

Helios

Like a fox to a burrow, mankind takes to the Sun. They raise their palms to the luminous star and shout their praises. They chant their wishes and sing hymns that peal through the hills and rush down the streams. There is nothing more mesmerizing than the steady hum of the people, their swaying harmony filling each and every crevice of the known world.

But there is also destruction.

The chaos reigns down from above, slaughtering every freedom and hope that the people cry out as their children are ripped from their grasp and their possessions scattered like sunbeams. That is their punishment from the Sun. As they pull trees from the ground and fish from the stream, the Son of the stars takes what he desires from them.

But they never learn.

The same lesson has been taught and relearned for centuries, but the people stay the same. That is the only thing one can rely on.

When I was a child, I asked my mother how Death would come for us. She told me, from the wise heart inside her blessed chest,

“Death will not come whisperin’ in your ear, darlin’. Soothin’ you for your treacherous journey to the afterlife. He will come knockin’, bangin’ on your door with all the strength of its weak soul.” She paused to unfold her best blouse and pin it up on the clothesline in our garden. This I remember clearly, as it was the blouse Death himself dragged her away in. “And he won’t let up, mind you. You can try and crawl away, but he will have you if he fancies.”

I began to cry then, my pudgy, childish face pinching and leaking ugly tears. I was still afraid of being lost, left alone to figure out my own path. She knelt to comfort me. “Now, boy. Do not waste your tears. We will need them when the heat strikes again.” She smiled kindly,

pinching my swelling cheeks. I giggled my tinny laugh, all fear forgotten, and resumed making destruction of my wooden blocks, the same blocks that now sit upon my bedside table. They are not perfect. They bare the notches made by the slip of my father's knife as he so painstakingly carved them. But they are also smooth, sleek from the touch of children's hands.

I drive my face from the wizened pages of a children's book. It provides nothing but the vague past of the last millennium. Whatever unknown information I hoped to uncover about the Sun was nothing but babble and false tales.

I set the book aside, deeply inhaling the stale scent of juniper gone dry. I imagine again what the land of the afterlife will look like. If only I could ask. If only I could seize the wrist of a man leaving this land behind and beg him to recite his glimpse of the paradise beyond. *Was it filled with clouds?* I would scream. *Were the pillars of the Sun's own temple shrouded in gold?* And he would tell me. He would part his parched lips and speak of the wonders I yearn for. The wonders that it will take a lifetime to have.

The thought of this flares up the raging creature caged in my ribs. I find myself out of my chamber door without as much as a thought. My legs, adopting a mind of their own, carry me through the cobbled walls of my home. Far off in the house I hear my father's pained groans. He is among the aged who will not let go of their miserable life. Though he does nothing but lie in bed day after day, he refuses to enter the land of the Sun, to enjoy eternal life. I shake my head, disappointed in his deference.

Outside the grand ebony doors lay the polished roads of a town I rarely pay any attention to. I walk past each mindless soul, every one of them unaware of their meaningless existence. They worship the Sun, but they do not comprehend any of it. They do not understand how pointlessly insignificant they are. Each man skinning fish for the market, each baker selling the

bread she labored over. No matter how much coin they make from it, nor the popularity they gain, it will mean nothing in the eyes of the Sun.

I pass unclean beggars on the streetside, reaching towards any noise they can decipher to be human, hoping to discover help beyond their blind eyes. I know now they will not find it. To my right lies mud-sealed cottages of stone, porches crowded with children. Children who ask their mothers about death, and cry when they receive the truth. So similar I was to the rest of them. How different I have become.

In the center of the town, alike every other civilization known to man, towers a temple. It was built by people long ago, made with precious metals and gems. Inside is nothing of significance, only the kneeling place of thousands who wish to connect with the Sun. Domed over the elaborate ceiling is thick glass, dimmed to protect the weak from going blind with their faith. I have been inside once, and only that. I found it sickening. Not one inhabitant of the temple had a single thought for the afterlife. Each one grveled at the feet of the Sun, but none of them would give up a dime for him. So strung on their earthly possessions, they know naught of how much they really matter. What is a single coin compared to a heaven's fortune?

One of the beggars catches me in my lapse. She is surprisingly quick. She grips my wrist with claw-like fingers as her lips move in silent words. Against my better judgment, I lean in. She brings her dry mouth to my ear, her entire body trembling with the effort. I furrow my brow in blatant disgust until I realize this was precisely what I had wished for: An opportunity for me to inquire about the afterlife. Is it possible her milky eyes can see what I cannot?

“Do not go with him,” she croaks, her eyes wide as a doe's. I am uncomfortably aware of her grimy hand on my forearm. “Do not succumb to death.”

I shove her away. I cannot help but rub my arm where she grabbed me. Foolish of me to think someone like her could hold something of value to me.

“Don’t touch me!” I spit. I leave her behind, painfully aware of her wide eyes still boring into my back. I am left strangely shaken by the encounter, but I don’t know why. The way her eyes were brimming with fear, and her grip so tight it could be nothing but terror. She seemed to think, to know, that I was in some sort of danger. I can’t help but glance over my shoulder, picking out every rustle of wind to be a malevolent spirit hellbent on my demise.

I stop suddenly, feet grinding to a halt on the cobblestone. A roadside shrine sits dilapidated and forgotten, wedged between two huts. The roof is a shoddy hay structure, providing little cover if there was to be a storm. Through the entrance I can see a rough rendition of the Son of the stars, with the robe of gold and blinding halo that is so popular among descriptions. Anxious to be out of the open street, I squeeze through the entrance. Unlike most roadside shrines, this one has a figure on the far wall in the place of a mural. Sharp slabs of metal shine from the ruined walls, and I can’t help but step towards them. I study my reflection, comparing it to that of others. My face, unblemished and unbroken by scars, is not the thing I pride in. Most would consider their handsomeness as their most valued feature, but I disagree. It is the soul and the mind that one should look for. It defines each person in a way that tells you of their true nature.

“Do you hear me?”

I spin around and cannot contain my gasp. The statue has grown, filling into the size of a full figure. I stumble backwards, grasping at the wall behind me for support. At first, I am convinced it is Fate, come to make heed of my menace towards him.

But I realize in a moment, that I am confronted not by Fate, but by Death. I search for an exit, afraid, but realize the shrine has melted away into a dark void. The form greets me shrouded not in cloth but in pure fear. It is draped over his body, collected ruthlessly from old and young alike. But beneath this dark veil, a beautiful face glows with sunlight. It is not Death knocking on my door. It is the Sun. I discern they are one in the same, now. His face is peaceful, its features relaxed into an almost sleeplike state. The eyes nestled into the hollows in the face are a blinding yellow, nothing like the soft gold I would have imagined. The nose is made up of a sharp bridge and soft nostrils. The mouth isn't tilted at all, resting in a straight line above the chin. The cheeks and frame are hard, but the strange hair softens the edges of the face. In the place of any hair at all lies the beginnings of wings. They flare out from the head, three pairs of them, two curling into a halo above. An aureole of light surrounds his head.

"Your arrogance is not appreciated." The Sun says. "You believe you are finer than the others. You are not. You desire something more than you have." I open my mouth to retort. He leans his face closer, features unchanged.

"I wish for something more than life," I whisper, my own sound a weak one, like the grinding of iron in comparison to the descendant star's. I had never noticed how raw and ugly it was. "Only that. Is it too much to ask?" I flinch at the pity I know he must feel.

"More than life? More than I have already given you?" He pulls away, headwings curling around his face to cover his disappointment. I am suddenly filled with anguish. I have disappointed the Sun! The worshiped one, the Son of the stars. Hate for myself coats the inside of my head.

"Do not hate the creation that I have made!" He turns and screams. But it is not a terrible scream. It is the peal of a bell of sorrow, of sadness. "Do you not realize how much I create for

you mortals?” Clear, effervescent tears begin to gather in his eyes. They spill over his cheeks as he continues with his demeaning speech. “I created you, your mother, your sisters, your brothers, your cousins. I created them all in my perfect image, and yet you still hate!” I think of the beggar woman and am washed with a wave of shame. The tears are flowing now, as thick as a waterfall. A puddle does not gather beneath us, for there is no ground for it to form. I want nothing more in that moment to cease the waterfall, to please the god. My lip trembles.

“Please, please!” Desperation fills my voice like a dark pool. “Let me go on and I will never disobey you again.”

The tears suddenly stop, like a plug was shoved into the source. Relief coils in me like a fallen rope. The Sun’s wings unfurl again, and he turns to me with hope. The soft look returning to his face clutches my heart inside my chest.

“You say you will never do it again. Again. You’ve turned away from me once.” His eyes flutter shut. The hope I thought I saw before dissipates in an instant. “It is only fair I turn away from you.”