

Those words are enough to tip the scales and convince him to follow through with what he planned way back in the tavern. He knows they are true, and that simple truth is enough to show him we are no different, that he was truly cursed the day he was born with my blood flowing through his veins.

Lunging forward, he closes the gap between us with a raging growl containing every ounce of his frustration, anger, courage and desperation. And though I was expecting it, the surge of his body catches me off guard and I fly backward, stumbling over my own feet.

The weight of our bodies splinters the lute on my back, its song bursting into the night and joining the nightingales as they trill before an otherworldly silence follows.

It is probably wrong of me to think this, but I am saddened by this loss because I've

had that lute for so very long it's become a part of me, and I'm sure the cruel god who cursed me will not return its likeness to me when I reawaken in some distant part of the world, naked and painfully new, as if I've been born again.

In fleeting defense, I bring both arms up, crossing them in front of me and shoving at him, but he's too strong, probably outweighs me at least six or seven stone. Full weight boring down on me, the frantic fury of his movement is surprising. It's as though he's struggling with himself, not me, fighting against that which he knows in his heart to be true.

Only death can end his curse; his, not mine.

And when the cold steel slips between ribs, bypassing skin, muscle, bone the way a hot knife passes through butter, it is his gasp that surprises me, not my own.

At first I don't feel it, but then the pain comes, the quickening of my heart, and I taste the blood as it rises into my throat to choke me.

Rusten scrambles onto his knees above me, right hand slick and red and sticky with my blood. There is no ritual, but it seems so incredibly primal as he raises that hand to his bone-white face and smears it down his cheek in dismay. Cast in moonlight, the dark circles beneath his wide eyes make him look like a ghost, though I am the one who's dying.

"I..." he stammers, "I just... I want to go home."

It is impossible to catch my breath, the gurgling gush of copper rattling through my throat as I strain against the agony and try to sit up, to reach for him and comfort him because surely, I owe him that much.

But the only words I can muster are, "I'm sorry, Rust."

Sorry because he'll never find his way back to that place he felt safe and comfortable, completed by her love for the briefest of moments before the road called to his boots and he followed his own footsteps so far from home he can never go back.

Maybe one day she will find him, the way his mother sought his own father. Maybe she will seek him out so he can see the same curse in his son's eyes and try to warn him not to listen when the call to wander stirs inside his soul.

Gripping the cold leather of his sleeve, fingers slipping as they slacken, I tilt back my head and stare at the silver moon, the remnants of faded stars that gave up their light to let her shine. I know they are going to burst above me, drawing me into their swirling and endless light where I

shall taste peace for the briefest of moments  
before the pain consumes me and spits me  
back into this world.

"I'm so..." I choke and sputter, "so sorry."

And then the sky above me explodes,  
though only I can see this glorious display  
as it draws soul from vessel made of flesh  
and bone and throws me back onto the loom  
of the All-Creator to be rewoven into the  
fabric of the world to start again.

As my conscious awareness fades I hear  
only the sobs of a man who longs for free-  
dom from a curse that never should have  
been his.

Captured, this burst of stars  
swirl and dance,  
twirl and prance  
in the palm of a hand  
that never closes.

And drifting ashes settle  
into the dust,  
upon the rusted  
memories that still linger  
in an old soul renewed.

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