

“You’re finally awake,” a deep, gravelly voice murmurs. It belonged to a hooded man dressed in a dark, flowing robe, smokey wings protruding from his back. From beneath his cowl, he shows only a thin jaw and even thinner lips, paper white and nearly skeletal. In one spindly hand he holds an obsidian scythe rimmed with crimson. In the other, a silver skeleton stopwatch on a long chain that flies back and forth, never ceasing, never faltering. A grim reaper, if one should ever exist. He drifts a few feet away as you sit up and look around.

Blank. Bleak. Pure. Not a single speck of color aside from the reaper and yourself.

“Where am I?” you slowly inquire.

“The entrance to the afterlife, young soul,” answers the reaper.

“The afterlife? But how? That must mean I have died!”

“Yes, the afterlife,” he confirms. “Do you not remember how you transitioned here?”

“N-no.”

He nods. “Many forget. Come, then, let us rewind the story’s end.”

With a flourish, he slams the staff of his scythe to the empty ground, splitting it like a brittle eggshell, with a cacophonous thunder. Frightened, you scuttle from the breaks. Black vapor hisses through the new fissures and gathers in a whirling tornado. Eventually, the wisps slow, though they never quite conclude, just like the reaper’s pocketwatch. The center of the swirl begins to glow bronze. Then, shapes emerge from the depths, twisting into much more detailed images. A gray bedroom in a gray house on a gray street in a gray world. A familiar figure in the bed shifts before reluctantly rising.

“There you are,” the grim reaper narrates, “depressed and insecure. Afraid of not appearing or acting or sounding like everyone else, of not meeting the standards fashioned by

society. Yearning to feel happiness, but happiness beyond reach. In your despair, you summoned a demon witch.”

You watch as the figure, the miniature version of you, hauls themselves over to a dresser across the room on which rests a bottle of midnight ink, a matchbox, and a scarlet tome. They furiously flip through the pages before stopping at a certain place. Tipping the bottle, the sable ink spills upon the carpet to form a symbol almost like a three-pointed star. Then they snatch up the matchbox, pull out a stick, and strike it. The little flare falls onto the star and the fire ravenously engulfs the ink. Their tiny lips shifted to form words long forgotten. The earth suddenly quakes within the reaper’s portal, lurching and heaving as if it wished to omit something atrociously unpleasant. A column of flame erupts from the symbol, and the world finally regurgitates the cause of its indigestion. Your nose wrinkles at the hideous creature.

A leathery beast with dirty, matted hair that smelled like a decomposing corpse. She towered at about three meters high, brushing the ceiling, and used a mound of red, withered flesh for a body. Eyes like solid tar roam her new surroundings. When they finally land on the little human, the cavity in her face contorts into a sickle, displaying craggly, yellow teeth. The floorboards creak as the creature leans down, rancid breath sickeningly warm and wicked intent in her gaze. A sour, bitter taste intrudes your mouth at the sight of the memory.

“For eons I have waited! At last, another has summoned me. Another who believes they appear just as I do,” she croons, raspy voice like sand hissing through a sieve. “I am the demon witch, Coyiset. You wish for a new skin, do you not? A skin like everyone else’s, with all the flaws and oddities flushed away and only containing what the world deems perfect. Beautiful, unblemished, soft-haired, unwrinkled! This I will grant you, if you pay the correct price.”

“Yes, any price!” you hear yourself claim.

“Very well, then. You need only to pay in full when you become dissatisfied with my gift. Until then, this new skin belongs to you.”

The reaper shakes his head in disapproval. “In an instant, you became someone new. The kind of person who you dreamed of being. However, you quickly discovered that resembling everyone else did nothing to make you any happier.”

After a flash of light, you no longer looked yourself and the world no longer came across as gray and dingy. Indigo curtains, maroon rug, blue bedspread. Everything seemed so much brighter, saturated, and exciting. Birds singing outside sounded more melodious, the sunlight steaming in felt ten times warmer, a gentle breeze rustled iridescent leaves beyond the window.

The images in the portal start to commence rapidly. You watch the former you eat breakfast then head to school, observe your copy as they strutted down the hallways, and smile as they laughed with the other teens. Everyone spoke to you, turning you into the center of attention.

“Sit next to me!” a boy requests.

“Hangout with us at lunch!” a girl giggles.

“You obeyed them so eagerly,” continues the reaper. “Quick to answer every whim, and quicker still, they forgot about you all over again. For the rest of the day, classmates interacted with you less, teachers no longer noticed you, no one recognized you. Invisible, simply another face amongst the crowd. What happened to being unique? To being special?”

Scene after scene, class after class, conversation after conversation, the world regained its original gloomy, gray filter. Gone were the colors, the sun, and the joy. You frown as you observe yourself trudge home beneath a cloudy evening sky. Your duplicate unlocks the door to the dark house, lumbers up the staircase, and sinks on the bed heavily. The black star from earlier that day

crackles and sparks, charged with a mysterious energy. For a second time, the earth retches out a column of sulfuric fire.

“Poor, miserable mortal. Not even an entire day!” Coyiset chuckles.

“You did this!” the duplicate objects, frustrated tears streaking each cheek. “You gave me the wrong skin!”

“I did not. I made you like everyone else, as you wished. Nevermind that, however. I believe we had a deal. I expect my pay.”

“The deal was rigged!”

Coyiset began to lose her patience. “If it was, then you were your own manipulator. I did not make you hate yourself! I did not make you unappreciative of how your maker created you! Society may have forced its wicked standards upon you, but in the end, it is *you* who succumbed to them! Now, relinquish your old skin to me. That is my price.”

“At that moment,” the reaper hums, bringing his skeleton watch to head-level, “you realized the gravity of your situation. Oh, the regret and remorse and fear in your heart! If only you had accepted yourself. You attempted to flee, but one can only outrun a demon for so long.”

In a cold sweat, your miniature dodges around Coyiset and bursts through the bedroom door. The demon witch shrieks in fury, chasing after them. They swiftly scurry across the hall and down the steps, hand fumbling for the phone tucked into their back pocket. *Too fast!* Tripping over their own feet, they tumble into a heap at the bottom of the case. The phone soars through the air. You gape into the aperture of time with increasing horror as the phone splinters on the impact of slamming against tile.

“Keep watching. You must remember your own fate,” the reaper orders.

You keep your vision glued to his portal. The tiny duplicate stumbles to their feet. They round the corner, snatching back the fallen device and frantically fussing over it, pleading with it to function. Nothing but a screen as empty as the house.

*The front door! A final chance!* Coyiset follows around the bend, screeching vengeance. Ten feet from the door. Five. Two. One.

“I-I think I know how this ends. Please, may we stop?” you beg the grim reaper.

“No. Keep watching.”

You watch yourself twist the lock above the handle. The bar inside slides back with a click. They turn the knob. The door opens only to come to a lurching halt.

“Please-” you beseech.

“Nearly there.” His swinging watch seems to move slower.

*The door latch!* Your double scrambles to close the door and slide back the second lock. Such a simple thing to do, a task that needs only a few seconds, and yet it still took too long. In an instant, Coyiset had caught up.

“Foolish human. One cannot summon and deal with a demon and live without the consequences. Your time is up,” she cackles. Her grinning jaws diverged from one another, stained teeth much more menacing than before. She pounces.

The portal goes dark. The smoke retreats into the fissures. The watch’s pendulum ceases. It spins in place for a minute before starting to sluggishly sway again. You clear your throat.

“There. My memories have returned. Will you lead me to my afterlife now?”

“Ah, but you are not quite dead just yet.” Your eyes widen at his statement. If you still had a heart, it would no doubt be sprinting painfully.

“What? What do you mean?”

The fractures in the floor had never sealed. Now, as the grim reaper shakes his head in pity, they branch out, rupturing the ground further. Every crackle and snap sends a new chill down your spine.

“Look in the mirror,” whispers the reaper.

The pure white landscape rumbles and shifts. The reaper becomes nothing more than an ebony blur, but you can still discern the glimmer of his silver watch, back in full swing.

“Wait! How can I not be dead? You forced me to watch my own demise!”

The rifts emit an umber smoke. Suffocating, intoxicating, lulling you to sleep, blinding your vision. Darker and darker. Brown turns to gray turns to black.

“Look in the mirror,” the reaper whispers once more, and the entrance realm to the afterlife disappears.

You jolt to find yourself sitting in bed, the world as colorless as ever. No more golden sunshine walls, no more mahogany dressers, no more sky blue pillows. Everything tainted, as they had been before you had summoned Coyiset, if such an event ever occurred. Your eyes roam the familiar surroundings. When they finally land on the three-pointed star, your mouth contorts into a downward crescent. *How confusing.* If Coyiset really answered your call, then where is she now? How are you still alive?

*Look in the mirror.* The reaper really insisted on it.

You throw the covers back and slip off the mattress. The floorboards creak beneath the rug. Carefully stepping around the star, you make your way to the mirror hung on the other side of the room. Odd. Your reflection comes across as... different. Is the mirror distorted? You step closer, squinting, blinking. Another step, and then you freeze. No.

*No.*

You rush to the glass, almost colliding with it, grasping the plastic frame. You shake the pane. You howl at it. You weep in agony. Yet regardless of how hard you try, regardless of the faces you make, the red, withered face with jagged, uneven teeth repeats each expression. You stare at Coyiset. You stare at the hideous, russet skin littered with pockmarks. Stare at the filmy, coal-like eyes that leak oily tears. Stare at the wrinkled hands that strangle the edges of the reflector, veins popping like mountain ridges as the grip becomes tighter and tighter.

Then the mirror shatters, and you scream.