

touch

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Prologue



Now she knows what heartbreak feels like.

His fever gets worse. There's not much time left, but he's stuck with her, a girl from an otherworldly place, a sad someone with no clue how to save him. Or how to lose him.

Even if she were to brush her knuckles across his cheek, he would still be dying. She finally understands—a touch between them isn't enough to fix this.

He's fading because of her, and she will miss the chance to say she's sorry. Sorry for this end. Sorry for betraying him in the first place.

She will miss everything: the inquisitive slant of his head, his storyteller's voice, and the way his hand would stubbornly try to reach for hers. She will miss those tireless questions skipping from his lips. Especially the question he asked back when he discovered what she was.

Who takes care of you?

Silly human. For a little while, *he* did. But he shouldn't have. Oh, he shouldn't have.

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Love's arrow strikes the boy first. It punctures his heart, turning it into a flashbulb within the shadowed halls of his body. The impact causes him to grunt and stumble backward into his dresser. Triumphant, the light disappears with a wink.

The girl is next, the jolt of Love's weapon shoving her onto the boy's unmade tornado of a bed. The lovers' gazes collide. Mouths slacken, eyes glaze over, and hearts arc straight from admiration to adoration. The girl opens her arms, inviting the boy in, and he leaps toward her with such clumsy enthusiasm that they almost topple off the squeaky mattress, the sound of which matches their own squeaky noises—*ouches* and *oohs*.

Love stands in the corner and smirks, watching the couple neglect their textbooks to ride the whirlwind of first love. Hands pull on curtains of hair. Nails scratch and excavate moans. The boy's lanky form balances on the girl's buxom curves as they try to coordinate the rest of the act.

So clumsy. So mortally predictable.

But so intimate.

The thought tugs down the corners of Love's lips, pinching her chest with longing. For all that she can sense human emotions, taste and smell their awe, hear the eagerness brimming inside their bodies, she still wonders what it's like to touch—and

to be touched—like that.

Being around mortal youth always does this to her, spirits away her reason and makes her yearn for foolish things. Maybe it's because they're only seventeen and, well, for a goddess, she's just as young as them.

But that hardly means she can identify with these lovers, or that she should hope to. They're human. She isn't. She's here to create love for others, not to want it for herself.

The boy and girl fumble around in the sheets. They'll figure out the rest eventually.

Love does a plume count to make sure the two spent arrows have reappeared in her quiver, then leaves the couple to their pleasure. The tricky part is sneaking through the first-floor window without alarming them. It was open before, but the boy closed it to block out the supposed chill. It's tempting to thrust open the pane without a care, like some naughty spirit, and laugh at the couple's bafflement. A window can't open by itself, they would think.

That's the way it goes when she's in the mood to play. Like now. Like always. But she forces herself to behave. After all the work it took to get this pair into a bedroom, she's not about to ruin the moment.

Bracing her hand on the window, Love eases it upward, and the partition gives a slight screech as it rides up the frame. She stops and glances over her shoulder. The lovers are busy with buttons and zippers. Good.

She ducks under the pane and hops outside, then closes the window and waves good-bye to the pair. Strapping her longbow to her back, she sucks in a breath. It's winter. The sky is a gradient of white and gray, with an occasional tease of blue. Ice covers every frostbitten porch along the residential lane while thickets

of snow, potholed with footprints, conceal the sidewalks.

Beside the boy's home, decorative, plastic snowflakes dangle from a tree. As the breeze swirls, one of the ornaments falls off a branch and lands near the toe of Love's boot. She tips her head to the side. The ornament isn't fancy, but it's flawless. She snatches it off the ground and tucks it into her quiver.

The woodland town of Ever is shaped like the stolen snowflake she's carrying. The lacy star of streets meets in the center, where a gazebo holds everything in place. On her way down the road, she spots a middle-aged woman climbing out of a car while balancing a tower of books. The woman looks like she was pulled from an archive, with her vintage trousers and a pencil jammed behind her ear.

Impulsively, Love twirls right through the lady, who gasps and nearly drops the books.

As Love keeps going, she passes familiar faces. Boyfriends and girlfriends. Husbands and wives. People with crushes and grudges. People with amorous hopes. Many are matches she's created in the last three months, since the Fates assigned her here.

I brought those two together. And those two.

Oh, they were difficult. The old ones are stubborn.

At the metropolis called Ever High School, the nasal drone of a central buzzer blasts through campus. The rebellious pair she left behind in the bedroom defied the attendance rule today, but their peers are just getting out of class now.

Love stands on tiptoe and peeks over the gate. She has lost count of how many times she's come here to watch the students, savoring these jaunts into their scholarly world, this little oasis of activity during the quiet season. She likes slipping into the cafeteria and eavesdropping. And it flatters her quiver, as the

Fates say, to perch queen-like on the teachers' desks while the students hunch forward in their seats during lectures.

At other times, the sting of being insignificant and unseen is overwhelming. When it gets bad, she comes close to throwing things.

It's like matchmaking. Her work is fun—and funny, ridiculously funny. And so much more that it often leaves her amused yet achy.

Students pour from the main doors, either speaking in loud voices or plugging their ears with tiny speakers that emit thumping music. One by one, the multitude of emotions breeding within them begins to froth on Love's tongue. She tastes sadness, delight, bitterness, fear, desire . . . The list of feelings is as long as the horizon. It brews with a peculiar restlessness inside her, causing her to squeeze the fence, amazed by how wholly and completely they all *feel*—even more so than their elders.

It's different back in the Peaks. Young deities aren't as primitive or vulnerable. At least the majority of them aren't.

The bitter taste of a quarrel gathers in Love's mouth, and she follows that taste, locating a couple grumbling at each other.

“Can I talk?”

“Can I finish?”

“Can you stop?”

“Can you listen?”

She rolls her eyes. Watching the pathetic display, she's reminded of what happens when her arrows aren't involved. Without her intervention, the fight will escalate, resentment will build, and things won't end well. An imperfect match.

But even when couples argue like this, life seems less . . . vacant. There's still room for a joke and a laugh, or a pure, untainted touch. That must be nice.

Nice. It's all Love can do not to swat her arrow at a nearby lamppost.

I'm an outsider. That's how it's meant to be. That's the price of being a myth.

At least she hasn't done something futile like get attached to one of them.

Love stomps off. She keeps to the edge of the teenaged crowd, steering herself away whenever she gets too close.

On the border of Ever, her forest awaits with its surplus of pinecones and fir. She hops over a mountain of snow, the hem of her white dress sneaking up her thighs and scarcely covering the hills of her bare backside.

The forest is seasonally calm. Time to change that.

Reaching the first suitable tree, she scales the trunk and springs from branch to branch, burrowing into the snowy woods while knocking nature out of her way. Twigs. Critters. The wind itself.

Her favorite tree appears. Love vaults, arms extended above her head, and catches one of its higher branches, lifting herself onto it. Once settled, she retrieves the plastic snowflake from her quiver and hangs it on the bough above her. There. Now she has an ornament, too.

Keeping a single arrow on hand, she stashes her bow and quiver in a gap in the tree trunk, then reclines. The bark's rough texture scrubs her spine, her legs hang off the sides, and her feet swing like a pair of bells. She picks her teeth carefully with the arrowhead's tip. For the thousandth time, she envisions the mind-warped spectacle she'd become if she accidentally sliced herself with her weapon. When fired from her bow, an arrow will fly seamlessly into a person's body, without drawing blood. If wielded otherwise, the weapon will cut skin—never to a dead-

ly extent, but it would take a mere slit to render the target love struck.

And the Fates constantly remind Love of the great irony, as if she'd ever forget: Deities are not immune to their own powers.

Compared to mortals, how quickly would the cut affect her?

Love stops prodding her incisors. As daring and stubborn—and oh, yes, mischievous—as her people accuse her of being, she doesn't want to find out. She's not *that* curious.

There are other things to be more curious about. Sweeping her fingers over her lips, she imagines what it feels like to kiss just as that couple did in the boy's room, with smooth, open mouths. To share a touch of affection, a loving touch.

Gah. What a lightarrow she is, wanting what humans have. She's been working this world for a century and a half, yet time hasn't snuffed her obsession. Deities embrace out of camaraderie, respect, lust. That's all. It's not natural for a goddess to have urges beyond that.

Obviously, this is why she has no friends back home. In the Peaks, she's ridiculed for her delusions about tenderness and poignancy. Most of her fellow archers look at her like she's weird, but Envy, Sorrow, and Anger are the harshest. Wonder is the only one who's kind to Love, but the girl has her own reasons for that.

Who needs friends anyway?

The sun begins to set. She stores the arrow in her quiver and then settles back down, closing her eyes to rest.

A breeze tickles her ears and brings with it the sounds of snow crunching beneath shoes. Her lids flip open, eyes focusing on the powdered branches above her, as a distinct scent cartwheels through the forest. It's young but masculine—and close.

Alert, Love jerks upright and slips sideways off her perch. Lashing out, she hooks her fingers into the bark and dangles.

Almost. She almost fell. That would have been irritating.

If people could see her, if they knew who she was, they'd be confused. Their first questions would be "Where are your wings?" and "Why can't you fly?"

The next question would be "Isn't Eros a man?"

Eros. Ah, mortals and their fanciful beliefs and misplaced facts.

She hoists herself back onto the branch, crouches, and waits. And sees.

A boy.

A teenaged boy.

A teenaged boy with a hiccup in his stride.

As he limps through the forest, the spiky layers of his white-blond hair materialize below. The color is striking on him, and it makes Love reach for her black locks. She envisions how the two of them would look side by side, all lightness and darkness.

She detects another scent coming from the boy, a minty one. The feelings that swirl in his body hint at a certain temperament: peacefulness.

He lumbers toward a tree and then digs through his backpack, the contents rattling as he produces a thermos. Zipping the bag up, he shrugs it back over his shoulder and gets comfortable—and what an odd place for him to do so, with all the snow—slouching against the trunk and unscrewing the thermos cap. He sips and stares into the distance, lost in an abyss of thought.

Love grins. *Well, what have we here?*

She leaps off the branch, drops twenty feet, and lands behind him with a resounding thud that causes the ground to ripple. She intends to jab at his backpack and knock it off his shoulder. For disturbing her rest, this boy deserves a good scare, and she's keen to give him one.

However, she is not prepared for him to dart around. And to lock eyes with her.