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### Statera

He couldn't remember a time when Summer's Child hadn't existed, when she hadn't combined the sun and wind and soil to create sparks of life. Sparks of life that grew and flourished and tangled together into masses of growth suffocating and rotting in the stifling humidity of the season. He couldn't remember a time when Summer's Child hadn't stood at the center of it all, or a time when he hadn't killed her on the first day of fall.

Her death fell on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September and he met her by an Autumn-chilled lake, as was their bargain. She had taken the summer in Oregon, and so, at dawn on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, he bled into existence on the mist-kissed banks of a lake high in the Wallowa Mountains and waited for her arrival.

The sun was setting between frost capped peaks, his own doing, as he had passed the hours of his birth day slowly beginning the end of summer's dominion, when Solis, so named for the sun which she so loved, wandered out of the forest to greet him. Where she stepped, the grass seemed a little greener, the air a little warmer, the flowers a shade brighter and he frowned as his autumnal handiwork was undone.

"Occasus, is it that time already?" Her voice carried with it the cheerfulness of life, the joy of living, even as she faced her death.

"I'm afraid so," he offered her a smile. As the Son of Autumn, this was his duty: *bring about the end, save only those you must*. Her death was the first of his shift in the cyclic

ritual, the ceaseless rotation of the seasons. He held out a hand to her, and when she took it, he led her to the water's edge.

The lake lapped quick and insistent against their calves, their thighs, their hips, kissed their chests and necks with waves crested with cold. They walked together until he could barely stand, until she was treading water beside him and then he turned and drowned her.

Occasus traveled North as time fell further and further into fall, whispering warnings to the wild things as he went, urging them south, to sanctuary and safety and warmth. To those he couldn't persuade, he prompted their annual adaptations, recommending heavier coats, advising stocked supplies, or marking their internal calendars for the start of sleep. To those who could neither adapt nor flee his coming, he killed with a practiced air of detachment and efficiency. Where he walked, the grass seemed a little browner, the air a little cooler, the flowers a shade darker. As he wandered, he touched his fingers to the tips of leaves, brushed his knuckles along the bark of trees, and soon the forests were afire with the color of sunsets and endings.

October dawned crisp and cool on the Palouse and it was there Occasus decided to settle. He'd performed most of his duties, knowing that even as he occupied himself in this small portion of the world, the rest of this seasonal zone would feel his presence. Now it was his time to play, experiment with leaf colors and timing their fall, practice his calls for wind and rain and the sun, paint sunsets in new hues and sorbet swirls. That's why he chose Pullman: its sunsets. To him, an ageless being in an eternal loop, he had discovered early on that boredom was a very real and possible state of being, one that he now tried his

best to avoid. Sunsets were his favorite distraction and he found that he could spend entire days setting the weather conditions just right, tweaking the atmospheric particles just so to produce masterpieces of blues, golds, violets, and reds. Especially reds.

Red was her favorite color.

If he was being honest, he could've kept traveling during the four months every year he had to walk the Earth, letting her find him on his death day at the end of December. But he couldn't bring himself to keep moving when he knew the chances of her finding him sooner were that much greater if he picked a place and stayed put, splashing the sky in shades of crimson for her.

He couldn't remember a time before Winter's Daughter. She had always been there, just as Solis had always been there, just as he had always been. After hundreds of thousands of years, what he could remember was that at some point her birth day and his death day were no longer the same. At some point she had faded into existence before her time and they had met too soon.

The year it began, he'd spent the fall in Shenandoah, enjoying the forest carpeted mountains only just starting to blunt under the weight of their many years. He'd found a new way to tweak chlorophyll so that a single leaf could produce several colors at once. Under a red, red sunset, he'd dyed a maple leaf's veins the color of sin and its cuticle a cheery yellow, and, sitting back to admire his handiwork, he watched as frost peppered its jagged edges.

"I could freeze the entire thing, ya know."

Startled, Occasus dropped the leaf and rolled to his feet, turning to find who had spoken. A woman sat straddling the place his head had just been, as if she'd been lounging comfortably above him on the hillside the entire evening.

"It wouldn't be as colorful as your masterpiece there, but ice can do some fun things to leaves." She smiled, pale pink lips pulling back in a manner that was both deadly and beautiful. Occasus had been alone for such a long time it took him a moment to place her face.

"Nix, you startled me." He took a deep breath, running a hand through hair mussed with pine needles and bits of leaves. Glancing at the sun and testing the air temperature with another inhale, he looked Nix over, puzzled. "Why are you here? It can only be early November." He was so used to only seeing her for a few minutes, every December 22<sup>nd</sup>, when she would appear to take his life and begin her own season.

Her smile faded slightly, but she turned her gaze towards the sunset behind him before he could read the expression in her cobalt eyes.

"I felt your sunset and wanted to see it for myself. Figured a month early wouldn't hurt anyone." She flicked her gaze to him, then, and despite the nonchalant nature of her reply, he read the underlying curiosity, the seriousness, the passion.

He didn't say anything in response, simply because there was nothing to say. Winter's Daughter was early; there she sat in the midst of a Shenandoah autumn, his newly minted maple leaf spinning nervously between her fingers. Taking a step up the hill, he took the leaf from her hand and sat beside her.

"Show me what you can do with your ice then."

And so here he was, so many seasons later, waiting until she blew into his existence. In September, October seems so far away. In October, November is a daydream born of boredom, but as the years had gone by, Nix had managed to arrive as early as mid-October, whisking in with an unexpected snowfall, taking the maple leaf he offered her in the way of a greeting and turning it into a crystalline echo of itself.

A part of Occasus knew that what she was doing broke some rule, something fundamental and integral to nature, something they really had no right to mess with. She knew as well, it was an ache they both felt when they allowed their timelines to blend, but it never stopped her and he never stopped her. Better to bear the pain Mother Nature inflicted upon them in punishment than to go another season seeing each other only on his death day.

Early October on the Palouse was a chilly affair, and he'd spent the past few days taking this as a sign of Nix's impending arrival. These were the worst days for him, the waiting for her after the initial burst of energy born from his murder of Summer's Child and his time of experimentation and creativity. There were only so many colors the leaves could be; only so many circular patterns mushroom rings could take; the sunset could only get so red. He couldn't recall what he had done with his time when she hadn't shared his season, and a part of him feared what would happen to him if she were to be called back to her proper birth day.

He shook his head, simultaneously emptying it of these thoughts and loosening bits of twig and moss from his hair. He was walking the streets of a nearby college campus; heading towards a bonfire hosted as some sort of celebration for the unimportant, fleeting activities of the human youths. The chill had settled in his bones, and it sat unsettled along

their knobs and creases without Nix there to give it purpose. Fire would do him good and he had painted a sunset to match.

Occasus was standing behind the crowd of cheering, jeering people, the raging fire spewing sparks and vomiting heat on their unwary, unresponsive backs when he noticed the snow. The first flakes met the fire's sparks in a dance choreographed by a northerly wind, whisking the elements together and apart amidst silken spirals of smoke before they collided, destroying each other on impact. He blinked a flake from his lashes, raising his eyes to follow the silent paths of its sisters as they fell to earth. As his gaze fell with them, he saw her.

Nix stood across the bonfire pit, her body seemingly framed by the flickering tongues of heat that brought a crimson blush to her pale cheeks. He remembered her trying to describe to him her fascination with the color red, how it was a perfect juxtaposition to the pure, virginal white of the snow and ice in winter. He hadn't understood until seeing that blush creep across her cheekbones, blood on snow.

Her azure gaze met his, and he was brought back to the reality of her existence, the beginning of their time together on Earth. Without breaking her stare, he walked casually around the fire to meet her, affecting an air of careful control, not wanting her to see how much she had been missed.

"It's a little late in the season for you, isn't it love?" Occasus asked with a smile, pulling a maple leaf in ombre rouge from his sweater pocket. He tucked it carefully behind her ear, letting his fingers tug gently at the chocolate strands of her hair, dying a few briefly gold.

"It's early," Nix laughed, "and don't call me love." She smirked through the reprimand, softening its sting, as she pulled the offering from her hair. Locking eyes with Occasus, she kissed the leaf, not bothering to watch the ice spiderweb through its veins as she leaned in to deliver a similar kiss to his lips.

When they broke apart, he took her hand and led her away from the fire, the crowd, towards the hills and the wild. Remembering her words, he pulled her closer, wrapping an arm around her waist as they walked. "Early? Are you sure?" It had felt like forever to him.

"I'm sure. The pain is a little different this time."

This pulled Occasus up short, and he stopped, turning Nix's face towards him as he did so. He looked again at her eyes, and yes, in their depths he could read her pain.

"Different how?"

She pulled her chin away gently, shrugging. "It's sharper, in my chest now." Nix glanced at him, knowing before she looked that his brow would be furrowed in worry.

"We both knew this could happen. We're breaking all the rules, you and I; Autumn and Winter in love."

Occasus frowned at her exaggerated dreamy tone, but continued walking, pulling her chilly hand through the crook of his arm, attempting to warm her absentmindedly even though he knew she would never rise to his temperature.

"You would feel this too, if you left the boundaries of your season," Nix continued, her words erring ever so slightly on accusatory. He stiffened slightly, but she had a point. In all their time together he had never broken the time line Mother Nature had granted him. He'd thought about giving Solis a month more time, arriving just in time to complete the responsibilities tasked to Autumn's Son before Nix joined him in October, cutting out the

month of boredom. They'd even discussed more than once the possibility of them ignoring his death day, of losing Nix's icy dagger somewhere in the forest and never looking back. But his duties, the rules, blended with the sound of a ticking clock in the back of his mind, drowning out any reason he had to stay with Nix longer than was already allowed.

But with the knowledge of her heightened pain, her sacrifice that she made every year just to see him, the eternally ticking seasonal clock was starting to seem a little quieter, his duty a little more lax. *Bring about the end, save only those you must.* Didn't he deserve to be saved? Hadn't they already brought about the end? Here it was, both autumn and winter, their jobs were done.

His own chest ached slightly, but he clenched his jaw and tightened his grasp on Nix's hand where it rested on his forearm. "This year, I'll feel it with you."

Nix glanced at him sharply, "You're serious? You'll ignore your death day and stay with me?" There was a shard of hope in her voice that he couldn't bear to rip out, afraid of the damage it would cause if he did.

"I'm serious. Just me and you, no time lines, no death days." It felt liberating to promise her this, it felt right, as if it had been a long time coming. He nuzzled into her hair as they walked off the college campus, kissing her temple.

Occasus had inhabited a long-forgotten barn enveloped between the autumn-browened hills of the Palouse and it was there they returned that night. The next two months they spent exploring each other, exploring the region, testing their newfound boundary-less existence. December 22<sup>nd</sup> came and went; his death day passed without excitement and for a time the pains in their chests remained dormant. Nix, thriving in the



heart of her season, showed him how she could twist and twirl ice into the unique patterns of snowflakes, how she could pull at the fabric of the gray, bloated clouds until they emptied their precious cargo in a maelstrom of ice and flakes. There was nothing like a snowstorm to bring into perspective one's own three dimensionality, and the three dimensionality of the world they inhabited, and as Nix led Occasus further and further into winter, he found himself falling further in love with his existence, with Nix by his side; with this version of Earth that he had never experienced.

It wasn't until the beginning of February that he noticed the ice in his lungs; a cold taking hold deep within him. It was so much more than the crispness of autumn that he had found so refreshing. This was a deadly, beautiful type of cold, one that he could feel in the painfully, sluggish churning of blood through his arteries even as he admired Nix's wonderful manipulation of the chill into delicate designs on the barn windows. As each day passed, he found it harder to pull himself awake; to blink away the ice that stitched his lashes together, or rub warmth into fingers that had gone blue around the tips.

He didn't dare let Nix know what was happening. They had left December 22<sup>nd</sup> far behind them, burying the possibility of his death beneath feet of snow. And yet here he lay dying, in an abandoned barn in the middle of rolling hills covered by a white blanket of silence. He couldn't even feel the dull ache in his chest, the reminder of his transgressions against Mother Nature. Everything was ice and numbness and death, and he began to understand what he had saved all those wild creatures from as he advised the birds to take wing, shown the bears and squirrels where to sleep, offered new coats to the deer and the rabbits. He knew now why he had been made to kill the creatures that could neither flee nor adapt; the slow death of winter was torture.

As the weeks passed, it was harder to hide his impending death from Nix, who turned a puzzled frown in his direction or raised an eyebrow in confusion when he declined to accompany her out into her landscape of ice and snow. He could barely bring himself to stand, to walk her to the sliding doors of the aged barn, to kiss her goodbye beneath weather sharpened icicles. He could hardly admit, even to himself, that in a way, she was killing him yet again. After hundreds of thousands of years in a pattern of life and death that had been preordained, they had thought they were above the laws of nature, that they could avoid a death and prevent a murder. But it would happen inevitably, and it would still be his death at her hand.

Occasus wasn't sure how he was alive by March 20<sup>th</sup>, but his breath still shattered choppily from frozen lungs and blood still pumped from ventricles coveting icicles of their own. The days had started to warm, and Nix, who had realized what was happening to him, shook him awake when dawn broke.

"It's the first day of spring, love. Only a bit longer now." She kissed his forehead, brushing a thumb over his ice-chapped cheekbones.

He smiled weakly, "Don't call me love." Nix laughed, throwing more blankets over him before rising to slide open the barn doors.

"Good to see you have your sense of humor ba-"

She never got the chance to finish her sentence. In the blink of an eye, she was knocked across the barn floor, muddied snow sloshing through the entryway at the paws of a massive lion. Occasus forced himself to sit up, knowing quite suddenly and surely that this was Spring and they hadn't circumvented nature at all. All fall they had thought it was his death they would need to avoid, all winter, they had thought their efforts had failed.

They had never stopped to consider Nix's death day and he had never asked; through all those seasons together, all those years, he had never asked how she died.

And now he was forced to watch, forced to feel his winter weakened limbs give way beneath him before he could reach Nix's side, forced to feel a sound louder than Nix's snow-soft voice echo through his chest as the lion roared and lunged in a blur of bunched muscle and lashing tail at the throat of Winter's Daughter.

He felt the first real warmth in months, as her life leaked across the slatted barn floor, pooling beneath his fingers, painting the snow the color of his crimson sunsets he hadn't seen in months: her favorite color.