

A/N: Last interlude chapter...

"No," said Houyi.

Fate choked. "Pardon?"

Houyi was silent, his stare impassive. It was plain nothing else was coming. He'd given his answer. That was enough.

"Why? *How?*" spluttered Fate. "Could it be that you still believe Jez is in the moral right?!"

Silence. "He is waging war on the *Multiverse*, sire! Whatever aspirations he professes to—whatever ideals to which he aims—he falls far short! The ends *cannot* justify these means. I— I should think this hardly needs debating!"

"I have given you my answer," said Houyi softly. His eyes, Fate only now noticed, were the only unusual thing about him. Now that he looked into him he saw swirling purple galaxies dotted with stars—like he held all of existence in those orbs.

One last desperate try. Fate owed the Multiverse that much. "My good fellow," said Fate, drawing up, bristling a little. "Could it be that he is too great a threat for even *you*? Surely not! I would not accuse you of *cowardice*, of course... but one must wonder..."

It was a cheap move. A jab at the ego, a sad limp final play. Houyi did not dignify it with a response.

Fate hung his head. He had hoped—well, he wasn't sure for *what*, precisely, but certainly more than this clipped little exchange! Was it over? It felt like they'd hardly begun!

"Is that all?" said Houyi slowly.

"I should ask that of you," sighed Fate. Another silence, turgid with finality. Then, just when Fate thought Houyi was done forever—"About my brother..."

Fate looked up. There was a strange catch in the man's voice, a pause, something nearing human. His face twitched a little. It was like he didn't know how to express proper human emotion—or perhaps he'd simply forgotten?

"Yes?" said Fate.

"Is he..." Another pause. More twitching. Houyi's lips drew tight together. He looked *awkward*. Nearly uncomfortable, even! It looked wrong on a creature like him. "Is he eating well? Is he... taking good care of himself? Will he be safe?"

Fate almost laughed at the sheer absurdity of the questions. This whole situation, standing here speaking to the most powerful creature in the Multiverse about something so—so banal, so utterly trivial—along with the multicolored clones, the pocket dimension filled with misshapen monsters—it was all starting to feel like a fever dream.

"He's hardly an infant, sire, as you well know. He is a *Godking*—and a shrewd one at that!" said Fate. "He's still up to his usual shenanigans. Running about wreaking havoc on his lonesome. He's sequestered himself from this mess, as he always does! I wouldn't be worried about him, sire."

Houyi seemed to loosen up.

"Good," he said, breathing out. "Good."

And then his face firmed up like water freezing and his gaze grew still again. "Kindness will see you out."

He turned around to stare once more into the vast night sky.

That, it seemed, was that.

"I was rooting for you," whispered a yellowish Houyi clone, blinking up at him. Compassion, this one was called. It was chopping blue firewood at the side of the path.

"Thank you," said Fate with a nod, a tad morose. He'd passed this one and a handful of others as he and Kindness took the meandering trail back to the docks.

"It is a pity. Truly. But I expected as much," said Kindness, shaking his head.

"Why?" said Fate, sounding a little broken—even to himself. "I simply don't understand!"

"I don't deal well with grayness," said Kindness sadly. "Once an arrow leaves my hand its victim is gone. That is a weight I must carry for-ever. And so I reserve my judgments for the true monsters. Those whose core natures I deem undeniably abhorrent. Jez... is not one of those."

Fate chewed on that. He didn't know quite what to say.

"I agree," a voice snapped loudly behind them, and Fate jumped. At some point Rage had come up behind them, arms crossed. "It's stupid as all hells. But what can we do? We're but emotions. As far as *we're* concerned, we get in the way."

His brows knitted. "It's shitty. But we're right. Emotions cloud judgment. For judgments of such importance the only way is to subjugate us to ultimate reason. Doesn't mean we need to like it, though. Fucking sucks."

"Mm," said Kindness, nodding. "Yet it is the only way."

They were rounding the last bend to the docks. Fate's little rowboat bobbed sadly in the murk.

"Here," said Kindness, passing him a crystal orb. Inside was a snowflake of glistening green qi. The darkness around it seemed to pull back, as though afraid. "This treasure should ensure no monsters disturb you. Safe passage back. May we meet again under more auspicious conditions."

It was puff and air, that was all. They both knew they would likely never see each other again.

Fate accepted the gift with a bow of his head. "You are too kind, sir. Altogether too kind!"

Kindness smiled wryly. "It is my namesake."

"Well... I suppose I shan't impose on you any longer..." Fate paused, frowning. "Erm. Is he alright?"

Rage was shining, spilling a reddish haze out of every inch of him. He glanced down. "Eh? Oh. Nothing to worry 'bout! Just a lil' anger dumping. That's all. You must've really riled core up somehow. Now we're shunting it off into *me!*"

"...I see."

"This'll make me a teensy bit bigger," said Rage. He brightened. "I've been balding lately. Maybe I'll get a new hair."

Fate gave the place one last sweep, one forlorn look before he had to go for good. It really was a sad little island, wasn't it? Stuck at the edge of nowhere for all eternity?

"So you're the biggest of them, are you, sire? Houyi's emotions, I mean."

"Me?" Rage barked a laugh. "Hells no! Not at all—not even *close!*"

"Oh? Then who is?"

Kindness tapped a foot on the ground. *Blue* ground, Fate realized. On the hairy grass—*blue* grass which looked more like true human hairs by the second...

Then the entire island shook, rattled, as though the dirt itself was heaving in a breath.

A dense whisper issued forth from deep within the bowels of the land on which they stood, reverberating endlessly into the night. A huge, sad, empty sound.

"Hello," said the island.

No. Not an island. A *back*. A giant, rounded back.

"Fate, meet Loneliness," said Kindness. He looked down.

The ground had started to glow a frosty twilight blue.

A/N: End of the Interludes! Sorry for the short chapter, but this felt like a good cutoff point. Back to Dorian tomorrow!