

Houyi was a myth in flesh. As Fate was led up the gentle blue slopes, past cozy little hamlets up a gravelly path, he was feeling a smidge unsettled. It wasn't that there were hymns sung about him (though there were), nor was it their strange and dangerous environs, nor was it the fact that there were as far as Fate knew fewer than ten beings in all the Multiverse who could genuinely threaten him, and Houyi was at the tippy-top of the list (though this too was true).

It was the man himself. He knew there was a Houyi once—a Houyi who had carved his name into legend. A Houyi who had shot the nine tyrannical Phoenix Godkings out of the skies. A Houyi who had slain innumerable holy and infernal beasts; who had ended civilizations with a twang of a bowstring; who had carved a bloody, furious path to the top of the Multiverse. Who was so powerful not even those Godkings, nor factions of Godkings whose families he'd slain—who harbored the deepest of grudges—dared admit it; for what fool in all the Multiverse dared make an enemy of the terrible Houyi? This Houyi was a husband, a brother, a warrior, a man. That was the young Houyi.

And now there was *this* Houyi, the Houyi who had fused with the Overbow, and so had become something else entirely: Houyi the Eternal Sentinel. Houyi who went beyond being a myth; Houyi who had made himself into what others thought he already was. Houyi the avatar of justice, carving all weakness from his flesh, shedding his humanity, transmogrifying himself into a perfect concept. A vicious tool to be wielded with prejudice by the Multiverse. The Watcher at the Edge of the World.

Fate shuddered, glancing as another big purple Houyi-emotion-clone-thing went by them, dragging a cart of blue firewood. He'd heard the tales of this cold Houyi. This new Houyi, so they said, was a creature of brutal logic—this creature who would save humanity by shedding his own. But that last bit always seemed to Fate metaphorical. Never had he thought the man would *literally* do it by splitting his very *soul*! It seemed to him unnatural.

Well—maybe it worked, and good for him! It wasn't Fate's place to judge, was it? Still... his hands ate at each other as another two of Houyi's emotion-clones, one gray, one yellow, ambled by. *Odd. Very odd!*

How did one speak to a myth? How did one address a concept? Usually Fate was one to talk with a man over tea—shoot the breeze, as it were, make a friend. But as he glanced around at this barren island he got the distinct feeling friends of Houyi were in short supply.

"This is far enough," said Kindness, drawing to a stop. Fate nearly bumped into him. "Eh?"

Kindness pointed up the winding path before them which stretched up a tall bluff furred with glowing blue grass. "You must walk the rest of the path alone." Kindness bowed. "It has been a pleasure, Fate. Good luck." He paused. "I seldom hear out others. I almost never grant their requests. But there must be something special about you or your circumstance... it has, I think, something to do with my brother."

"Oh, truly?" Fate blinked. "How so?"

"To be sure, I don't know it *truly*," said Kindness. "But Vulnerability has been growing larger of late. As has Nostalgia. So it happens when I ruminate about that little rascal."

He paused. “It is perhaps my one greatest moral failing that I did not, and still will not, shoot *him* down.”

“Well—that’s a little harsh, surely!” said Fate with a little squeaky laugh. “Dorian may be a bit prickly, but he’s hardly a monster. He may have his flaws, as we all do prickly, but he’s got good traits to him!”

“Name one.”

Fate hesitated. Then hesitated some more. He wracked his brain.

“Well—alright, you’ve got me there. But perhaps they’re buried rather deep within! But they can be dug out! Everyone is capable of redemption. Everyone has some goodness to them!”

Kindness regarded him with a heavy gaze. “Do you truly believe that?”

“Of course!”

“I do not.” Kindness smiled. “And *I* am Houyi at my most kind. It is not merely the case with my fool brother. People are, at their cores, are who they are. People can change. That change is cosmetic. Deep-down, the stuff of the soul, is set. The best one can do is to resist one’s core nature. That is all. You are very old, Fate, older than even I. You ought to know this.”

Fate bristled a little. “Oh come now, good sire. You can’t truly believe this sort of—pardon my language—this hogwash! What a cynical lens through which to see the world! How awful! How can anyone muster up any hope, with such a—a *mean* view of humanity?”

“I don’t believe in humanity, nor Spirit Beasts, nor any other creature which claims to live,” said Kindness slowly. “I believe in *myself*.”

The warmth in his gaze had cooled. “Left alone, life eats itself. Left alone order devolves to chaos—*always*. It is my great Kindness to the living community of the Multiverse that I curb its greatest excesses, arrow by arrow. You may not agree with me, and yet it *is* my perspective. You ought to keep this in mind should you seek to convince me.”

Then Kindness clasped his hands behind his back, smiling wanly. “You walk a tightrope between optimism and delusion. It is a charming act. Yet my core self shall have no patience for you if you fall off in either direction.”

He paused. “I only mean to help. I *wish* what you say were true. I truly do.” A corner of his lips quirked up. “Who knows? Perhaps you may yet convince me.”

Then he gestured to the winding road ahead, the road to the top of the hill where a figure wreathed in black stood, gazing out at the twinkling night sky.

“In all sincerity. Best of luck.”

When Fate was at the base of the hill the shadow was still. As he went up, as the shrubbery about him thinned and the gravel path sprouted thick hairy grasses, as the land grew more barren and the charming little hamlet receded below, the figure was still unmoving. Even as he rounded the final curve and stood at the peak—even as he stood not twenty paces of flat, grassless blue ground from the man, Houyi had about him a boulder’s timeless stillness.

Now Fate saw why. Houyi's whole being was focused on one act.

Beneath his simple cloak one arm was drawn back. The other held a bow firm: a bow which seemed to Fate the most ordinary thing in the world, a bow a mortal could have made. Simple brown wood, fitted with a light sleek string. Houyi was aiming, his whole body frozen with tension.

Nothing about it suggested world-ending power. Yet *that* was the most peculiar thing of all. Fate had long since reached the peak of power; he could suss out the power level of any creature in the Multiverse with but a glance!

And yet here Houyi—if he *was* indeed Houyi, and indeed a hint of suspicion prickled at Houyi now as he gave the man another look—here Houyi seemed like no-one at all! A void of qi, like a mortal who hadn't touched a cultivation manual in his life!

Then Houyi let the arrow go.

The twang of the bow was soft and ordinary. The form on the shot was perfect, a seamless kinetic chain head-to-toe. He could've been a veteran hunter hunting a deer in some tiny insignificant wood.

But the arrow shifted out like no arrow Fate had ever seen. It moved at the pace of an arrow fired by any mere mortal, and yet it had an immense gravity to it, like the slow ponderous arc of a celestial body crossing the night sky. It had none of the burst of a cannonball. It had none of the speed of other godly archers he'd seen, none of that shocking zip-quick flash and fury. Instead it moved like a great armada of battleships leaving a port. It had a certain finality to it, an inevitability.

Fate saw the thing make contact with the fabric of this plane. There was a sound then: his whole field of vision drew inward as the arrow pushed against the fabric, stretching it, not slowing in the slightest, forcing the *world* to contort around *it*. Something had to give. A tear opened up at the arrowhead, a tear which was blown into a jagged crevasse, a horrid nothing-colored fissure hung in the air; the world howled and bled and shrieked; the arrow went through, arching into the void, and the world stitched itself back up. The air in its wake shifted uneasily, as though gasping.

Fate knew one thing with cold certainty. He could see it in the green lines of destiny, though he didn't need to invoke his Laws to see the truth. It did not matter who the victim was, mortal or Godking. Whoever that arrow was meant for was already dead.

And *then* Houyi turned to him.

He looked like an ordinary man. Fate had seen him; he'd seen his color-clones, though this version looked no more or less than any human. Fate would not be fooled again.

“Is it true, sire?” said Fate, eyes wide. “That you have not missed in ten thousand years? That your arrows track their victims across all of space and time—that it matters not what treasures, defenses, hiding-places they muster? That every twang of your bow is always a one-shot-kill, a life snuffed out—like *that*?”

Houyi regarded him silently. He did not smile. He did not frown. He simply looked. It was unnerving. Fate was ranked number seven in all the Multiverse! He very, very rarely dealt with anyone stronger than himself. He never dealt with anyone who could genuinely *threaten* him.

But here the difference between rank number seven and rank number one was the difference between Heaven and Earth...

“Greetings, Fate,” said Houyi evenly, plainly. “What do you desire of me?”

Fate cleared his throat. He usually did prefer to have some tea, perhaps chatter a bit about each others’ lives, get warm, make a friend, perhaps. *Right to business, then!*

“It appears as though we are losing the war for the Fate of the Multiverse,” said Fate slowly. “My visions were true. Jez’s powers stretch far beyond even my direst warnings—and he has enticed a register of Godkings to his side. Each addition bolsters an organism of already unfathomable power, and he only gains ground yet! We mount an impassioned defense, and yet Jez himself... I fear I am not a match for him.”

Silence. Fate took it as a sign to go on. “It is not simply that he is powerful in qi. He is also charismatic and pragmatic. He professes kindness, and yet acts with rank ruthlessness! And most pressing he is perhaps the most talented swordsman I have met, in all my years. He may be as talented with the blade as you are with the bow, sire, dare I say it! It is...”

Fate shuddered. “It is a most dangerous concoction indeed!”

He waited. No reaction. Fate went on, feeling suddenly antsy.

“Good sire—if he grows at his current rate—why, we may not yet have ten years before he overruns all of the Multiverse!” Fate cried. “*This* is why I have made the perilous journey here, why I stand before you today. It is not so much a request. It is a plea.”

Houyi cocked his head. “Speak.”

Fate swallowed. He would never, never, *never* wish such an awful thing upon a living being in any other circumstance. He felt sick even as the syllables formed on his tongue. But things had gotten beyond dire, and Fate had tried everything, and still his fellow Godkings were slain by the day. Still entire planes were swallowed up under Jez’s golden aura. Something had to be done.

“The only creature in the Multiverse who may match him now, power-for-power, is *you*,” Fate said. “My plea is this. For the sake of the Multiverse—for the sake of Justice—shoot him down before he ends us all!”