

## Exemptee

If fall to the ground, sight will be restricted, unable to see deeper, and can only stay at the level, accept happening; but there is a moment when I turn over and prop myself up with elbow, wildly igniting my desire of freedom, start running. I howling with the wind that rushes past my cheek, until the smells drag me to reality, while I can't see clearly, the pungent odor already filled my senses.

Mother? I push myself up to confirm the corpse lying next to me, almost forgetting to breathe; unfortunately, life is stubborn. Mother's body is even more stink than the smell of alcohol. I glance over and see father holding a bottle of liquor, sitting on the ground and chewing on something while staring blankly at that swollen corpse.

Sweet home. I don't remember how I got back here. Since I became my mother's commodity, I never thought I would be able to step into this home again. Murder was once my fantasy, and they were both engraved in it.

Staring at the third-rate crime scene in front of me, guess my father and I have the same fantasy. But whether he wanted to occupy the family karma or take away all the wealth to bathe in alcohol, he failed. Alcohol is fuel, it destroyed my father's sanity, even his humanity. He must have been punished by the authority after murdering my mother, so he didn't smash my head—my stomach twisting slightly, excitement is more intense than the fermentation of these filth.

I am no longer mother's commodity. I no longer have to worry about being blamed, beaten, or sold, she's dead. Regardless of whether my father falls into madness or senility, the authority will surely take some action and erase his existence. I will inherit the karma, and I will be eligible for redemption...

"Urg—" My thoughts are interrupted by father's voice. He grabs his right hand, trembling, biting the pulp of his thumb. His face is wrinkled into a ball, and his blackened gums are stained red. Looking at my father's demeanor, letting hunger and pain dominate himself, arguing in a ridiculous way, I believe this is punishment.

Approaching my father, I pulled his hand away, attempting to communicate with him: "Father, are you hungry?" No response. He faced me, but his eyes were unfocused, and saliva kept slipping from his loose mouth, seeping into the gaps between my fingers that were holding onto him.

"Father, what happened?" I place my other hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him, hoping to bring him back to consciousness and trying to create an emotional connection. "Can you speak?" Unfortunately, my words did not stir even a ripple.

Suddenly, he put on a silly smile and waved his hand, squeezing the air in his throat. I didn't let go, so he raised his left hand and used his curled fingers to push and rub my face while muttering incomprehensible words. I grabbed his ragged clothes, before I had time to think.

"You killed her! Why? Why do you still exist?" When I startled by my own sharp scream, I release my grip and stare at my father's contorted face. This creature became strange to me, making me feel disgusted. My rationality seemed to have found the mercy that was driven away by impatience, attempted to completely strangle it—I was too eager to break free from this predicament, or perhaps, the obscure freedom made me feel lost, forcing me to ignite my emotions and burn them out.

My father spat out some more unintelligible sounds, tilting his head and smiling at me. He looked pleased, even somewhat proud, this time my expectations weren't hooked—it had returned to my mother, dragging my gaze along with it—this corpse is more valuable.

She was obviously dressed up, and even in death, her beauty couldn't be completely erased. That dawn-colored dress was only meant for special occasions, and her jewelry soaked in a pool of blood, still proclaiming its existence in the dim light. I stuffed them into my pockets, looking at my hands stained red. I didn't mind getting even more blood on them.

Greed expanded quickly, and the filthy pool churned up like thick, putrid water, in both smell and sound, and it could feed the small ambitions of life. I forcefully lifted my mother's body, and as she turned over, the stench spread, and the liquid slowly crawled down the folds of her clothes. A buried object was the first to touch the ground—it was her delicate purse adorned with jewels that she loved so much. apart from her love, it often carried even more precious things, such as vanity, wealth, and perhaps even hope.

Tearing apart the opening mired in mucus, nothing could be seen. I leaned in close to the lamp, the eerie apricot-colored sheen illuminating. Many things had rotted away. Carefully, I cleared out all the items and placed them on the table: money, trash, a pile of envelopes and documents. These things could keep me alive for a while. Some drugs and gruesome collectibles that looked like organs were in the trash; And that stack of papers was tied together by coagulated blood, which I had to handle with care lest I tear them apart—they documented crass transactions of both material and spiritual natures, even including my future and my price.

Ah, a sealed envelope bearing the mark of authority, more splendid than gold, as never to be opened—not anymore. I did not quite understand the complex vocabulary in the contents, let alone the fact that the filth had corroded them. But I recognized the symbol of redemption, not only in this letter, but in the purpose of all life. Unfortunately, the numbering beside it had become so blurred that I could no longer recognize the name of fate, nor the damn digits that had caused us to writhe in agony.

Just leave then, grab my weapon and get away from here. I had hidden the stolen dagger in my room, and it existed nobly in all my fantastic and cruel fantasies.

As I am walking past my father and towards the room, I catch a glimpse of him silently tracking me with his gaze. Moving aside the heavy clutter blocking the door, I hook the iron ring and pull it open, then prop up the brace and carefully descend the stairs. The decaying wood and rusted metal are seeming ready to crumble at any moment.

Light still on, flickering as always, thick gas, confined and crawling creatures, here could simply makes all kinds of life sink. Before my mother established her dirty trade, this was my favorite fortress. The grip of the dagger was embedded in the wall, not far from the door, like a crude trap. I used to think it might accidentally kill my mother's customers, or anyone who dared to violate this domain. But alas, it was rusty and dull, incapable of anything. Seems after I being thrown out of this home, it also lost its chance.

I drew the dagger and the wall crumbled under the grinding of its handle—the sound of lamentation made my heart tremble—my father's head hung there, his arm ruined the brace, the door seemed to clamp his chest tightly—pain spread, and I realized that I had cut my hand; for a moment, the broken blade pierced my father's brain, rendering him silent and easy to use, and the two similarly dull and harmonious qualities of the blade and my thoughts gave rise to an association that they were both the lowest quality of spiritual reliance, bestowing upon me hopes that would never be fulfilled.

He does nothing, without language, without even indifference; as if this life is trying to blaspheme the essence of existence, but inevitably succumbs to the cruelty.

I stab the dagger through the pocket to secure it, then climb upward, pushing against the door and my father's face as I clambering out. He lay on his side, curling up like a worm, screaming loudly. His cries triggering my fear, so I quickened my movements to prevent any disturbance.

Steps carried me to the door, which, once I lacked the strength to open, for they had imprisoned me here; when I naively thought obedience could earn me freedom, they installed locks to keep me out. Now, with knowledge I understand how to use violence as a key—I kicked out the lock that lay fallen before the door, grabbing the handle, and pulling with all my might to separate the door from the wall—what, this stubborn door seemed to forget to respond my force, lingering there.

I kicked the door, and my manic depression begin to overwhelm me. After several attempts, I stopped before tearing my arm off. Something was definitely stuck, I try to inspect the tracks and seams of the door, no idea—there are some sounds—it's father, crawling and knocking over the lamp, shadow filled my vision. That disgusting thing pushing mother aside like mud and came towards me, can't even dark hide that thing. I couldn't take my eyes off the threat, backed into the corner, and held the knife in my hand, waiting for an opportunity, or perhaps I was just paralyzed with fear. I'm not sure.

He stops in front of me, looking at my feet or something. I should act, end the fear with my own hands. But the damn law makes me hesitate. When he slowly lifting his head, my courage leaking away, leaving my mind blank. He stared at me, I try to decipher his gaze, run past him, kill him, wait to be slaughtered. Then, my world froze solid.

He pushed up his arms and body, standing up, separating light and shadow. His body exuded horror, and I searched for any memory that could strike back against reality: he was just trash, he had no body at all, he was the self-suppression miserable...

The sound of steel shaking resonated into my mind. As I turned around while gasping for air, he slammed his hand heavily on the door handle, gripping it tightly, light twisted with muscles and veins. The metal suddenly scraped sharply, and I caught a whiff of the spicy smell of burning waste outside. The darkness cracked open, and the dim light stretched over me, from right eye to left eye. Horizon—where those pitiful insects that yearned for light and warmth smoked it into pale as ash. Their scattered bonfires dyed sky with rust and mottled

colors, the wasteland rolled and tumbled with chaos as its axis. On this remote hill, I couldn't avoid capturing all of this.

I turn my head and raise my eyes, wondering what this monster in front of me wanted. He hunched over and looking me distractedly. I doubted the title "father" for this creature; it seemed like a more primal being, hungry and afraid of pain, like an imbecile or an animal. In any case, it was much better than my father, as at least it would open the door for me.

"You..." Certain doubts are being swallowed before they can escape my mouth, providing sustenance for time. I won't attempt to communicate with this thing.

I step down the stone steps, turn into a narrow alley, return to the sculptures of vulgar civilization. The veil of authority hung over the dust, and the flyers gasped and fluttered in the wind. Few people remembered what they conveyed; I remembered that they were about law, karma, and redemption—that, is everything, but these ignorant words defined life before I could read or listen, pain taught me, and doubt was the greatest reward.

I increase my stride to shake off the stares that crawl out from the crevices. A small life almost dirties my shoes; they are like the tumors of this street, feeding pests and brewing plague. Fortunately, weakness has eroded their annoying cries into sobbing. I don't know what value they have, as everything will rot, especially food. Ugly, or perhaps the taste of these races is not very good, I don't want to get close, and disease can also make them be exiled.

I envy them. Before the world gave me a reason to fear death, hunger and thirst dragging me. At that time, I didn't need to look far to see slavery and torture filling the future; But death is different, it is mysterious, and the punishment of the authority makes people fear death. The authority does not allow anyone to desecrate life, otherwise they will be forever drowned in pain.

I have suffered enough pain. I am not afraid of being overwhelmed by pain, and besides, it's rumored that death is very painful and it's the end of pain. Therefore, I am certain that exploring death is the shortcut to escape pain, and even the authority encourage me to do so.

I don't know how much pain I can bear for death, trying hunger, bleeding; but my mother soon found out and whipped me, making me understand that she was the one in control, giving me life and death. Although I didn't quite understand it, but I agreed, the pain she inflicted brought me closer to death, extinguishing my hope, compelling me to survive, and allowing me to truly understand death, rules, and hatred—this emotion tempted me to keep breathing and made me fear death. Revenge breeds opportunity, for me, this is the essence of life.

Walking into the depression is the down city, I can see the avenue, a desolate trail that strings together all misfortunes, winding from the down city to the bustling area, leading to the authority's bell tower. That transcendental existence cutting time, to assisting the authority in controlling the masses, and making it clear that life is filled with countless confusions. I will find what I am looking for there.

Stepping over the filth flowing between the fragments. People gather, evaporating oneself and nurturing oneself at the cost of their lives inexplicably resonating. I didn't think much about it.

From afar in the down city, the sound of tapping ripples and mixes with the already blurred shouts, interfering me. My sense of smell has been occupied, and the once nauseating smell is no longer there. I know that the illusion is slowly burying me, but I am tired and indolent, disregarding my vigilance—I once imagined that my heart would learn to embrace falsehood and stop beating, brewing fear and sharp minds. Now, I don't care anymore. Even if clear won't bless my life, I can still walk the rest of the way.

“Doubt is not allowed, and questioning is punished; work hard, strive for redemption...” The noise came from the authority's loudspeaker, scattered like nails, crookedly planted in the organs of the down city, intensifying the pulsation. The workstation was next to one of them, I shouted to attract the attention of the station supervisor. He is probably deaf, swinging his legs and sitting there, enjoying the tranquility and food. As my hand was about to touch him, he suddenly stands up, letting the accumulated food on his belly slip to the ground.

“Come down!” His words were intertwined with wailing and roaring, and all I could understand were these: “You don't climb! Down!” Following his gaze, I clarified the situation. My mischievous companion had hung his heavy body on the iron fence.

Perhaps the shepherd started putting meat near the campfire, I remember how its smell fascinated me; but that would require mineral or timber to trade. It might get locked up in the mine, I will wait until this is all over then talk to the supervisor about how to get to the tower.

When it was about to climb over the iron fence, it toppled over and it fell into the soil, struggling and rolling like a stranded fish. Then it rolled up the dust and ran towards the shepherd's dwelling—where the flickering flame danced.

The supervisor suddenly turned his head and shouted at me: "What? Go away! Don't help the bad, or you get punish! Leave!" He glared at me, his pair of rotten yellow eyeballs weaving bloodshot lines.

"This is a misunderstanding, sir," I have to along the trend, "You must know where the vehicle to the bell tower is."

"Oh, oh, Lord, I know, Lord." He shrank into his small workstation, and the speaker burst out with a piercing noise that started vibrating, producing a low frequency that almost suffocated me. He moved his body and resumed eating, saying: "Wait, it will come." As he was about to sit back down, he screamed in horror, and the dirty chunks of meat fell back into the dust again.

It is approaching us with something dangling from its foot, dragging on the gravel.

Grabbing the supervisor's shoulder, I turn him towards me, make him see what I'm saying: "You should notify more people. I'm certain that creature is coming to kill you." The screaming didn't stop, he is sobbing like an inflating balloon, pumping his eyes and nose swell and red. Soon, tears and mucus impregnated with his pustules and warts... whole ridiculous face.

I step back to increase the distance between it. If it intends to kill anyone who might compete for its food, that would be my future length. It steps into the dim light of the workstation, then the supervisor's sharp voice abruptly cuts off. Then this pathetic coward collapses stiffly. I see that its chest is piled high with chunks of flesh, so I halt, not believing it would use that mass to bludgeon me to death.

It bypasses the workstation; I noticed there was a person hanging from its foot, like mud barely alive. I can't help but question the authority's sanctions, imagining dissecting my redemption fantasy, thoughts dissolve into chaos. A chunk of flesh rolls to my feet, and oil seeps from charred cracks and spills onto the ground. I reflexively grab a leg, and as I lift my head in confusion, it bends its knee, drawing my attention back down, it tears into the meat, eats.

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My hands are so dirty, I'm not hungry, and this leg is charred anyway. I sit down, abandon the meat, start brooding over my restlessness. This world is tough, full of deceit. I should stop thinking and observing. I could just wait, after all, I had done enough—revenge those sources of my torment, then despoil redemption from them, that's all. I stared at the meat, imitating it.

The impending dream was crushed by the metal centipede, that giant vehicle stopped nearby, it's opening shell with reverberation like rusty iron chewing. I climb aboard, sit down, and as it crouches down within my field of vision, my mind began to settle.

Graffiti patches the Tattered posters of those in power, constructing this corridor. Several dilapidated amplifiers hang in the corners, emitting only the electric current undulating rattle. A person suppresses his cough, huddling under the amplifier tightly wrapped in gloom, like everyone else. The shell closes, the vibrations resonate and are uncomfortable like breathing or heartbeat. Bored, I squint my eyes, distort the light, let it bind my eyes like tentacles, then wander in nothingness.

Something slapped my face, then a forceful impact knocked me to the side. I trying to lift my eyelids; seems I had fallen asleep.

“Hey! trash, why you ran?” The voice catalyzed my consciousness, and I jerked up, surveying my surroundings. I recognize these faces—mother's old customers didn't seem too pleased. I adjust myself, as levity was easier to face them with.



"Look at me!" He grabs my head to twist my neck to the side, my eyes didn't follow, this mangy freak is not good-looking.

"I paid, a lot, a lot money." his hoarse voice remains: "So you are still mine! Mine..." While murmuring, he slowly crawling on top of me, sniffing, like dog.

"Don't know about money." I calmly tell him: "but you need to know that my mother is dead."

"Oh." he stops his movement and says thoughtfully: "need new home? a existence, alone no approval, no communicate, no breed, no karma, no redemption, I know all! You want to join us!"

"Come my family, we approval! You work for me, to street, but I give you more!" He is panting while talking, his breath spraying on my face, I hold my breath unconsciously.

He uses his hand as my collar, extending his tongue. I am familiar with this step, too familiar even wont can do this for me. But no matter how many times I go through it, I can't reconcile my behavior with my mind. I grope in my pocket for some medicine to prevent him from leaving parasites in my body—There's a knife in there, rusty, and dull, blocking in front of the consistent choice, confusing me. Then, I recall the reason it's here, this rusty and dull me.

"I won't join your damn pustule family, so back the hell off." I shove him away and get up.

"You trash! How impolite!" Anger making his ugly face boil. He is scratching his ears and the ringworm on his face, looking around in astonishment, and finally looking at me in disappointment, saying: "You're mine, mine! My family is very strong, we have everything, we have money! If I want, people will give me they, and all they have!"

I stand up then tell him: "I will accept redemption, out from constraints of this stupid world..."

“Re, re- redem...” He interrupts me, waving his hands in confusion and muttering anxiously: “Redemption no good, this place is good; why not just stay? No, you can’t!” He turns towards me, extending his claw.

“Get lost!” I lift my dagger, threatening him, “Just like that, I will leave, or you will die.”

Suddenly, he pounces on me, and in that instant, I stare blankly as he tightly grips my rusty blade, squeezing out blood. As I start to struggle, he shoves me, then roaring something, but my panic only allows me to interpret it as madness.

Something flashing, so bright and white, and then people are gone, and I seem to be too, except for my feet; so many feet making an annoying noise, I’m so tired, too tired to sleep. Some people stand up, some fall asleep, some get opened up, and then... uh, I don’t know, maybe I just woke up by accident, maybe I slept for years, and now everything is so calm, calm enough to make me not want to look or think anymore.

Tinnitus.

Pure white cleanly split open my eyes, and as I blinked, the world was being blurred with sharp pain and tears. My body convulsed violently enough to bring back some consciousness amidst the visceral agony. Bitterness welled up from my throat and nasal cavity, I found myself coughing. As it eased, the burning sensation and stench remained—I could smell it. My face felt numb, and I seemed to be lying on the ground. The dizziness still hadn’t let up, and I couldn’t organize my thoughts properly, not even with my manic depression.

In confusion, a figure crouched there, holding a folded body and watching me; I must have gone insane, I need to rest—Obviously, the fright is price of over relaxation, the exposed world envelops me, my heart and lungs oppress each other, the ringing in my ears gradually subsides, and the swelling pain and hunger in my head are so clear.

I first noticed the messy bloodstains on the ground, followed by this shabby alley and the excited voices coming from the nearby area. The sound of the bell suddenly echoed, overwhelming my soul and everything around me. Even though my head was foggy, I still easily found my way to the corner where the bell tower stood, following the footprints, conversations, roads, or the overwhelming signs.

“So stinks, that thing should be punished...”

“...Exactly! When they can't create anymore, they should be consumed! We can't delay this, because they will weaken and deteriorate! It's a complete waste! Those in power shouldn't protect the garbage that no longer has the ability to produce. This is about transformation, development, my friends...”

The square in front of the intersection is teeming with people, both onlookers and pontificators, all draped in wealth. I know these people; they are the source of my mother's business, they invented money. I try to avoid thinking about their motives for being here.

“Of course we can, we can raise humans. In fact, I am developing a human breeding farm. Let go of your guard, my great rulers, authority does not protect life that cannot create karma. We are talking about intelligence and survival instincts! Only life that possesses these will be protected by authority. We can find a way to take these... yes, raise them, for more nutrients. And I'm not just talking about food, my rulers, they can also provide organs, they can make you eternal...”

“Look at that, shouldn't that be mining or make us some meat down there?”

Not only me, these people also dump their ugliness elsewhere—a giant figure is being dragged by enforcers, ridiculed and spat upon. As they turn the corner, I see the prisoner writhing in a desperate manner; in the fleeting moment of blocked vision during the movement, it stops and looks at me.

I closed my eyes and covered my ears. I just wanted to get through this without causing any trouble. Someone grabbed my arm and my throat showed ruthless: “Get off, scum!”

“Watch your mouth.” The person stepping back a few paces, says: “You should... still remember me, right?” I open my eyes, sure, mother's client.

“Usually I don't sentimental, but this time, it's been really hard.” He smiled and continued: “I couldn't find your mother, how is she? Anyway, it's a bit dirty, don't you? You know where my

house is, yes? Come spend a few days with me, clean yourself up, don't skimp on the water, okay?" He pulls out a few bills then presses them against my shoulder.

"How generous, sir." I accept his money, "It would be even better if you have fire."

"Fire? Of course, I have hot water, poor thing." He looks to the side then annoyed says: "Hurry up now? I'll find a few more people."

I lower my head, bypass him and the crowd, walk along the avenue until I push open the huge door. Inside the empty bell tower, my heartbeat seems to overlap with the invisible second hand, and then with my footsteps. It is as if I have forgotten about distance and direction, passing through several doors, or maybe just pushing something open, until the pure white makes me doubt my own sight.

I cannot see my limbs or any shadows, unable to determine where my next step will land. I turn my head, the arcade that connects this space is still there.

"Name, number." echoes the heavy words.

This command requires an answer, I have to answer, it must be related to redemption. The number is already too blurry to discern; as for the name, I cannot dig anything out from my memory. I have no name, and I do not remember any names. No one struggles for a name; it is too intense as a form of individual.

"Mother died; father be executed. Yes, exemptee, allowed to inherit the family karma..."

"Executed?" Looking towards the dazzling pure white and I expressing my confusion: "Has my father passed away? But I..." I can't hear my own words clearly.

After a brief silence, I received the feedback: "This rudeness can be forgiven. No, exemptee, death is vague, your father is no longer here, and his purer essence will lay the foundation for the world. Bath in light, exemptee, I will guide your spirit..."

"What are you, authority?"

"I am an insignificant servant of the sentient beings, collecting karma to annihilate life, assisting the supreme souls in exempting life from devastate. Exemptee, must have come here for redemption. Now, bath in light, I will guide your spirit."

"Of course, redemption, I should be qualified to know what redemption is." Redemption is as unfamiliar to me as death, but I try to understand more about the purpose of life and shed the cowardice from my feet.

"Doubt. Ignorance is always a prominent leader, giving life the courage to explore the unknown." A few mocking remarks, and the voice became solemn: "Redemption, purifying exempted one's tainted souls, making them eternal; Exemptee no longer have malice, life, memory..."

"Idiot!" I don't even need to think, my anger has nowhere else to go but out of my mouth: "Losing life and memories? That's death! What a pathetic world that makes all life tirelessly pursue a better way to die?"

"Death is vague. The soul of the exemptee will transcend and no longer possess humanity. The exemptee have the right to choose, die, live or accept redemption; Question is not conducive to faith."

I seem to understand why death is end of pain, and how redemption can be a twisted form of destruction. Face the inevitable, I have no choice. Perhaps this is the goal of all life, and I just haven't realized that it's what I've been seeking.

I take a step forward, making sure to feel something solid beneath my feet. The pure white around me fades into a bleakness, as my footsteps lead me further away from self, in tandem with my fading heartbeat.

My thoughts detached from my senses without any hesitation, I am remnants of the world. So blurry, but I seem to be thinking about its twisted words and face, that creature I could never communicate with, making me wonder if I glimpsed an adumbration of goodwill.

“...Face another judgment!” Anger, and incomprehensible words, this is auditory sense.

I gulp a big breath, as if waking up from a nightmare. Two enforcers lie in the doorway, it dragging its severed limbs, leaving a long trail of blood.

“Protect yourself, exemptee. I assure you the harshest punishment is imminent.”

It stops in front of me, and opens its tightly clenched fingers. My dagger is in its hand, and it tries to hand it to me, but its weak arm won't allow it, and the dagger falls. It bites its tongue and frantically swings its arm, colliding with the dagger. Its fingers seem unable to bend.

I step forward and pick it up again.

“Do not taint your soul, exemptee.”

Weakness takes its gaze away from me, its heaving chest gradually eases; I am feeling my own and its heart, mine is much faster, my haggard soul never letting my heart slack off for a moment.

“Stay away from the disaster, wait for the enforcers to arrive.”

Waiting, attributing the present to the next second, used to be my expertise. These pulsations are enough, I pick up the dagger on my father's chest; Ah—fantasy and reality are worlds apart, the way blood splatters, the form of death, my actions and state of mind are completely different, and so is the place I'm about to go.

I think I gave up struggling, my desires seemed less noble, it just maliciously silenced itself in a flatter place; I only realized this when I collapsed, gasping for my second breath in the struggle for life.

If this is depravation, I will fall to the deepest depths.