip on George’s wrist, pressing deep once again, burning him. “Because whatever it was, George, it was enough to chase him out of here.”

“I didn’t...” George choked on his own words. Something inside him had cracked right down the middle. “I didn’t tell him to leave. I told him to choose the safest choice for us.” *For me*.

There was only pity on Dream’s face. “George,” he said, “there’s no difference.”

George watched the blood trickle down Dream’s cheek and drip down to the floor between them. It was always going to end in blood and broken glass. That was how their story was written. There would be no happy endings, not for people like them. They’d done too much against the universe to expect a reward now. Wherever good souls went, George and Dream and Sappnap would go the opposite direction.

So, this pain was deserved. This grief was inevitable.

He was always going to suffer.

He just thought Sappnap would be here to carry half of the heartache.

“He wouldn’t leave me,” George repeated, numb to everything but Dream’s grip on his hand. It was his only anchor to a world that had suddenly turned unrecognizable. Up was down, north was west, and Sappnap had left George without a goodbye. “He wouldn’t just *leave* me like that.”

Dream, the boy in the snow, then the boy in the river, and now the boy kneeling beside him while the rest of the universe burned around them, sighed and said, “George. Oh, George. He just did.”

He tried to go after him.

If George wanted Sappnap to know one thing, that would be it: he *tried*. The morning after, he'd packed a bag, fully intending to follow the divots Spirit's hooves had made on the pliant dirt. He'd followed it all the way to the edge of the forest.

And then George had turned back. He'd gone back to the House, exhausted beyond explanation, and sat on the grass outside, all alone until Dream found him. Dream sat down beside him, and they were both silent. The next day, George stood and started walking again. But, always, always, he stopped at the very edge before retracing his steps. And always, always, Dream would be waiting on the grass, his legs tucked under his chin, watching George approach with an indecipherable look in his eyes. The fifth time it happened, George sat down beside him and said, "Ask me."

Dream blinked curiously at him. "Ask you what?"

"Ask me the question that you've been wanting to ask this whole time."

Dream looked as if he was considering playing dumb, but both of them were past the point of pretending he wasn't two steps ahead of everyone else. "Why don't you leave?"

It was a fair question. It should have had an easy answer. After all, George had his favorite, and both of them knew it wasn't Dream. Sappnap was his best friend. His longest friend. Where Sappnap went, George wouldn't be too far behind. And yet. *And yet*. Sappnap had left, and hadn't dignified him with a goodbye or an explanation. He'd left, and he'd taken their horse with him. He'd left, and George wasn't going after him.

"Is it a matter of pride?" Dream asked. "Of winning? You go after him, you lose. He comes groveling back, you win."

"It's a matter of faith," George said simply. "I have to stay, for when he returns."

"*Faith?*" It was the first time George had ever caught Dream by surprise. "You still have faith?"

George traced his fingers against the cold ground beneath him, growing pure-white daisies in the wake of his touch. "It's all I have left."

Strangely, it was Dream who broke first.

George was more used to waiting—after all, he'd spent a handful of centuries waiting for the world to suit him, sleeping years away without much thought. And he was more used to Sappnap's tantrums, too. He was sure Sappnap was going to burn himself out soon and come back with a begrudging apology, but until then, George was going to find worthwhile distractions.

He started with their broken kitchen. He found a broom and swept up the broken glass, ignoring the blood stains on the floor. He threw out everything that had broken and splintered, stacked the salvageable books into neat stacks, took the map with Dream and Sappnap's handwriting scrawled across its surface and folded it into a tidy square. Dream wouldn't need it anymore. His plans for war had grinded to a halt the moment Sappnap left. George could see it, the disappointment in his eyes whenever he looked at George, thinking something George already knew. He couldn't do anything with just George.

He needed Sappnap.

So, six months after Sappnap had disappeared, they found themselves sitting around the dining table George had fixed. It hadn't been easy; even now, he thought he could still feel the splinters he'd

earned for his troubles. But at least there was somewhere to sit now, somewhere where they could still pretend they were still waiting for someone. George sat at one end of the table, pretending to read. Dream sat across him, watching him pretend. In between them, a third chair sat empty.

George had already reread a sentence thrice without understanding a single word before Dream stood so suddenly, his chair clattered backwards behind him. George peered over his book at him, only to find Dream staring at him with an intensity that made George glad there was a whole table between them.

“What?” he asked, trying to sound unperturbed.

“Let’s go,” Dream said simply. And then he was striding out of the kitchen.

George blinked, finding himself alone in a room once filled with three different voices laughing. He had nothing left to do. He folded the edge of the page he’d been reading, already knowing even then that he’d never get the chance to finish it. And then he followed Dream.

He found Dream crouched at the threshold, already lacing up his boots. He stood and turned to toss George’s cloak at him.

“Where are we going?” he asked, even as he tied his cloak obediently over his shoulders.

Dream’s face was unreadable. “We’re getting our little soldier back.”

The forest was quiet as they made their way out of it, as if in solemn mourning. Not even the cicadas seemed to care that it was nightfall. When George passed the last tree at the very edge, he felt as if the forest was the one that left him, instead of the other way around. But he put one foot in front of the other, his eyes fixed on Dream’s back, the curl of his sun-burned hair, almost silver in the moonlight.

I’ll follow you anywhere, George thought again, helplessly, anguishing. *To my bitter end.*

The voice in his head was his. The words were not.

He could see the truth forming, terrible and cruel but inevitable. And still, still, he followed each of Dream’s footsteps. Because he was running on faith, but faith wasn’t going to be enough this time. Dream needed Sappnap, but so did George.

He just wanted his best friend back.

Dream suddenly stopped in the middle of the road. A few paces behind him, George stopped, too. Dream raised his hand, and before long, two shadows were heading straight towards them. As they approached, George saw them more clearly: it was two people on horses. Sharp neighs pierced the night air as their riders pulled sharply on their reins, stopping right in front of Dream. The riders jumped down from their horses with a quiet thud. One of them wordlessly handed his horse’s reins to Dream. The other gave his to George.

In the dark, with their hoods pulled over their faces, it was hard to be sure, but George thought the riders looked half-asleep.

Dream was already on his horse, looking down at George and the riders, who stood silently where they were. He cocked his head to the side, as if asking, *Well?*

George looked down at the reins in his hands. “How do you know where he is?” he asked, rather belatedly.

Dream scoffed, as if the question was an insult. “Don’t be stupid, George,” he said, which wasn’t really an answer. “Get on the horse.”

So George pulled himself up on the horse that had been quite literally handed to him. And then they were riding into the night, leaving the riders behind in the dust off their own horses. They rode in silence for a long while, following the moon as it arced across the cloud-choked sky. But the questions were only building inside George, and he had no choice but to let one out before he exploded with them.

“Who were those people?” he shouted into the wind.

Dream didn’t even glance back at him. “Very generous folk.”

“How do you know them?”

“I know a lot of people, George.”

“And they’re okay with you just stealing their horses?”

Dream shrugged and then snapped his reins, pushing his horse forwards. The conversation was over, because Dream decided it was. It was a fact that George was starting to accept. The road spread out before them, a straight, unforgiving line up until the horizon, where it branched off into different paths like the spindly arms of a spider web. Only Dream knew the way.

They said nothing else.

And they rode on.

They found the camp just as the moon slipped behind the gathering storm clouds, and as they stood on a hill overlooking the tents scattered across the valley below, George felt a memory pulled violently out of him. The last time he’d found Sappnap in a camp like this, he’d been a prisoner. Now, standing beside Dream, he didn’t feel any different.

“This is...” George began, then shook his head. “Why would he be here?”

Dream’s smile was sharp and mirthless. “Leave it to a war god to find solace in war.” He made his way down the hill, then looked over his shoulder when he realized George wasn’t right behind him. “What are you waiting for?”

The wind was howling, lifting George’s hair and his cloak. His shadow behind him looked like it had very errant wings. Below him, somewhere in that mess of tents and torchlight and soldiers preparing for battle, was someone who’d broken his heart without even trying. Suddenly, in a moment of sharp clarity, George thought about running. He thought about getting back on his horse and going back home, wherever that was now. He thought about finding himself a nice, cold cave in a nice, quiet forest and going back to sleep. He thought about forgetting.

Because, gods damn it, the past six months had been unbearable. It felt like someone had cut him in half, and he operated only as a fraction of who he used to be. He wasn’t sure he wanted to go down there, find Sappnap, and give him that power over him again. He wasn’t sure if Sappnap deserved it.

But he had to know. He had to know *why*.

“I’m coming,” he told Dream. They walked, side by side, into the camp.

George expected aggression or, at the very least, suspicion. The two of them in their dusty cloaks stuck out like a sore thumb. But there were no demands to identify themselves, no soldier dragging them off to be interrogated. They moved unobstructed, almost invisible, through the ranks. The soldiers were laughing, talking, sharpening their swords, counting their arrows, hurrying to dinner. George and Dream might as well be ghosts.

They made their phantom procession, down the rows and rows and rows of tents, preparing for a war, always another war with these mortals, George didn’t even know *which* war this was, or which kingdoms it was between, just that it was new, and it would end as all wars did, brutally, without real victors, only to make way for another one, down the rows of tents again until—

Until the campfire, at the heart of the camp, the burning light to which every insignificant insect flocked.

George saw him first.

He was sitting near the fire, his sword lying beside him, never far from his side. A white cloak was thrown over his shoulders, the same one all the other soldiers were wearing. It should have made him indistinguishable from the rest, but there was no hiding what he was. He was a warrior among men. They could not hope to win without him. And despite everything, George couldn’t help but relish in their shared divinity. They were gods. They would always be gods. This, and everything, was beneath them. No matter what grew between them now—time, anger, betrayal—they would always have their immortality.

At the end of time, it would still be the three of them together.

“Sap—” George began.

“—nap!” a different voice finished.

George blinked, and in an instant, Sappnap wasn’t alone.

There were three people by the fire now. Someone had their arm around Sappnap’s shoulders, jostling him in that way that George knew he didn’t like. But Sappnap was laughing.

As Dream and George looked on, Sappnap leaned against the other person who had joined him, and they laughed—all three of them—together, and George wanted to know what the hell was so funny, because he’d never heard Sappnap laugh like that, not in a hundred fucking years.

“Oh,” Dream breathed. “He’s replaced us, George.”

But that wasn’t quite true. Replacement would imply that two things had equal value. But the smile Sappnap had on his fire-lit face now, that was a smile George had never seen him wear. While George was fixing the mess he’d left behind, while George was doing everything and anything to distract himself from the grief of being the one left behind, while George kept whatever faith he still had left alive through whatever means, while George was stuck with someone he no longer recognized, Sappnap was building a life where he felt safe enough to laugh like nobody was watching.

He didn’t replace them.

He outgrew them.

A small, traitorous voice in his head told him to march up there, to demand answers, to throw the tantrum Sappnap always accused him of, to show him what a tantrum *really* looked like, to fill this whole valley with poison ivy, to smother them all in vines, to remind Sappnap how easily he could take it all away from him—

George's heart froze.

What, he thought, the hell am I thinking?

He could feel Dream's eyes on him. Always.

George ran.

He didn't stop running until he found the cliff. It was miles away from the valley and the camp, miles away from the nearest road, miles away from anyone else. He ran, ran, ran towards the edge, towards the open sky, towards the infinite darkness below, and then he stopped, and he screamed, and the first clap of thunder served as his echo. The sky broke apart above him, spilling an ocean's worth of rain.

Another boom of thunder. Another scream.

Was it rain or was it tears now? George no longer cared. He no longer knew enough about himself to care. Who was he supposed to be now, knowing what he didn't want to know about Dream? Who was he supposed to be now, without Sappnap?

Who was he supposed to be without them?

Who was he? Because whoever he was at this moment, he didn't think it was himself.

He'd never felt this anger before, not even when the mortals first burned a forest down and he'd felt the fear of creatures trapped in the smoke. It was anger beyond anger. It was fury. If he still had his mirror, if he looked at himself now, he'd see the same look in his eyes as he'd seen in Dream's, that day he told them about the angel, that day that changed everything. This fury didn't belong to George. But still here he was, carrying it, feeding it, nurturing it.

If Dream asked him to join a war now, he would say yes. And he could win it alone. He'd be a solitary shrike, impaling Dream's enemies on thorns of his own making. He would not let anyone on that battlefield forget what he was. He'd do anything, just to give this anger in him somewhere to go.

When he heard footsteps behind him, he thought it would be Dream, coming to collect on the promises he'd made inside his head.

But it was someone he dreaded more.

"George," Sappnap said. "What the hell did he do to you?"

George spun, and saw his face in the brief flash of lightning before the thunder followed. He was looking at George like he was some wounded animal he either had to rescue or put down.

George barked out a laugh. It filled his lungs with cold rainwater.

"The things we do to each other," George sighed. "How did we ever fool ourselves into thinking we were friends?"

Sapnap's brows furrowed. "What are you talking about? We're friends—"

"Is that what you call this?" George snapped. "Is that what you call fighting, and screaming, and leaving, and fighting again? Is that what you call this one-way co-dependence? I'm not your friend, Sapnap. I'm your fucking parasite." He breathed in, suddenly feeling like he was drowning. "I suppose I should congratulate you."

Sapnap's dark eyes were obsidian pits. "What for?"

He sounded like he almost pitied him.

"You're finally free of me," George said. "*Congratulations.*"

Sapnap would have looked less stricken if George had just punched him.

"George," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

And that was enough to do it. George walked over to him, met his eyes, and actually punched him.

It was hard enough to snap Sapnap's head to the side, and when he looked back at George, there was a cut on his lip that spilled blood down his chin. But it wasn't long before the heavy rainfall washed even the blood away.

"Well," Sapnap said. "I deserved that, I think."

"Yeah, you did," George snapped. "You don't get to say you're sorry. Not to me."

"I'll say it anyway."

"Don't you dare."

"George—"

"*Don't you fucking dare.*"

"I'm sorry."

George raised his fist again. Sapnap didn't even flinch. He didn't move to stop him. He just stood there, waiting for a blow that would never come.

George's arm fell to his side. Just like that, it was done. He was done.

He was tired. So, so tired. He wanted to sleep.

But instead, with a crack in his voice and in his chest, he asked, "Why didn't you take me with you?"

Sapnap looked anguished. "I didn't have time. I had to get out of there. I couldn't be there anymore. You have to understand, George. Talking to Dream, when I told him I wanted him to leave you alone, when I started arguing with him, it felt like—" He made a frustrated noise, hands working to fill the gaps between his words. "It felt like I was being *suffocated*. Or, like I had been suffocating for years and just noticed. I needed air. And I couldn't get enough of it until I was as far away from that house as possible."

"But *why didn't you take me with you?*" George growled. "Did you never stop and think that maybe I was suffocating, too? Why did you leave me behind?"

“Well, why didn’t you follow?” Sapnap shot back.

In their silence, they knew they had the same answer to each other’s questions.

And it was walking up to them in the rain, a small smile on his face.

“Lovely reunion,” Dream said calmly, “wouldn’t you agree?”

“*You*,” Sapnap snarled, putting himself between George and Dream. Even now. After everything. Even as his blood stained George’s knuckles. “You have some nerve, coming to me—”

But Dream wasn’t listening. “You ran after George so quickly, you forgot this.” He threw Sapnap’s sword at him. It clattered at his feet. “Your new friends were more than willing to let me deliver it to you.”

Sapnap stiffened. Through gritted teeth, Sapnap said, “What did you do to them?”

Dream feigned a look of surprise. “Why do you always jump to the worst conclusions, Sapnap?”

“When it comes to you, those conclusions are almost always right.” He stepped over his own sword, heading towards Dream. “I swear, Dream, if you so much as *breathed* in their direction—”

Dream scoffed. “Put your claws away, little bloodhound. I wouldn’t do anything to them.”

The unsaid word hovered in the air between them: *yet*.

“At the very least,” Dream said, “could you give us an estimate?”

Sapnap blinked. “For fucking what?”

“For when you finally get bored of playing mortal.” Dream cocked his head to the side, staring Sapnap down with bright green eyes.

George should have known then. The only animals in the forest with colors that bright were the ones that poisoned you.

“You think I’ll come running back to you,” Sapnap said, anger lacing every word.

“I’ll also accept crawling.”

“You’re insane.”

“No, Sapnap,” Dream said evenly. “Insanity would be thinking this won’t all fall apart around you. What do you think you’re doing here? Do you really think you can love anything without destroying it? Do you think it isn’t our nature to break? And mortals are *very* breakable, Sapnap.”

“I think,” Sapnap said slowly, “that I fucking hate you right now, Dream.”

George saw the words land on Dream. And George saw him shrug them off.

“You hate me?” Dream asked, walking slowly. Towards the cliff’s edge.

“Dream—” George said, but this wasn’t his fight.

It was Sapnap who stepped forward, his brows furrowed with confusion and conflict. “What are you doing?”

Dream was standing at the edge now, the wind and rain slashing against him. But he was immovable, staring at George and Sapnap staring at him. He had his hands behind his back, as if he was just taking a stroll in the sunshine.

“You hate me,” Dream repeated.

Sapnap took a step forwards. “Don’t—”

Dream fell backwards, and the fear in George’s heart eclipsed everything that came before.

But Sapnap was there, running towards him and catching Dream by his shirt. And the two of them stood there, Dream suspended over an infinite drop, with Sapnap as his only lifeline.

“You have a funny way of showing it,” Dream said.

And then he grabbed Sapnap’s wrist, so roughly even George could tell it had to hurt. He pulled himself back to solid ground, pushing Sapnap back in the process. Sapnap tried wrenching his arm away, but Dream’s hold on him was not to be denied.

Dream squeezed his wrist, making Sapnap meet his stare.

He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Go ahead,” Dream said. “You have my permission. Go back to pretending. Live and pretend and love.” He leaned in close, until Sapnap had no choice but to see only Dream. “Enjoy it while it lasts, but don’t blame me when it doesn’t.”

And then he let go. Sapnap stumbled away from him, holding his stare for a second before he snatched his sword from the ground. For a moment, George thought he would run Dream though with it. For a moment, Sapnap looked like he was considering it, too.

But then he turned around, marching back the way he came. He passed by George, almost as if he had forgotten he was there at all. And then he stopped, turning back, and his eyes were bleak. He looked like he had lost everything, or was about to.

“George,” Sapnap said. Just “George.” In that single syllable, George heard everything else: *Please* and *I’m sorry* and *Come with me*.

And George almost did.

Except he remembered Sapnap’s smile around the campfire, and another memory, rising unbidden, of George hanging over a pit, hanging on for dear life. But the memory was different this time. This time, Sapnap stood over him. And Sapnap let him fall.

In the end, Dream was right. It was a matter of pride.

“I’ll wait for you at home,” George said.

Sapnap almost allowed himself to look disappointed, but then that stubbornness returned, making him set his jaw and drag his gaze away from George. He met Dream’s eyes evenly.

“You once said I could survive without you,” he said. “Watch me prove you right.”

And then he was gone, leaving George in the downpour. For the first time, George finally registered how cold he was. He fell to the ground, pulling his knees to his chest as if he could somehow warm himself. He began shivering. Or maybe he was trembling.

“Why do I have the feeling that I’ve just seen him for the last time?” he asked brokenly, addressing no one at all.

“I won’t let that happen.”

He looked up to find Dream standing over him, his green eyes fixed on where Sapnap had disappeared to.

“Our symphony is still unfinished, George,” he said.

George shook again. And this time, he knew for sure he was trembling.

“We still have our war to plan. We still have our angel to kill. And we can’t do it without Sapnap.” A smile flickered on his face, and that was how George knew he had already had a plan. “If he wants to fight his mortals’ war so badly, then I’ll let him. I think it’ll do our war god good to finally learn what it feels like to lose.”

George sucked in a shaky breath. “What are you going to do?”

“*George,*” Dream sighed, and when he finally looked down to meet George’s eyes, George felt like someone had dragged a sharp knife down his spine. “Who said *I* was going to do anything?”

In a kingdom, there was a castle. In the castle, there was a bedroom. Its occupant did not sleep, but he still dreamed. Often, the dreams were not his own. Often, the dreams were not dreams at all. They were orders from a voice he could not disobey and would not remember in the morning.

The forgetting did not absolve him of the crime, but it did absolve him of the shame. In the morning, he could wake up, back in a bed he did not remember sleeping in, and he could go out of his room, down the hallway, down the stairs, down to the garden, and he could meet the prince’s eyes without flinching. And he could smile, ignorant, so blissfully ignorant. But that was tomorrow.

Tonight, Technoblade dreamed. And he dreamed of blood.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. In my defense, I unfortunately live in the Philippines where *gestures vaguely* everything's going wrong. Still, I thank you for your patience and I hope you enjoyed the penultimate chapter of shrike :)

[If you can spare one more read, please read up on the situation in the Philippines, specifically the Marcos presidency. Keeps us in your thoughts. Thank you.]

remember me, love (when i'm reborn)

Chapter Notes

Chapter's content/trigger warnings:

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implied suicidal ideation, implied violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George hated the fall.

Sapnap had asked him about that, once. It was a memory George had to wade through decades to find. Lately, he felt as if he was fighting a losing battle with the past. His memories were submerged in murky waters, and George had to fight tooth and nail to grasp even one. And even when he had it between his hands, he had to hold on with everything he had, or else it would just slip away like the rest, disappearing into the vast pit that had grown inside his head. Even now, he held this memory with Sapnap tightly, examining it like a wary jeweler who'd been given fool's gold one too many times.

How much of it was real? And how much of it was something else?

Or, George thought bitterly, angrily, traitorously, someone else.

In the memory, he and Sapnap were alone beneath a tree.

In the memory, they were almost happy.

George didn't remember how the conversation began, but he knew at some point, Sapnap had turned to him and said, "I would have thought you'd hate winter most."

George had cocked his head to the side, raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "What makes you say that?"

"Well," Sapnap began, "you know, I figured winter wouldn't be the kindest season for the forest."

George considered his words. In those early days, when they were still stumbling around trying to know each other, a lot of Sapnap's questions had made him defensive at best, murderously annoyed at worst. But this one, he weighed in his hands with a sincerity that he wasn't used to.

"I suppose," he said, "the difference between winter and fall is the same difference between death and dying. At least with death, with winter, it's all over. There's a certain peace to it. A quiet. But with fall..." George shook his head, shaking off a sudden chill. "Everything is still on its way. It's all still decaying, still clinging on, still *dying*. And that's more agonizing for me." He looked at Sapnap. It was easy, with immortality, to feel like he was saying the same thing, over and over,

across the centuries, explaining himself again and again to every new generation. But now, with Sapnap, everything felt brand new. “Death is kinder than dying. Winter is kinder than fall.”

“But you still hate winter,” Sapnap said with a crooked smile. “You’re absolutely useless in the snow.”

George winced. “Don’t remind me.”

“Don’t worry, George.” Sapnap knocked his shoulder gently against George’s. “You can leave your winters to me.”

George couldn’t help but return Sapnap’s grin; his glee was infectious. It carved dimples into his cheeks and smile lines into the corners of his bright eyes. “And the falls, too?”

“Especially the falls.” He raised his fists, punching them against some invisible enemy. How young they both were, then, with their whole lives still ahead of them. “Give them all to me. I’ll take care of you.”

And George believed him, then.

The mortals Sapnap loved died on the first day of fall.

George felt it happen. He shouldn’t have. It was too far away, and the flowers that would have kept vigil over the battle had been trampled by both the season and the unforgiving march of the rivaling armies. But somehow, somehow, he still *knew*.

He could feel the grass giving way beneath Sapnap’s boots as he was pushed back, and back, and back. He could hear the murmur of the weeds as the bodies began to fall, one after another, poor little soldiers, the prides of their kingdoms, reduced to mere *fertilizer*. For a moment, George allowed himself to think about who they might have been. Sons and daughters and parents and sisters and brothers. Did they believe in the cause they fought for? Or was it a matter of survival, of gold to feed hungry mouths back home?

And then the moment passed, because George could almost see Sapnap, a blazing light in the deep dark night. He was fighting, always fighting, his obsidian blade cutting through waves and droves of enemy soldiers—and even those that were his allies. George didn’t understand, at first. Sapnap was usually so precise, so calculated. Watching him fight used to be like watching a well-rehearsed dance. But this time, he was slashing and clawing and cutting his way through the battlefield with abandon, not caring where his blade landed.

And then the watchful trees that curved over the dying soldiers showed George the look in Sapnap’s eyes, singular in their focus, frightening in their desperation. He was cutting his way through, his lips moving in a soundless scream, forming names George couldn’t make out in the chaos. All at once, George understood.

Sapnap was looking for someone. And he was not going to find them in time.

The roots of the battlefield, those that remained despite the trampling, whispered the tragedy to him: the war god would not win this war. And he would lose something else tonight, something he held closer to his heart than his own nature.

Show me, George begged. Show me where they are.

The field obliged.

It showed them together, standing together, dying together.

They were already broken beyond repair, and still they held each other's hands, a final comfort as their hunter stalked towards them.

Even far away from the fight, George felt the cold sting of fear run down his spine. The hunter moved through the battlefield like a ship cutting through the waves, mindless of the tides that pushed and pulled; it knew its way towards its harbor, and it would not be deterred. A trident gleamed in his hand, already slick with blood and gore. He spun it with ease, almost absently, almost like he had all the time in the world.

Familiarity dropped into George's gut like a heavy stone. He knew that stance. He knew that arrogance, that proficiency in brutality. He'd been that hunter, once. Sapnap, too, and Dream.

This was their kin.

The hunter was a god, blank-eyed and vicious.

In the end, Sapnap's mortals didn't stand a chance.

Right before the trident sunk into his chest, one of them turned to the other, his eyes wide with the despair of someone who knew this to be the end. And finally, finally, there was a hush in the battle, a brief silence that allowed George to hear his final words.

“*Run. Find Sap—*”

“George?”

George blinked, and suddenly he was home.

The battlefield faded like a dream, dissolving from his grasp as sugar dissipated into tea water, leaving nothing behind but the sickly sweet aftertaste. The sounds of screaming and blades scraping and blood splattering echoed, once, twice, before fading off into silence. There was no pain here, sitting in the kitchen he'd built and rebuilt again. There was no war. There was only warmth, and safety, and *home*.

And there was Dream, crouched in front of him to meet his eyes.

“George,” Dream said again, his voice softer than George ever remembered it to be. “Come back to me.”

George blinked, and the rest of the room came back in a blurry focus.

He'd been sitting here, alone, restless, since they came back from the war camp, both of them drenched and angry. He remembered putting his fist through a wall; his bruised knuckles, half-healed now, was evidence that that memory, at least, was real. He also remembered Dream standing in the doorway, water clinging to his eyelashes like unshed tears, his head cocked to the side like he was trying to listen to a song playing from the other room.

He remembered Dream frowning at his bloody fist, at the crack in the wall. And Dream had said, “He'll come back. Just wait.”

A bitter laugh bubbled out from George then. “*Waiting*. Of course I'll wait. It's all I'm fucking

good for.” And then he’d marched down to the kitchen, found the closest and only surviving chair, and sat there in the dark. The morning had found him there, and then the next night, too. The days passed him by like he was some insignificant, forgotten thing, and George couldn’t muster an ounce of rebellion against the forgetting.

Let the world forget there ever was a god of the forest. Let them all forget his name, that he ever existed long enough to learn to hate, then love, then hate again this strange, wide world where everything felt just a little bit *wrong*. Let this house crumble down around him and smother him in the ruins of his own making. Maybe he hadn’t built a house at all. Maybe, all along, he’d been building his own mausoleum.

And future historians will stumble into his own self-made tomb, and they’ll find him surrounded by torn-up books and broken chairs and chests of weapons and a mirror with its broken shards painstakingly pieced back together, and maybe they’ll conclude, in all their scholarly wisdom, that this dead man had been loved once, loved enough to be given a burial with so many offerings. Maybe, maybe, they’ll even think he was worshipped once.

That had been his last real thought before the battle called for him.

And now, here he was again, alive and breathing and looking at Dream through a strange haze. Were they underwater? Were they finally drowning?

But then Dream reached up, and George flinched back.

Both of them stilled, with Dream’s fingers inches from George’s face, and George knew they were both wondering when George had started being afraid of him.

“Stay still,” Dream said.

George did.

Dream’s knuckles swiped against George’s cheek. It wasn’t until that moment that George realized he’d been crying.

“Who are these tears for?” Dream asked, knowing George wouldn’t deign to give him an answer.

Instead, George stood hastily. As he wiped the last of his own tears away, George looked down at Dream, still crouched by his overturned chair, and he said, “I guess you were right.” He scoffed. *When is he not?* “Sapnap’s coming home.”

But then he didn’t. Not for a long while yet.

And George waited.

And waited.

And drowned in his own patient misery.

When the door opened, years later, they did not recognize each other.

He thought once that would have been an impossibility. They were supposed to know each other, weren’t they, to the end of the world? That was the promise. That was the hope that kept him alive, the only thing to tide him over as he became a ghost in his own home, haunting empty hallways,

pacing empty rooms.

But when that front door creaked open, spilling light into a foyer that had not seen the sun in years, it was a stranger who stumbled in.

The god of the forests was sitting on the stairs, the slim rectangle of daylight slowly creeping towards him. It slanted over his legs, his chest, his arms, before stopping at the too-pale column of his throat, as if even the sun was terrified to reach for his face.

“Dream?” he said, his voice sore with disuse.

The stranger didn’t respond. Instead, he took one slow step, then another, and then he fell to his knees on the dusty floor, and he stayed there.

Neither of them spoke. Neither of them moved. Neither of them could look the other in the eye.

And then there were footsteps, coming down the stairs.

Dream jostled past him, uncaring, callous, just as he’d been for the past seven years. Dream reached the stranger, stood over him for a long, silent moment.

“Sapnap,” Dream said, and George *remembered*.

Sapnap raised his head from the floor, and the look on his face carved a hole through George’s chest.

He’d *aged*. They weren’t supposed to, the whole immortal lot of them. They were born and would die as they were. But time had etched itself forcefully into the sharp planes of Sapnap’s face; it was a violent senescence, and Sapnap had not put up much of a fight. He’d given into his own deterioration. Once, it was hard to look at him without seeing the flames of war, always there, burning away in the back of his obsidian eyes, and his mouth was never too far off from a grin. Now, it was hard to imagine this man before George ever smiling at all. His hair grew around a stained face and down his shoulders in a messy tangle. His clothes were torn and streaked with what could have been dirt, if George didn’t know any better.

In Sapnap’s eyes, there was *nothing*.

“Dream,” Sapnap replied, and the word came out in a desperate sob. He reached trembling hands upwards and clutched desperately at Dream’s shirt, a god reduced to supplication. “*I’m sorry.*”

George couldn’t see Dream’s face, but he could see the way his shoulders tensed. He could only hope to guess at the expression on Dream’s face as the green-eyed god reached for Sapnap, taking his muddy, tear-stained face between his clean hands. Just as he’d done for George a million years ago, Dream wiped the tears from Sapnap’s cheeks with his thumbs, gently and carefully with the practiced tenderness of a parent comforting a wayward child.

And then, with that same softness, Dream said, “Oh, Sapnap. I fucking told you so.”

George expected Sapnap to flinch back. To *fight* back.

But instead he wilted.

“Spirit—” he choked out. “I don’t know where he went. I—I lost him, too. I fucking lost him, too.”

George raced through his memories of the battle, but the poor horse was lost among the carnage.

“Tell me,” Sapnap said. “Tell me who it was. I know you know, because you always do. Tell me who to fight. Tell me who took everything away from me.”

“Everything?”

Finally, finally, Sapnap looked at George.

George blinked back at him. He hadn't meant to say anything. He hadn't meant to draw the full tragic weight of Sapnap's haunted gaze on himself. He had meant to retreat into the darkness not even Dream had managed to coax him out of.

But instead, here they were, strangers again, as mistrusting as they were on the night they first met, when George first looked at Sapnap in the flickering light of a bonfire and thought, *I knew you once*.

Sapnap waited for George to finish his sentence. They both knew the words that were in line to follow.

Everything. He said he'd lost everything.

But I'm still here.

But George would take those unspoken words with him to his grave, wherever and whenever that might be. Instead, he swept his eyes over Sapnap, over the white cloak tucked around his shoulders like a child's blanket, over the moss that clung to him almost like an embrace, over the weeds and ivy that had grown around his limbs and the single dandelion stuck to his hair, its white petals stark against his pitch-black curls.

Sapnap let him look.

Still kneeling, still a stranger, Sapnap said, “They grew on me, while I was...” His eyes darkened, returning to an unspeakable place for a brief moment. “While I was... mourning. Was it your doing?”

George held his shattered stare.

“No,” he lied.

Sapnap only nodded.

“Come on,” Dream said gently, pulling Sapnap up. When Sapnap's knees buckled, Dream wrapped his arm around him and let him lean on him. Dream threw George a glance over the top of Sapnap's head. The command behind that single look was clear. *Shut up and follow me*. “Let's get you cleaned up.”

George pulled himself up from the staircase and watched as Dream led Sapnap back to the kitchen. Back to where he belonged. Back where George always wanted him to be. But he didn't have it in him to rejoice. He couldn't even muster sick vindication at having been right. There was only the gnawing fear that the worst was only just coming around the corner.

Dream and Sapnap's shared footsteps stopped at the doorway to the kitchen.

“Sapnap?” Dream whispered softly, his arm still bracing Sapnap up. He was the only thing keeping Sapnap from crumbling apart, the only one keeping him together.

In that moment, all three of them knew he'd already won.

“*Never*,” he said, his voice turning low and vicious, the warmth bleeding out of his words just as quickly as he'd pretended at it, “try and replace me ever again.”

Dream helped Sapnap to a chair, watched George place himself across the room, said, “I'll be right back,” and left George and Sapnap alone together for the last time.

For a while, there was nothing to do but wallow in the silence. It settled over them like a heavy blanket, pinning them down against the floorboards of the home they'd built together. Sapnap sat listlessly, curved over himself with his head in his hands, his hair spilling between his fingers in messy tangles. George leaned against the counter, the very same counter he'd had to fix alone after Sapnap broke it in his last fight with Dream, and found he had nothing to say. He used to imagine all the words he'd fling at Sapnap the moment Sapnap crawled back to him, the accusations and the backhanded jibes. Those sharp practiced words fled from him now, leaving George standing alone, unsure of what to do with his own hands.

They'd broken apart before, had had arguments that George thought would spell the end, had walked away himself with no intention of returning. But still, inevitably, like the waves to the shore, they'd come back to each other.

This time felt different. This time, the separation felt permanent. The gulf between them was too wide, uncrossable.

George was going to cross it anyways.

“You know,” he said slowly, “Dream just about lost his mind with you gone.”

Sapnap didn't look up, but George knew he was listening.

“I mean, he tried to hide it. But I don't think he expected you to hold out for so long.” George drummed his fingers anxiously against the countertop behind him. “I think he expected you to come back the moment you lost.”

The silence stretched.

George almost gave up on speaking at all until Sapnap said, “I couldn't leave them there.”

“Well, yeah, but you could've brought them—”

“No, George.” Sapnap looked up, then, and never had George seen anyone so *anguished*. “I *could not* leave them there. I couldn't stand up, even if I tried. But I didn't want to try. I wanted to stay there and *rot* but of fucking course I couldn't, because I'm cursed to live. My punishment is my survival.” He took a shaky breath, and George saw him struggle for his next words. “You should know, George. I want you to know this. I'll fight Dream's war. I'll fight anyone he tells me to, if only for a chance to put my sword through the son-of-a-bitch that did this to me. And then that's it for me.”

If George had been anyone else, if he had not lost and lost and lost, if he had not stood in the middle of a forest fire and felt death a thousand times over without dying himself, he would have said anything else but a simple whispered, “Okay.”

Sapnap's mouth twisted into some grim imitation of a smile. “Don't worry,” he said. “I don't expect you to mourn me.”

A different conversation from lifetimes ago echoed around their empty kitchen.

“Definitely not,” George said, which meant, *I will do nothing else.*

Sapnap blinked up at him, and George thought he might have seen a light flicker to life behind his eyes. But it was a candlelight held up against the darkness of the entire universe; it would not be enough.

“You don’t have to go,” he said. “I’ll keep my promise to you. This isn’t your war to fight.”

George stared back at him for a long moment. Then he said, “Don’t be an idiot.” He pushed himself away from the counter and walked steadily towards the table. He pulled out a chair. Dragged it in front of Sapnap. Sat down. “If we’re going down, we might as well go down together.”

Dream returned to find George gently plucking leaves and rotten petals from Sapnap’s hair, all so fragile they crumbled away in his hands. Dream had a half-smile on his face as he stalked towards them, holding a basin of water and a clean cloth. He kneeled by Sapnap’s chair, dipped the cloth in water, and began wiping dirt and blood and mud off Sapnap’s face. They moved without saying anything; George stood and walked behind Sapnap to untangle his hair, combing his own fingers through the dark strands as Dream continued his work. They took care of him, and Sapnap repaid them by letting himself be cared for.

It wasn’t all bad. That was the worst thing about it. Their time together, no matter how it ended, no matter how it started, had moments like this. Moments of tenderness, kindness, brotherhood. George could only speak for his own sincerity, but he would swear until his last breath that it was real for him. And that was what made it hurt. It would be easier to forget a tragedy if he hadn’t built a home right at its center.

By the time the cicadas started singing outside, the candles were burning low, withered petals scattered across the floor, and Dream had already told them of how they’d start a war.

It was a simple.

It was cruel.

Sapnap listened to the plan without saying a word.

“Well?” Dream said, when all was said and laid out before them. “What do you think?”

Sapnap looked to George. But if he hoped to rediscover his morality in the tired lines of George’s face, he found cold indifference instead. The writing was on the wall; virtue would change nothing. Only fools expected honor from gods with nothing left to lose.

So Sapnap turned back to Dream.

“When do we leave?” he asked.

Dream began to smile.

They ended where they started, in a world of snow and dead trees and church bells ringing clear through the howling of the north winds.

George remembered a town of rickety houses straining against the weight of a blizzard, of narrow

gates and narrower roads, of quiet, restrained townsfolk that put all their devotion to the very same god that would plan their demise. But as the three of them crested the hill that overlooked the humble little town, George realized it, too, had changed over the years. Tall walls rose around a large expanse of brick buildings crowded close together, almost like children huddling in the cold. This far above everything, George could see people moving in and out of their homes, or lounging against the freshly-lit lampposts, or leaning out of their windows to greet passing neighbors, or heading to the bustling marketplace with baskets tucked under their arms and children tucked under their parents' coats, or sitting on the steps of the marble church at the very heart of their doomed city. Everything and everyone looked so small. Like ants.

It was easier to withhold mercy from insects.

The battle axe strapped to George's back seemed to weigh lighter than it ever did.

It would be a massacre, plain and simple. Something Dream's Angel could not ignore. Something that would call him back, wherever he was, straight into the palm of Dream's hand. A whole war, just to draw one god's attention.

A small part of George thought they might deserve it. This world, this universe, was rotted down to the core. And here was Dream, letting them burn it down as they wished. Wasn't this what George had wanted all those years ago, when he was standing in the ashes of what used to be his forest, his lungs full of smoke and loathing, his hands itching for a chance at vengeance? This was their fate, and they brought it down on themselves.

But then he shook his head, almost like he was clearing cobwebs from it, and all he could hear over the sweet peal of the church bells was the sound of thousands of voices, laughing, talking, whispering, unaware that right outside their city walls, two gods had returned, armed to the teeth.

George glanced sideways at Dream, who stood between him and Sappnap. He hadn't brought anything with him, and why would he, when the god of war was the only weapon he would ever need?

Distantly, George recalled the last conversation they'd had in the Community House.

He'd wandered the hallways aimlessly, as if, deep down, he knew he could never return there again. He'd placed his hand against the wall, trailing his fingers against the old wood as he walked, listening to the creaks of the floorboards under his bare feet. Eventually, inevitably, he found Dream in one of the rooms, standing at the window with his hands in his pockets. The sunset slanted over him, painting his body in scarlet and shadow. In the dying light, Dream almost looked like just a boy, fair-haired and tall and harmless.

George didn't wait for him to turn around before he started speaking.

"You asked me once if you could ever do anything to make me hate you."

Dream's shoulders tensed, as if he was expecting a blow. But he still didn't turn.

Drawing from the frustration and pain and anger that had gathered in his heart for years, just waiting for a moment to explode, George continued, "I can tolerate you being cruel to me. I can bear it. I don't care enough to hate you for that. If I did, I would have left you here alone years ago." He took a sharp breath, feeling like someone had put a knife in his gut and *twisted*. But he couldn't stop, not now, not when he knew it might be the last time he'd ever get the chance. "But you tried it with Sappnap, and that's where I draw the line. *He's* the line, Dream. And you've crossed it."

“Dream?” Sapnap’s voice echoed in the cold, dark house. “George? I’m ready now. Let’s go.”

“I’m on my way,” George called back without taking his eyes off Dream’s back.

Turn around, he begged silently. Look at me and say something, for fuck’s sake.

And he did, but it wasn’t something George wanted to hear. “Go,” Dream said quietly, almost like he hadn’t heard George at all. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

When he met George and Sapnap at the threshold, he’d said nothing to George. He wouldn’t even look at him. Everything since then—all his light-hearted conversations, all his attempts at concern, all his offers of a spare coat when their lonesome trek slowly brought them closer to their northern destination—was reserved for Sapnap, who was Dream’s favorite now, who perhaps had always been Dream’s favorite the way he was George’s, who had broken the way Dream wanted him to, the way George had not.

George felt his icy exclusion down to his bones. With Dream’s banishment and Sapnap’s inevitable self-destruction, George was set adrift all on his own, an exile of his own making.

He didn’t know who he would be after all this. He just knew he would no longer be theirs.

Now they stood where the beginning met the end, the axis of all their lives. All the steps they’d ever taken had led them here, standing over a damned city, with nothing holding them together than the faded memory of loyalty.

Dream cocked his head to the side as he considered the city stretched out below them.

“Do you want to know,” he said calmly, “what kind of god I am, George?”

George stiffened. It was the first time Dream had said his name since they’d left the House.

“What?” George bit out, because despite everything, some reprehensible part of him would still answer to the sound of Dream’s voice.

“The merciful kind,” he said, throwing George a mirthless grin. “Until now.”

And then he snapped his fingers.

That was all it took. A snap of his slender fingers, the movement so quick George wouldn’t have registered it if not for the sharp *crack* that echoed after it, too loud to have just come from a single gesture. It sounded like canon fire, or the splintering of a giant’s bones, or the world ending.

All at once, everything stopped.

The laughing and the talking and the whispering. The walking and the leaning and the lounging and the going about their lives. The noise and activity of an entire city, snuffed out as all the people within it froze where they were, suspended in time, caught mid-step, mid-sentence, mid-laugh.

And then, all eyes turned to Dream.

A thousand heads snapped up, all at the same time, as if they’d all been strung on the same puppeteer’s string and the puppeteer had *pulled*. A thousand slack-jawed faces, unblinking, looked to the god that stood high over them, the god whose story was painted on their church walls, the god who now opened his grim mouth and said, “*Approach.*”

They did. Oh, gods, they *did*.

Hundreds. Thousands. All walking towards their own slaughter.

George had thought he was past horror. He was wrong.

“*You—*” He turned towards Dream, who looked just as surreal as the day they met. “You could have done this all along.” *We never stood a chance.* Going against his own sense of self-preservation, he seized the sleeve of Dream’s shirt and spun him around, forcing him to face him. “That day I let you come with us. That day I let you into our lives. Was that you? *Was it you in my head?*”

His voice pitched with hysteria. Dream only fixed him with a look that made him feel so, so small.

“Would it change anything if I was?”

“You fucking *idiot,*” George said, the word now laced with more vitriol than he thought himself capable of. “It would change *everything.*”

Dream answered his despair with cool indifference. “Then I’ll let you believe what you want, George. Preserve what memory of me you want to. See? Don’t ever say I was unkind to you.”

George was swinging his axe before Dream could finish speaking.

Dream stepped nimbly back, avoiding the sharp blade by a hair’s breadth. He narrowed his eyes at George, in annoyance more than anything.

“George—” he warned.

George swung again.

Their boots skidded against the snow as they fell into the graceless chaos of one immortal trying to kill the other. There was no logic behind George’s movements, no calculated strategy. He swung his axe with everything he had in him, seeing nothing past his own fury. This was a fight he could never win, but he didn’t care. He just wanted to make Dream *bleed.*

He could hear Sappnap calling his name from somewhere far away, but his eyes were on Dream. He watched as Dream’s face shifted from annoyance, to indignation, to boredom, and then to anger as George kept swinging and swinging and swinging.

His axe split the earth where Dream’s right foot had been just a split second before, and the sound of it was like the crack of a whip. He was the weakest god of the three of them, but a god he still was. Dream’s mistake had been forgetting that.

“*Enough,* George,” Dream ordered.

But George was done listening.

Dream stepped back, too slowly, just a second too slowly, and George took his chance. One blow. He only needed one clean blow.

He’d cut Dream’s heart right out of his chest.

George swung for the last time.

But Sappnap was there.

He slid between Dream and George just as the axe arced towards him. There was the hiss of steel

grinding on steel as his sword rose to meet George's axe, and the impact almost knocked him off his feet. With Sappnap still blocking George's strike, Dream stepped casually towards George, wrapped one hand on the axe's bone handle, and tugged it easily out of George's hands, like a parent taking a disobedient child's toy away.

George's breath came out of him in short, packing bursts, misting the air between him and Sappnap and Dream. Through the fog, he could see the agonized look on Sappnap's face. He could see Dream weighing his axe in his hands. He could see Dream hold it horizontally, the axe that had been with him almost as long as Sappnap, the axe that had saved his life a thousand times over the decades, the axe that was the first thing that had been well and truly *his*.

"No—" George said, just as Dream brought the axe's handle down over his knee.

There was a sharp *crack* as the axe was split in two: handle and blade, both useless now. Dream tossed the fractured pieces at George's feet with a look of disgust.

"Look at yourself," Dream spat. "Do you really still think you have power over me? You have *nothing*."

"Go fuck yourself," George said.

Dream's brows knit together. George couldn't read the emotion that crossed his face just then, but only the most generous poet would call it hurt. Dream opened his mouth, doubtless to order him to fall on his own sword, but it was Sappnap who spoke first.

"George," he said, so quietly the howling winds almost drowned him out. "I think you should go."

George stood there in the snow, miles and miles away from the closest shade of green that wasn't Dream's eyes. Of all the places Sappnap could have broken his heart, did he really have to do it when George was so godsdamned powerless?

"Why?" George spat back. "So I don't have to watch you slaughter all of those defenseless children?"

"Well," Dream said with a shrug, "not *all* of them. I still need an army."

"A mindless army with a pawn for a general," George said, his eyes pinned on Sappnap. "How fitting."

Sappnap's jaw clenched.

"After all we know of him," George said, "you still choose him. All for a shot at revenge."

"What do you want me to say, George?" Sappnap asked. Exhaustion dripped off every syllable. His eyes were dark with despair.

Say you'll come with me. Say it isn't too late. Say you're still my best friend.

"I have nothing more to say to you," George said.

It was the last thing he'd ever say to Sappnap.

To Dream, to the green-eyed god, to the boy who had ruined his life, George said, "I'll see you in hell, I guess."

"Not if I see you first," Dream replied, so lightly George almost wondered if he was trying to make

him smile.

George turned and began to walk away.

But then, seven paces in, he turned back around to face them once last time.

He could see Sapnap and Dream, watching him leave. Behind them, thousands waited in prim and silent lines outside the safety of their city halls, the first casualties of the world's bloodiest tantrum, all of their lives reduced to collateral damage. And Sapnap would be the one to deal the death blows.

"I hope," George said, "if there's a life after this, I never have the misfortune of meeting you again."

When he walked away this time, he did not look back.

He found Spirit lost but unafraid in the first forest he checked.

Spirit was grazing underneath a wide oak tree, nibbling calmly on the grass until George came forwards out of the underbrush. The horse raised its head, meeting George's eyes, and the forest god raised his hand in greeting.

"Hey, there," he said softly. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Spirit blinked lazily.

"Here," George said, digging into his pockets and taking out a handful of fresh berries. "An apology."

The horse hesitantly nudged the berries around George's palm before taking a bite. Then another. And another, until George's hands were clean.

For a minute, George let himself lean against Spirit, breathing quietly, in and out, as the forest welcomed him home—the sounds of the cicadas just waking in the dusk, the rush of a distant river, the birds flying high over his head, the leaves rustling in the warm wind, chasing the cold from George's skin.

In a few months' time, he'd be burying Sapnap in the valley where they had first met. A week after that, he'd be going to sleep under the very same tree he'd woken up in years and years and lifetimes ago. A hundred years after that, he'd wake again to find Spirit waiting, and he'd manage to smile and say, "Hello, do you know what century it is?" and when Spirit neighed gently in response, George would realize this world—no matter how hard he had tried—would not be worth loving alone.

The grief would never leave him, and he'd be haunted by the ghost of unfulfilled promises until the sun swallowed this doomed earth. He would see Sapnap everywhere, in the stars, in every mirror, in every cold river, and he would never stop apologizing. In another story, another life, perhaps, they would have fought that last battle together, like brothers, together until their last breath. In that story, maybe Dream would have been with them, just the three of them against the world. In that story, Dream wouldn't be lying when he said he was the best thing that would ever happen to them.

But that was a time George hadn't lived just yet.

He was still here, in this moment, with his head pressed against the warmth of Spirit's muzzle, his fingers still sticky from his offered berries, snow from a distant land still melting in his hair. The forest was alive around him.

He grabbed Spirit's reins, still miraculously intact even after the battle Sarnap had dragged it through.

"Come on, you must be tired," George said. "Let's find you someplace to sleep."

He led Spirit deeper into the forest, and wherever he stepped, flowers bloomed in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

What a journey, huh? :) This all began as a silly little side-project for me, just to explore the world I had built up in passerine because I wasn't ready to leave it yet, but over the past few months I've just thoroughly enjoyed this story for what it is by itself. Thank you, thank you, thank you for sticking around for the end of the road :)

ALSO IM SORRY FOR THE TYPOS IT IS 5 AM i shall fix the errors when i am less sleep deprived lmfao

End Notes

Yep. It's me again lol

This will be a less "ambitious" project than passerine, more character-driven than plot-driven and definitely shorter, but I still hope you guys enjoy reading it :) This can be read before or after reading passerine, so no heavy spoilers ahead for those who haven't read passerine yet :D

As always, thanks for reading <3

((Also, work and chapter titles taken from Shrike by Hozier))

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!