ACQUIESCENCE TO BREAK THE GREAT SPINE

Banished to the Realm of Death, a man must grapple with betrayal, fate, and identity, choosing between walking the isolated path of righteous vengeance or stepping into unknown grace with a stranger

Word Count: 2999 words

He knew he died in the autumn, and he judged it must be the depths of winter in this Realm now, from the ashen flurries ceaselessly drifting from above. Although, he could not be certain how much time had passed or if this Realm followed the seasons of his own. There was no time here, no light of day or cover of darkness; there was only that grey wash across everything, tinging all within his view and even his skin with the pallor of Death.

He adopted a simple existence while attempting to outrun his true end. He slept when he was too exhausted to push forward. He drank in an attempt to slake his thirst. He did not need to eat, but there was a hunger inside him that gnawed and rattled his bones, demanding to be freed to consume everything in its path. He fed that hunger with the memories burned deep within his core; his brother's impassive eyes locked onto his, his own hand coated with blood as he staunched the flow from his ribs, his brother's turned back— his last fixed gaze in that Realm.

The pain of the betrayal threatened despondency, and stillness jeopardized momentum. He would not accept this fate. Instead, he shed those feelings until they hung by the barest thread; he became a beast provoked, focused solely on the jolting ache that pierced the scars on his side, which went much deeper than simple flesh. He became the blade that had slain him. The thrum of retribution within his heart thudded in time with his very being, reshaping and propelling him forward every moment, guiding his way out of this stone depression surrounded by giant effigies.

The mountains here were not mountains at all. Each step landed upon a mangled hand, upon a silent anguished cry, upon the hunched shoulders of forms fossilized by this strange Realm. He once studied their faces and features clinically, imagining meaning behind their frozen gestures. He parsed out his own path forward from the clues they left behind.

But what once seemed distinct and intentional now reflected the monochromatic expression of failure. The damned had no knowledge to convey beyond their frantic scramble to leave this place, to reach further than the soul before them. The cacophony of their plights beat out of sync with his own. He'd rather see them as formless mountains, and so he did. The ceaseless thrumming within him was now his only companion.

The man flexed his fingers, his knuckles defiantly creaking against the effort and falling open at his sides. He looked out into the shadowy expanse before him, a colossal snowcapped spine extending as far as he could perceive. He did not know how far this Realm reached, but he would find the end of it. He had plans now, and while Death may have claimed him, he would not let that stop him.

He trudged forward, each step thudding with the echoes that haunted him. That pulse still beat steadily, growing in strength. Each step he took was in time with its incessant thrum, his head pounding with determination to make it out, right the wrongs, change his fate. It was all he knew.

The Great Spine rent in two, bodies reaching in either direction. He went right, thinking perhaps he had never seen these exact forms before. The journey became torturous. He did not see the terrain in front of him; it was useless in this pass, given the constant twilight. He could only feel his way forward. Underneath the loud thud of his heart, he felt that remnant of thread tugging him home towards his Realm. Using that, he felt out the next step, the next ascent.

But with his ascent came the unbearable pain of memory as he once again felt the blades slashing and piercing him, felt the stabbing pain of his blood crystallizing in his veins. Each step brought the onslaught of his betrayal. His lungs could not expand against the dull ache, then the sharp sear, of his ribs, the scars an ever-burning mar across his skin. It was too much. He discarded his thread. He did not

want to feel any longer. He would find home another way. His blood thrummed in his ears, commanding him to take one more step, one more breath.

More time passed. His knees buckled and slammed to the ground. His hands split against the rough stone as he pushed himself up to step forward once again. Each step was measured but more strained than the last. He was nothing but the pain radiating from his wounds. He wanted to shirk off his armor, drop his katanas to the ground. But he forced himself to make it around the next bend, and then the next — he'd need them when he made it out. He was nearly there, that thrum picking up in excitement, his steps coming easier.

He'd traversed many bends, excruciating pain reducing him to a crawl, when he saw it. The bane of his journey. It ended the same every time, yet it still came when least expected. The stone which bore eighty-eight slashes — soon to be eighty-nine — loomed ahead. The effigy was his savior from the ashy sleet as he slept. It was also perhaps his biggest tormentor. That unsated hunger twisted within him, stoking that pulsing flame in his gut. A piercing cry belted out of him and misted the air as he hopelessly collapsed to the ground.

He dragged himself under the cover of his hellish home and succumbed to nothingness, not quite sure when the thrumming stopped and the inky blackness began. He knew he'd wake and scratch yet another mark on his stone, determined to go one step further this next venture. He always made it one step further —he was no closer to making it out.

Waking this time was different. His awareness pricked awake before his body. Still heavy with sleep, he opened his senses to the rogue energy. The thrum that guided him sparked to life. His half-lidded eyes glanced around his hollow. The man's gaze landed on a dark figure crouching in the corner. The figure shifted, lifting their head, a sharp blue glow pinning him into place.

“Who are you,” he drawled, not bothering to rise.

“Your salvation,” a disinterested female voice replied.

He scoffed. “And how might that be?”

“We are both an ask and an answer to the other,” the woman continued. “I know you’re attempting to break out of this Hell. And failing. At least eighty-eight times. *Tch*,” she mused.

Indignation flared through him, jolting him upright, glaring down the shadowed guest. “You will leave this Realm,” the unwelcome guest agreed, as if she read his mind. Unmoving from her casual position, she lazily lifted a hand in offering and added, “but you will need my help to do so.”

“And why is that?” he retorted, ignoring her gesture.

“Because I am the only one who has ever left this Hell. The only one who has ever escaped the inevitable fate of hardening to stone. I know you feel the calcification setting in, burdening your every footfall as you inevitably return to this very spot despite the different routes you trek. It will continue like this, until you can no longer lift your foot or even slither along the path. Until only your eyes can move — the eyes take longest to settle, unfortunately. Choose your final resting place wisely, for there’s nothing you can do after that.”

She paused. “There is an alternative fate. You can trust me to guide you out.” The bluntness of her tone clanged through him like the killing blow thrust through his breastplate. His outrage roared to an uncontrollable blaze, and he leapt up, brandishing his twin blades.

The woman’s body sprang with stoic grace as she withdrew her own longsword. He advanced first, and they met with a clash. She didn’t yield a step to him and

hardly seemed to lean into the countermeasure, her inner strength at odds with her willowy frame. His scars protested against his locked stance, but he only allowed the sharp sears to fuel that thrumming blaze within him. The painful pulse at his ribs propelled him forward at a ruthless cadence, the same way they had on his journey through the Great Spine. He refused to be slain again.

“Our goals are the same. We both aim for you to leave this place,” she heaved out in a frustrated breath, knocking him back several steps into the open air.

He paused for a moment, katanas down, brows furrowed in confusion as he wondered why this mysterious guest would want to help him rather than smite him down to his final death. His brother had done just that when he allowed himself to trust. He would not repeat that fate. He only trusted his ability to survive and push forward alone, as he always had.

Memories flashed through him, validating his refusal to trust this specter. The first image was an impossibly young boy burying his parents in graves deeper than he was tall, sleeping by their earthly tombs for three cold nights; then, a slightly older boy, one who should still be too young to know the responsibilities he carried, training alongside young men, quickly outpacing and outranking everyone around him; finally, a young man stealthily gathering secrets, weapons, alliances, forces so that he could finally uncover the truth and right the wrongs done to his parents, to him.

It ended the same every time. He had always walked the path alone. But then, one day, a brother walked alongside him. Then, *she* walked alongside him. When had he stopped walking a few paces in front of them and allowed them to walk in step with him? When had he stopped truly being alone? That was the weakness that exposed him to this fate. That incessant thrum of his heart beat loudly and drowned out all reason. “I will free myself,” he argued.

“You think you have the power? I am the warden of this Realm,” she snarled. Long wisps of silver strands broke free from the red ribbon in her hair, whipping across her face and threatening her perfect composure.

“I know the rightful ruler of the dead. You are not *her*,” he seethed, his heart giving a painful twist. That inner thread materialized again as he thought of Death, the true ruler of this Realm. The thread pulsed in time with the thrum, angry at the imposter before him. No longer would someone take what was not theirs.

He advanced, dealing several katana strikes, and she retreated, her raised brows the only hint of her surprise at his strength. She remained graceful, and his blows did not land, but she continued to retreat until she had receded down the sloped heap of stone bodies reaching for the Heavens above. He was advancing, he was winning; if he could slay this so-called warden, this intruder, he could get out of this Realm. He would claim her power as the strange magic in her eye died out. He would consume it, breaking whatever chains confined him here; he would leave.

He towered above her now, the advantage of the high ground bolstering his confidence. He raised his blades above his head and crashed them down with all the strength he possessed. Again, she met his blow with an apathetic counter, but he thought he sensed a slight falter. Their swords locked between them, and her piercing gaze seemed to call his soul forward. That strange blue eye of hers glowed and illuminated the webbed scar that tore her face from the arch of her brow to the pull of her smug grin.

He tore his gaze away, not allowing her an inch to advance or a parcel of his soul. His eyes landed on the claw-tipped gauntlets gripping her longsword; the golden gloves were the most ornate he had ever seen, engraved daffodils growing through littered bones. Shock clanged through him, and he glanced down to the hilts of his own katanas. The ones gifted to him. By *her*. Death.

His eyes roved over the intricate carvings of the grand tree at the center of the hilts, at its expansive roots that morphed into serpents eating their own tails, giving the carvings no true beginning or end. As his eyes traced the recursive loops, they landed on the identical daffodils carefully whittled between the roots. He had been there when the once-wooden hilts were harvested from an ancient tree near his true home. Had seen them lovingly crafted and petrified into the rosy handles with deep green veins that mirrored those beneath his skin. The ones *she* knew well.

“Where did you get those gauntlets?” he breathed.

The woman carefully followed his attention. She smirked, her next words unfurling like smoke, “Who do you think sent me to retrieve you?”

That scrap of thread deep within him gleamed crimson, a knell filling his ears and body as it strengthened until there was no sound at all. His head cleared. He felt his katanas slip from his grip. He did not hear them clatter to the ground. He fell to his knees, but he did not feel the sharp gravel cut into them. His shock ran deep as his mind and body conspired to remember. To truly remember *her*, to remember his true self in all he was, he would have to *feel*.

The man felt the icy dread emanating from his ribs, stealing his breath, blood bubbling up through his throat until he choked on it. He hunched over as the blood spewed from his garbled wheeze, soaking his hand just as it had when he braced his ribs on the battlefield. He lifted his eyes to the woman, hair sliding over his brows, and her gaze held his in a knowing embrace, freezing time.

He thought the silence was unbearable; as the soft patter of his wasted heart, the wet rasp of his breath, the grating slide of his severed bones all filtered in, he knew he was wrong. Consumed by the sound of his own death, replayed for him at last, he finally felt the quiet desperation of his betrayal, felt his fear for the Realm he left behind. The larger ramifications of his brother’s betrayal finally flowed into

view. His stomach twisted with dread for all the lives tangled up in his carefully laid plans, lives that now laid exposed. Yet, the greatest fear that gripped him was the possibility of *her* anguish or suffering. *She had sent for him.*

He gripped his swords, using every ounce of strength he had left to push himself upright, knees faltering as they mineralized into place. He settled for a kneel. He commanded a defiant expression towards the Realm, refusing to accept his fate. He would not return to avenge the many wrongs he was dealt; he would return to prevent those wrongs from devouring the rest of them, *her*.

“What do you need me to do?” he asked as he angled his face to the woman, projecting brutal strength through his voice. He had always hid behind an impenetrable stone wall like this, but he allowed vulnerability to cast its light through the depths of his eyes. “How do we go back?” he pleaded after the silence ticked by.

“We can’t go back. Not as we were,” she murmured.

The air was stolen from his lungs as he registered this confession, a defeated gasp barely breaking through. Tears broke free as he closed his eyes, rolling down broad planes, catching at the corners of his mouth. He upturned his palms, the stories etched in them seeming to change with the very gesture, rearranging to describe some new fate. He felt as if his soul were being cleaved in two as that dwindling inner fire was snuffed out, his inner drum of purpose deserted with no grounding to restart.

He raised his eyes to take in his last moment, for surely this was his final death; he expected to meet the cold yet smug gaze that haunted him during his time here. He felt the acceptance of his fate crack open and flood his heart. As he met the woman’s eyes, though, he was met with a strange hope.

The woman looked at him favorably, a soft smile lighting a new glow within her, shining like moonlight. Her blue eye dulled to reveal a marbled galaxy, stunning in its depth. “Now you are ready to be remade,” she approved. He attempted to move but faltered, the pain at his side becoming unbearable, the inky blackness consuming him again.

***

There was only feeling at first. He sputtered, the dribble of blood coating his throat and lips. He felt its gush through his fingers, down his side, as his entire body ached against the uneven ground. He felt the heat of the flames engulfing the towering trees around him. That thrumming in his chest was back, the one that had kept him together all along, but it was different this time. This thrum would sustain him, not consume him. He anchored to it.

The sounds came in next. The clang of metal against metal, the slice of sinew, the gasps of stolen life. He took in the whimpered wails of the dying and thought of the Realm with the Great Spine covered in ash and snow. He knew it would grow vastly by nightfall.

He opened his eyes, the familiar scene of his death surrounding him. He inhaled, the effort painful but possible. His eyes locked with his brother’s, the once-impassive look now morphing to one of disbelief, the horror turning his brother’s face that familiar hue of ash. The man inhaled, that cloak of silence enveloping him once more, and stood. He gripped the crafted hilts of his katanas, taking no pleasure, no remorse, in what was to come.