

Title: I Never Really Found That Dove

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They say history is written by the victors.

And I am, supposedly, the ‘victor’, whatever that means. Whatever that victory was worth.

If I am the only person who remembers my story, and I chose to author a new one, then did my story ever really happen? Or can I be the sole judge of truth? Can I write my own story, and choose to believe in it? So far, nobody has stopped me.

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Demihumans are not common in Teyvat. There are gods, and there are humans. There are yokai and oni, adepti, there are seelies and elemental spirits. Gods never used to be separated as minor or major, strong or weak; they were simply gods — before Celestia declared a contest of power.

In those days, you could say I was one of a kind. To the best of my knowledge then, at least, and to the best of my knowledge now, I have never met another like myself.

I am half-wind spirit, see, and half-mortal. Father was an elemental god, Mother a mortal woman.

You understand, right?

They were my parents, Amos and Decarabian. And I was alone.

Not just symbolically; yes, I was the only one like myself, but I was also *alone*. I grew up in that tower with no metric to compare myself against. No knowledge of what was normal or typical for a human, for a child, for a god, for a spirit, for a boy or a girl, for a growing, developing person.

All I had was my own mind, and my parents.

I remember being small, sitting on Mother’s knee, while she told me, in hushed undertones, stories of the outside world. I never knew such a place could exist.

Mother was always tired. She always had this faraway look in her eyes. She was quiet when they argued, and quiet when he hit her. She was especially quiet when she taught me how to read, showing me how to fold the books with illustrations into the

pages of thicker tomes. We didn't speak of the outside world anywhere the wind could hear us.

I could see how he treated her, and how she feared him. I could see how he would bruise her, and how she would let it happen. I knew it made me unhappy, but I never understood *why* until the first time it happened to me. Once I learned what 'pain' and 'fear' were, I began to see them everywhere. Inside our home and beyond it —the world was filled with suffering, and at the heart of all of it: Decarabian. My father.

I won't say I ever loved him before then, but I never hated him either. I never fully knew what those things were; emotion wasn't part of my childhood curriculum. Mother taught me only how to keep it tamped down, hidden, for what she called my own good. But I think that day he first hit me, despite how it hurt, was the catalyst for change.

Mother was not quiet, then. She flew at him, her normally passive eyes blazing. I stumbled back as they screamed, and I was sure she was going to kill him; or, perhaps, that he would kill her.

Not much changed after that day, but Father never hit me again.

In fact, he dared not look at me after that.

But now I had learned what it *meant* when he hit her, and I could not tolerate it any longer. I begged her to leave him, but she refused.

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"Venti," she sits with me, running fingers through my hair, braiding it as she does her own. Using the name she has given me, that Father does not know about. "I cannot leave him. He listens to me, sometimes. Rarely, but he does. He does not understand humans. Without me, there would be no balance. I am the vital intermediary. The people suffer a little; if I leave, they will suffer a lot. It is not a matter of my happiness and safety, but of checks and balances."

This is what she says to me in secret, and I think I understand. The world is greater than our small family. Father is a man who holds great power over a great many people. We are responsible for more than ourselves. We cannot leave him to his power. He is mad, yes, but he is mad and in love.

He is cruel, yes, but he curbs himself when she tells him to. She is acting as a shield for an entire nation.

And I think I understand it. He is a god. She is human. And yet she has a great power, and she recognizes it, and she wields it against him.

I am lesser than her in every way, despite the elemental energy that runs through me in place of blood. I am half of her, but half of him also. And I think to myself — this means I must have the capacity for great goodness, but also the capacity for great evil.

And I truly think I understand, until she tells me:

“I cannot leave, but you can.”

And then I understand nothing, because I am *of* them — so are they not my responsibility also? If I have the power to balance him, should I not use it? If I have the power to protect her, should I not use it?

It dawns on me that I do not. If I pleaded with him to extend the harvest season, to let a little more sun inside, he would not listen. If I placed myself between him and Mother, he would simply remove me. He would lock me in the keep for a time to learn my lesson, and there would be nothing I could do. If the weapon she wields against him is his own love, and if I have no power over him, then does this mean he does not love me?

It must, and I am ashamed that it has taken me twelve years to realize this.

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When I am fourteen, Mother convinces me to leave the tower. Not because I am to abandon her; rather, she has found a use for me.

Father does not seek to control me as he does his people. Nor does he care enough for me to follow my movements. Even more importantly, he does not fear me. I mean so little to him that he does not spare a stray thought to imagine I could possibly work for or against him. I am not a son, nor a tool, nor a threat. I am insignificant in his eyes.

But not in Mother's. She sees my desire to be useful, my desire to help, my desire to become something. To have purpose of my own. She gives it to me:

“Go, and live among the people. Befriend them, work alongside them. Become human, and learn to love them.”

I don't know yet how this will help, but I know Mother is uncanny in her intelligence, and that she is always planning many moves ahead. I trust her implicitly. She is wise and witty and will outmanoeuvre each and every one of us, whether we will it or not.

So I leave the tower, I live among the people, I become human in the ways I hope Mother intended. In time, I make friends, and I learn what love is, and finally, I understand how it can be wielded as a weapon.

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What I learn is that the people hate the gods. What I learn is that I share their sentiment.

I learn what it means to loathe one's own nature. I don't understand it. I love my Mother, and I love that she is a part of me. Sometimes, when things are particularly grim within the city, I curl up with my back to a cold stone wall, press my hands to my ears, and listen to the sound of my heart beating in my chest, just to remind myself it is there.

I have a human heart, and it was given to me by my Mother.

Yes, I can hear voices in the wind, and they answer me when I call. They share secrets when I ask, they call me *kin*, and I know I am not human. But I have a human heart inside my chest, even if the blood it pumps through my body glows an unnatural green-blue in the darkness.

I am afraid to bleed.

I think my friends may hate me if they knew. Not only am I lying to them; not only am I not *human*. But I am a god, at least in part. And I am *his*.

I do not want him as a father, and he does not want me as a son, but I am his nonetheless.

I return to the tower and tell her what I have seen.

"The people hate him."

"I know."

"The barrier does not let enough light in. The crops are dying. We are losing the woods we used to hunt in. The people are starving."

"I know."

“The guards are inciting violence against the innocent. There is unrest. If there is another unlawful detention, I think there may be riots. They say they will not tolerate it any longer.”

“It is as I had hoped.”

“If he keeps pushing, we will have no choice but to push back.”

Her face is calm. None of this comes as a surprise to her. She already knew. So then *why?* Why send me out among them, if she does not need the information I bring back to her?

“...The people are going to rebel, and I am going to join them,” I realize.

She smiles, and once again, I understand her plan far too late to avoid falling into it.

Not that I would have avoided it. She is right. She knows my own heart; she only set me on the right path, like any mother would.

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There is a sentiment that is echoed throughout the rebellion.

No gods, no kings.

I can't remember who said it first, but I think it might have been myself. I'm surprised by how much I mean it.

There was a time when I was still small, when I might have loved Father. In a way, I think I still do. But I am growing older now, and I have learned something very important from Mother: that is, how to separate the different parts of myself and allow them space to exist without interfering with the Good Of All. Without allowing them to cloud my view of the right thing.

Amos loves Decarabian. But she also loves Mondstadt, and humanity, and knows that Decarabian is stifling them, killing them. She can still love Decarabian, even while she recognizes his actions are harmful. But she cannot allow that love to blind her.

I am the same. I love Father, in a way, but he does not love me, and he does not love his people. If I am to do the right thing, then I must not allow love for Decarabian to stumble me from my path.

No gods, no kings.

I am afraid to bleed.

When I don't know what I am, I listen to the heart that Mother gave me.

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I never planned for him to die, but I never denied the possibility of that outcome.

Still...

I wish it hadn't happened like this.

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We fight, and we bleed. I bleed. I bleed, and ichor like starlight paints my skin and the stairs for everyone to see. It shines unnaturally in the dark, washed out in the glow of the fires. I don't try to hide it. I don't let it shake my resolve. I am committed to climbing this tower, but I do not begrudge anyone who leaves my side for safety.

Some run. Most stay. We fight our way up while the battle rages outside as well. I can hear shouting in the streets, where my Knight leads the people against those loyal to the King, those who cry "security" and "safety," and everyday pay the price with the blood of those they consider lesser. Even outside of the fight, beyond the tower, I can hear the shout rising up throughout the city;

No gods, no kings.

It is a warcry and a chant now. Even if we fail, this city will never settle. **I** could feel the tentative balance shifting for weeks as the riots began. The city no longer sleeps on injustice, the people are awake and will not be placated again until we see true change, the despot dethroned, and freedom in the hands of the oppressed.

Few of us are left by the time we reach the top. Humanity beats wildly in my chest, the passion and desperation of a short and brutal life stoking the starlight in my veins into red-hot blood.

We find the God - the King - my Father - in the stone court at the tower's peak, with his back to us, looking out over the city.

We handful of farmers, miners, and children-turned-soldiers stand across from him, facing the unknown power of a god. The few who didn't run are looking at me, and I realize they expect me to strike him down. They recognize me now as a god in their

midst, and chose to desperately believe in me, as the only thing they have left to believe in.

He doesn't turn, keeps his back to us.

“Are you happy, boy?”

Leather-gloved hands are clasped at the small of his back. His posture is straight.

I am slouched, favouring one side, stardust spilling from jagged lines in my skin.

My Warrior stands beside me still. He did not leave when my blood betrayed me, staining the stone staircase silver and gold and green. He eyes me warily.

“Of course not.” For all that I once respected and loved him, for all that I now fear him, my voice does not waver.

“Come here, boy. Look upon the fruits of your labour.” He gestures sharply to his side, and I, human as I am, feel that *pull* of elemental authority. I find myself moving, heart pounding in my throat, shaking the bars of its cage as my feet drag me across that court alone. Away from the humans and to the god's side.

I am so small next to him, and impossibly young.

Thumb under my chin, he forces my face to the archway. The sounds of screaming, singing, weeping and praying rise from below. The sounds of a city at war. I am not blind to the bloodshed. There is a warmth to the normally cold city as homes and businesses alike burn as bonfires in the night.

“Has this satisfied your need for rebellion?” he asks, coldly. “I gave you everything a child could require. And when you craved *freedom*, I let you whittle your time away playing with the humans. And still, it was not enough for you. Did you truly crave my attention so badly you would drag *my people* into a bloody civil war for the sake of your petty adolescent dramas?”

And I feel what I have never felt before in my life, and hope to never feel again — that very human emotion called *rage*. My skin feels tight and my joints creak as I hold my body in perfect tautness, teeth grinding.

“This is not *petty*, Father! This is *real*! This is not - this was never about you! It is about Mondstadt's *suffering*. The people, *your people*, are suffering! This is about the thousands of people who are so much more important than you or I. The people who are *starving* to death, slowly. There is no warmth left in your heart, and no warmth left in this city. It is dying. It was dying before we brought war into our home. A slow,

crawling, lonely death. You do not even know their *names*, but they are as real as you or I!”

The God finally moves. All it is is the slight twitch of muscles. The turn of his head upon his neck. He looks down on me, and I feel frozen in place by the ice in his eyes.

I feel the eyes on us both, those humans who came into this tower to fight and die for their freedom. I know they will never trust me again after this. I know I have granted them only the gravest of betrayals in letting them find out this way. But that does not matter. All that matters is winning. My father will stand down, his people will go free, and what happens to me after does not matter.

I meet his eyes. I am sure he sees how I quake, but I stand resolute.

“You are a disobedient child throwing a meaningless tantrum. You whine about freedom and the slow death of our people – fool. To be human is to die. Better to live long and die slowly than be torn apart for the ideals of a child. You cry about *freedom*, forsaking security. *You will get my people killed*. If I had let you wander outside, you would have been swallowed up by greater gods than you in the raging war outside of our walls. Oh, did you not know about the war? Because you are only a *child* and do not understand the world you live in.

“That is what your parents are for. To make these choices for you, to protect you! And this is how you repay me? An act of rebellion so violent and petty that you lead thousands of those you claim to wish to protect to bloody and violent ends. What is your real purpose, boy? It is not the people; if they mattered as much as you claim, you would not have led them to their deaths.” His voice drops, as cold as his eyes, and colder still than the winds outside the tower. “Ah. But I see now. Perhaps you knew more of the war outside than I had realized. What else could it be? To topple the King and take his throne. You are here to take your birthright. My life, and your inheritance.”

The God-King throws his head back and cackles, the sound merging with the howling and screaming of the wind, the war, and the wolves at their door.

“You will not have them! These people are *mine*, and I will not let my own *brat* depose me!”

His backhand comes with no warning and the force of a hurricane. My feet are no longer below me, and bricks break around my body. I fall, and I do not catch myself. I lay trembling on the floor before the Men and Women I swore to protect, a broken and impotent child.

I tell them to run.

All but one listen.

I don't know why he stays, that dearest friend of mine. I know him well. I have, after all, been living in his home, breaking bread at his table. His expression is stony, but he stands unwavering.

There is me, broken and bleeding on the floor.

There is my Warrior, standing tall, sword in his hand.

There is my Father, turning slowly to gaze upon him.

"... Why are you still here?" he asks, sounding bored and uninterested. "Go, put an end to all this fighting. This is over, isn't it?"

Still, he does not move. "I have just witnessed what I thought was my closest friend, and the Mad King of Mondstadt, in a domestic dispute, and come to learn the two sides of this war have both been blind. I have watched my neighbors fight, bleed, and die, *for an angry teenager at war with his father*. They are *still dying*, and for what? A dispute between gods. One who rules us with an iron hand, and one who *pretends to be one of us*. And for *what? For what?* Is there a *point* in all this death?"

He breathes, heavy in the silence. My Father doesn't answer. I certainly do not answer.

His steel resolve slowly crumbles around him as the appalling weight of shock, horror, and betrayal shed themselves in turn to reveal the rage beneath. "We fought with *purpose*." He seethes. "And I will not see those deaths wasted. We swore, *I swore*; no gods, and no kings. If we cannot have Freedom in life, then we will have it in death, for you *cannot rule the dead*."

And my beating human heart leaps as he throws himself forward with one intention: kill or be killed.

He will never forgive me if I intervene, but I cannot allow him to die like this. I leap forward, arms reaching out for him, when I see her.

A pale face in an archway, like a ghost. Silver hair and eyes reflecting the fires of the city below. Entirely mortal. Mother.

All of us, *all of this*, was for one purpose. A civil war destined to lose, a thousand lives destined to die. The price paid in blood for a single moment.

We were to be her distraction.

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The world explodes.

My blood evaporates in my veins, the air boils around me, I become a singularity.

— *the screaming of life and death and sound and matter and the entire past and future of humanity, war and war and war and rebellion and freedom and love and loss and hope and death and death and death and a billion voices calling out my name and praying for a better life* —

Time moves forward and backward around me and I see the faces of every human I have ever loved and will ever lose. I taste fire and ash and ambrosia and I am screaming for them not to leave me here like this.

There is a human in my arms, his hair is red, and I do not remember his name. He carries a sword and we are in the heart of an atomic bomb.

The afterglow burns my eyes and my skin and my blood and my bones.

There is a human in my arms, and he is breathing. There is nothing but death around us. I am clutching him to my chest with shaking arms. There are feathers spanning the length of the room, floor to ceiling, wall to wall. A cage of empyrean light.

Eyes blown wide, skin streaked with blood, ash, ichor. He is shaking too, as he looks at the blazing deiform wings, set upon set upon fathomless set, and he raises his sword and speaks;

“No more gods. *Never again.*”

His sword pierces upwards through my body.

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There is a man alone in a tower, covered in blood that isn't his, and isn't human. In his arms is his closest friend, who he faintly begins to believe he has just killed.

His closest friend, who very likely just saved his life.

He wonders if anyone else has been spared, or if he is the sole survivor of this god-forsaken rebellion.

He looks at the body in his arms.

Its eyes are wide open, body limp. It looks like a corpse, skin ashy and silvery blood pooling beneath it. Unnervingly still and quiet. The wings spreading out behind it in every direction, disjointed and unnatural, are the only thing keeping the man from despairing. He stares at them, and they become his lifeline.

This is not his friend.

This is a creature.

This is a god.

This is a liar.

This is an unholy Thing, an enemy of Mondstadt.

It is still alive. One tremulous breath turns into a soft keening as unfocused eyes regain clarity. There is panic in the back of its throat that it swallows down. It sees the man's face above, and calms. Despite the fact that this is the same man who stabbed it, it settles into his arms, the same way it always has.

The man is cradling his closest friend on a bloodstained floor in the tower of a now-dead god. The city is quiet, and he dares not look yet out the windows. Does not want to know the scope of destruction outside these walls.

"He was your father." The accusation falls from dry lips, voice wild and fraying with betrayal.

"He was."

"You never told us."

"I didn't."

"You are a god."

*"In a way." Its voice hisses and crackles, spilling from it as mercury bubbles between its lips.
"In a way."*

"You... betrayed us." The sound is a plea. A plea for it to be true. There is no reason or rhyme, simply raw emotion. He needs this to have been a betrayal. "You were the storm god's heir."

"In a way." All it does is agree with him. It doesn't argue or fight or do anything but close its eyes. "Do not despair. This is... the best outcome." It murmurs. "We said... no gods... after all."

And the warrior's ire is raised again at the words his friend – a falsehood, an imagined identity, a person who never truly existed, a sham – would never have said.

“The best outcome!?” he demands, and the thing cries out weakly when he shakes it. “They are dead! You’ve killed everyone. Did you know that would happen, when he died?”

“...Not dead,” it argues. And then, with the last of its strength: “Go, look.”

He does. He leaves it there on the floor and goes to the window. He looks out upon the city. What he sees is impossible to describe. The tower is the epicenter of destruction. It stands, untouched, within a ring of dust. There is no rubble larger than a grain of sand, and there are no bodies. Just blackened earth.

But.

On the other side of that perfect ring, there are people.

They stand in groups, large and small, each person silent. Staring up at the tower. He sees hope and terror, dread and despair and shock. And, in spite of everything, he even sees some falling to their knees to pray. He doesn’t know who to.

He steps out onto the balcony, and a whisper goes through them.

“Decarabian is dead.”

He turns his back as the first cheer goes up. Soon, behind him, the entire city is screaming their victory to the heavens, to each other, to the winds and the earth and the storm. They are screaming it to the snow that encroaches, buoyed by their victory. It is jubilant. In the face of so much death, in the face of their grief and loss and the long road ahead, they choose to weep in the streets and declare themselves the victors.

His focus is elsewhere.

He walks slowly to the body on the floor, where he left it, unmoving.

“... You protected them?”

If it answers, the sound is too quiet to hear.

The warrior realizes he does not want it to die. He kneels by the body, knowing little of how to heal a human with a sword through their chest, and even less of how to heal a god.

“It’s okay,” Venti warbles. “It’s okay. Let Mondstadt’s gods end with me.”

He places his hands on it, trembling as he slowly wakes up from his fugue.

He bows his head and prays.

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I fall up. I separate. I ascend.

Something is taken from me.

My heart.

It stopped beating in the tower. By the time I am dragged unwilling before the court of the gods, it is quiet inside of me.

They say I do not need it, they *take* it from me, and give me something of theirs in its place. I am torn open beneath their eyes, my spirit cloven from my frail human bones. They place a shard of ice in my chest and it burns in all the wrong ways.

They should have killed the god. They should have killed it in the tower and left me to burn through my remaining mortal years.

Instead, they strip me of the heart my Mother gave me. I am left with only the rot of godhood.