

He could tell by the way people glanced at him that something was very wrong.

It was the furtive glance—the quick darting of the eyes that went back to staring straight ahead after the closest so-and-so saw his face. Others were less...intimidated? They walked right past him, heads held high, eyes never moving from some point in the distance. Those people studied him openly in their periphery, never daring to make proper eye contact with him.

A thin smile crept across the man's face as he considered the hypocritical behavior. He brought a gloved hand up to quickly cover the unfamiliar smirk across his mouth. The muscles that drew his lips into a tight line felt *foreign*, but it also felt *used*.

A shudder raced up his spine. Yes, that's what it felt like. Like his body was used. Intentionally used and misused and discarded until he found himself lying half buried in decaying leaves and mud in some pit in the ground with barely half a mind of memory in his dome.

A snarl inched its way across his nose and that felt almost familiar, too. He ran his hands over his face, massaging away the creases that formed almost naturally on this face—*his* face. He could feel a pointed nose, downturned eyes, a refined chin. Yet, his own reflection was mist.

He had made it to an inhabited city by a lake. He sat on a bench and rested his tired feet, watching the city's inhabitants go through their morning routine. Farmers made their way to the cornfields just at the edge of the city, a well-dressed young woman hurried to unlock the doors to her boutique. To observe such an idyllic scene was a privilege, he realized, especially after the path it took for him to get there.

It was by no means a difficult walk, at least not physically. When he awoke in the dirt the sun had barely risen and the morning fog hadn't lifted. His face was wet with dew and his body was cold and stiff. His entire body creaked and ached like an old leather glove that needed to be broken into again.

He dragged himself up and clapped the leaves off his shirt. His clothes gave him no indication of his occupation or status; it was just a simple black tunic and dark trousers. He headed down a road, trying to recall what had brought him to this place. Even with a blank canvas for a mind, he could tell this was no home.

The land was dotted with pits, ground gouged out like scoops of cream. Rusted swords and remnants of old weaponry were strewn throughout the field. When he cast his eyes across the plains he could hear the war cries. The clash of iron on iron rang in his ears and his body twitched in response, side-stepping, ducking, dancing with an invisible enemy.

And he'd blink and the image was gone, the memory vaguely coherent in his cognizant mind. Was he a soldier? A knight?

The visions continued as he followed the scent of the bitter freshwater up the road. This was a battlefield and he had reveled in it, seeking the thrill of a glorious, anticipated death. Countless enemies

fell beneath his blade. There were none worthy enough to put a fantastic close to his dull, wearying life. He trudged forward, ending life upon life until—

The memory faded and he was at the entrance of the lakeside city. The sun had risen above the horizon and the fog had melted with the morning heat, taking the mirages with it.

Across the lake he could see a centuries old cathedral and deeper into the city were the parapets of a castle. The regular humdrum of life started again with the light, as if the scenes of bloodshed never happened.

When he first laid eyes on the old stonework of the city, he was struck with another vision of fire and red skies. He could just about imagine a raging dragon trampling across a garden. His head stung and was struck with the feeling of having been here before. He remembered this very lake, partially frozen by the abnormal chill that was supposed to signal the end of times. He remembered waiting for someone. Or he thought he remembered because it was *almost* a memory.

And if it was, it couldn't have been his. None of these memories could have been his. There was a dissonance he couldn't pinpoint. Granted, if it was the end of times, how was he still here? He sat up straight. Who stopped the apocalypse?

And the stimulating dreams of war—that was not him. While entranced, the feeling of dragging his blades through the enemy and the warm blood splashing on his face was ecstasy. Reliving that thought now made him retch. Why would he enjoy that? *Did* he enjoy that?

He slumped back down and pushed back his hair. He held his forehead in his hand and squeezed it gently. If his memory served him (or what little instinct he had left), it told him he was dead. He died.

And then what?

Something—*someone* used him. His body was usurped, his ego quashed and eliminated to some corner of his mind. And now that his body was freed, here he was, emerging to feel the sun on his skin and the wind on his cheek. The dead, coming back to life with nothing but the pathetic burps of memories that weren't even his.

He scoffed. Was this the gods telling him he was undeserving of a second chance?

Even so, could a man die twice? Thrice? The dead should stay dead. And yet, three deaths lived in his mind; two of them were not his. Or were they? The identity of the second man in his mind puzzled him. *His* memories bubbled just beneath the surface.

But the man he is now had none.

Who was he?

Who were *they*?

He removed his hand from his head and looked up, catching a random citizen by surprise. He smiled wryly and awkwardly dusted his dirt-caked tunic.

He stood up from the bench and stretched slightly, his muscles still sore but no longer stiff. A quick splash of water from the lake should stop people from staring at him. But that didn't seem to be the reason why they stared.

They looked at him like they knew him. He shrugged, making his way to the lake's shoreline. Perhaps that was better. It would make it easier for him to find out who he was.

He knelt at the edge of the water, gravel and pebbles digging into his knees. He froze and looked up at the clear blue sky.

He had done this before. It was somewhere where day and night did not exist. He couldn't see the sky because it was obscured. He had held his head up to look anyway like a priest reverently seeking answers from the heavens.

There was someone with him in that memory. A figure cut for battle standing over him, his own sword in their hands. Did he see tears or did he imagine it now, at the lakeside? Like little pinpricks of starlight tearing opening the night sky, his mind ripped open with a dawn of realizations.

He dunked his head into the cold water, scattering the memory that was not his. They were not his tears, it was not his relief. It was not his joy when he felt the cold grasp of death. It was not him who orchestrated his own demise to flee the repeating machinations of this world! Oh, the plans the Creator had for *him*!

And yet! Here! He! Was!

He surfaced and gasped. His head pounded with memories that his soul did not own. What wretched things did this body do when he left it unoccupied? Nothing but destruction followed *his* wake. *His* footsteps brought fiery conclusions. The end justified every means if it meant *he* could cultivate that one person to blow smoldering ashes into flames that would combust *his* life.

The man's hands shook at the thought of all the cruelty *he* dealt in his body. Anyone who recognized him had reason to balk. The terror *he* and *his* colleagues brought to the world was devastating. They were the literal thing of nightmares. The whisper of *his* name was now used to scare children and adults alike.

His stomach writhed and then jumped to his throat. The surface of the lake settled and revealed his reflection. Tentatively, he reached for his right eye.

Drops of water ran off his face, plip-popping into the water and creating the smallest ripples that distorted his reflection again. But even that wouldn't have been enough to obscure what he saw. Or rather, what he didn't see.

The dark, scaly patch that marked *his* Evil Eye was not there. Instead, it was unblemished skin. Even his iris was no longer crimson. It was strange to see his features symmetrical. Once upon his time, this was what he had originally resembled.

He pulled away from the water's edge and stood up, unsteady at first. He breathed slow, deep breaths.

This was fine. Yes. He could live like this. He pushed back his wet hair and turned towards the city. The memories would be a burden but this was perhaps atonement. If carrying on these memories meant he could live out the rest of his life that was fine. He'd have some difficulty adjusting and creating a new identity but it's not like he and *him* were the same person.

This was just...the body.

A familiar and yet unfamiliar smile crept across his face. A weight had been lifted.

Bright plans in mind, he took a step back towards the city.

"Stop!"

He did. If the imperative didn't make him, the desperation in the voice did.

He turned around to face the owner of the voice. A person stood in the middle of the bridge having just arrived by Moon Gate. They noticed him first and he cocked his head slightly, recognition building.

His thin grin turned into a genuine, open-mouth smile before shrinking into horror.

The person ran down the bridge and he remained rooted. He owed them that much.

The tear-stained face in the memory was nothing compared to the fury on the face that approached him.

Before he could react, a hand snapped forward and gripped his throat.

"You're not him," they declared. "Who are you?"

The cold hand shook and clenched with just enough pressure to allow him a few shallow breaths. He looked down at the Milletian. The star of the dawn. Anger, betrayal, disbelief. Grief.

There are no second chances. It had to be a cruel joke.

The gods were despicable.