

The Glass World

The cool night breeze blew gently through a silent, strange village. The air had that fresh smell it gets right after rainfall, but there were no puddles in the streets. A stranger walked down a cobbled path, one leading toward the village. He didn't know who he was, where he was, or what he was doing. His past was a blank, everything around him was unfamiliar. He could tell there was something off as he approached the village. At first glance, it looked like any other village, but there was one crucial difference that set it apart. The stranger wasn't sure how, but he knew for a fact that villages were made of brick, stone, and wood. This village, though, was made of glass.

Each house had a series of paned glass walls, doors, and roofs. Each was a unique and beautiful work of art in its own right. Colourful stained-glass murals of flowers, people, and landscapes covered every house. The stranger stood in awe of their beauty, stopping to take in the wonderful view around him.

It was hard to see clearly in the darkness, but what was illuminated by the moon and stars was just as breathtaking as the houses. Luscious trees and gardens filled the streets, their fragrance filling his lungs with a freshness that made the ends of his lips twitch up. The hood he had been wearing gently blew from his head, falling around his shoulders. The stranger looked up at the newly revealed night sky above, and a beaming smile leapt onto his face. The moon was a silver spotlight, shining down upon the world's splendor. Stars twinkled like precious jewels in the night sky, and were like the hairs on one's head, incomprehensibly countless. Those stars told of the vastness of the world, that it truly was endless, a continuous story that will last as long as time itself.

The stranger almost laughed into the silent darkness. Wherever he was, whatever world he was in, he thought, it had to be a good one, for such impossible beauty to exist. He journeyed deeper into the village, his curiosity carrying him onward. During his travels, he saw incredible things; a cat that ran across his path, giving him a wary look before darting away behind a nearby house, and a group of fireflies that flew by him, like lost little stars, trying to find their way back up to the heavens. He even saw a moth, trapped in a spider's web, attempting to free itself. He stood and watched its toil, fixated and fascinated by the moth's persistence in the face of certain doom. After some time had gone by, he watched with shock and amazement as the moth freed itself and flew off into the night.

With each new discovery, the stranger became more convinced that he had somehow found himself in an almost perfect, utopian world. It seemed as though he could journey forever and never discover everything. It was an endless adventure. An eternal story. An amazing challenge in a beautiful world.

Then he saw a woman, walking swiftly down the street on the other side of the road. Her eyes were wide and alert, her head whipping back and forth in fear. The stranger watched her curiously, wondering what she was afraid of. She had almost passed right by him when suddenly her eyes darted towards him. She raised her hand, pointing wildly in his direction. Her pupils were constricted into pinpricks.

"MONSTER!" She shrieked, running as fast as she could the other way. The stranger jumped, looking this way and that, trying to find the monster she was pointing at. Then he saw it, a small but terrifying figure beside him. It looked like it had horns and claws, and a thin, sharp tail. The stranger yelped with fear and ran hastily down the

street. His feet pounded in time with his heart, and his heavy breathing sounded like a dying man's. Out of the corner of his eye he could still see the dark and shadowy figure of the monster, easily keeping pace with him. *What are you running from?* A deep, eerie voice echoed in his ears. Fear compelled his legs to work harder. His eyes darted this way and that, trying to find an escape.

It was like the village had suddenly changed around him, transforming into a different place altogether. Garbage littered the streets; wilting plants dotted every yard. Dead rats and squirrels could be seen, flattened and almost unrecognizable on the road. Shards of shattered glass sliced into his feet, going straight through his thin shoes. The stench of death filled the air, and the stranger caught a glimpse of what looked like a man lying on the ground in an alleyway. Dried blood had hardened all around his corpse, creatures ate away at his remains. The image brought back flashes of scattered memories. Fresh scarlet blood flowing from countless bodies scattered about the ground. The looks of horror in their faces in their fleeting moments of life, and their blank stares of confusion in death. The stranger clutched his head, shaking it fiercely, trying desperately to get the images out of it. Where had the beauty he had once marveled over gone? Where had his utopian world vanished too?

The stranger had no time to dwell on such thoughts, not with a monster chasing him. *So, you're remembering, then?* The monster's voice hissed. *It always takes you far too long to remember. It takes the fun out of things.* The stranger grit his teeth, his muscles burning in protest as he pushed them to the limit in an attempt to escape the terrifying voice. He glimpsed another alleyway that seemed clear up ahead. He darted

into it, running frantically around countless turns. The monster was always right beside him the whole way. Yet, it never made any aggressive moves.

Exhaustion filled him, draining away his fear, although his heart still pounded in his ears. He stopped behind the corner and pressed his back against the wall, trying to steady his breathing. He closed his eyes, resting his head against the glass wall. What kind of world had he found himself in? How could such ugliness and danger exist under such a magnificent and awe-inspiring night sky?

The stranger sighed, and opened his eyes, looking at the space in front of him. His eyes widened in fear as the red and dangerous eyes of the monster stared back at him. A scream escaped his lips, and he ran down the alleyway again, eventually finding his way back to the main streets. There seemed to be more people, all of them running away in terror, just as he was. The resounding finality of slamming doors and windows did nothing to ease the stranger's own building panic. Would he ever manage to escape this monster?

That was when he heard it, the thunderous sound of hooves, and the clanging of metal. He spared a glance over his shoulder and saw small specks that resembled horses and soldiers in the distance, along with flickering orange lights; torches. Another memory, just as fragmented as the first, came rushing back. Men with torches running at him, yelling things he couldn't quite make out, while waving their flaming torches in his direction. The smoke and flames engulfed his vision. The stranger blinked the memory away, scolding himself. Those people coming would help him. They wanted to kill the monster, which would save him from becoming its prey. They were coming to his rescue.

Yet, he couldn't bring himself to turn around and run towards them. It was against every instinct in his body. So, he simply continued forward, hoping they would catch up to him in time before the monster killed him. He turned into another alleyway, ready to dive back into the endless maze in hopes of finding some kind of refuge. As he turned the corner, though, he stopped dead in his tracks, realizing he had made a mistake. In front of him stood the monster. He froze, staring at the dark figure, with its crimson eyes, pearly white horns and claws, and its gleaming, yellow-tinged fangs. He could feel his body shaking, trembling at the thought of fighting such a monster. But he knew he had no choice. Something inside of him knew the monster would always follow him without relent, unless he confronted it right then and there. The stranger could hear the distant pounding of hooves getting louder, closer. Back up would soon arrive, but he had no time to dawdle. He had no other options. He had to fight or die.

The stranger raised his fists, his body instinctively settled into a fighting stance. He watched the monster copy his every move, as if mocking him. He didn't care, though. In fact, nothing else mattered in that moment, other than his opponent in front of him, and the deadly weapons that were his fists. He couldn't afford to lose the battle. After all he had seen, he was determined to explore the world and uncover its hidden truths. He couldn't do that if he was dead.

The stranger took a deep, calming breath. He only paused for a moment, and then he sprang into action. He stared savagely into the eyes of his opponent, his nimble and deadly fist swinging towards the monster. The monster followed suit yet again, swinging its fist out to collide with the stranger's. The stranger braced himself for the impact, letting out a savage cry of determination and strength. As the stranger's fist

collided with the monster's, a stinging pain shot up his arm. Glass shards flew and scattered about him, like tiny knives. The stranger stumbled backwards, shaking his hand, and then looked up in shock.

He finally realized why he couldn't escape the monster, because in the glass before him was his own shattered reflection.

His hands shook, and he saw fear and horror in the eyes of his reflection. He was the monster, he realized. All of those people were afraid of him. Memories began to flow back, again just as fragmented and shattered as the glass, but this time, like the glass, they were sharp too. He could hear the screams of people, he could see flashes of blood, he saw the fire of the torches that were turning onto him, and the angry cries of people, demanding his death. Now he could hear what their voices were saying.

"Murderer!" They screamed. "Thief!" They cried out. "MONSTER!" They howled. The stranger shook his head, clutching it in his hands again. He wasn't a monster. He didn't want to kill anyone. It was all just a mistake, a misunderstanding. Surely, they would understand if he just told them he wasn't a threat. Surely, they would let him live, if he just convinced them that he wasn't what he appeared to be. *You always do this,* the now disembodied voice pointed out, vaguely amused. *You always try to convince yourself of humanity's compassion, when that compassion is non-existent towards you.* The stranger curled his shaking hands into fists.

"You're wrong," the stranger hissed into the darkness. "Don't underestimate humanity's ability to change and adapt, and to show compassion for other beings. They can. I know they can. And they will, you'll see!"

Then there was a sickening sound, of metal running through flesh. Pain tore through the stranger, and an agonizing scream managed to escape through his lips. He looked down and saw the tips of a metal stake sticking out of his chest. Scarlet drops of his life dripped from the stake. Shock filled him, followed by pain, and lastly, acceptance. He shouldn't have been surprised. Those men had been hunting the monster. He shouldn't have disillusioned himself with the naive notion that he could try to plead his case to them. Why would they listen to the lying words of a vial monster, after all? Yet, he had done nothing wrong. His innocent blood was spilt, simply because of his appearance, simply because people fear what they don't understand.

He saw his own reflection again, in the shattered glass before him. Blood soaked and dying, his claws dripping with his own blood. He looked pathetic. He looked small. He looked ugly. *The irony of this is unbelievably delicious*, the cruel voice cackled. *You were once in a similar predicament to the one that you find yourself in now; on the verge of death. That's when I found you and offered you a second chance. You were more than willing to oblige, despite the strict and harsh rules involved, all because you wanted another chance to find out the truth about the incredible world you so loved. You sacrificed everything, to get a glimpse of beauty, and life. But instead, you're forced to see the ugliness of the world for all eternity.*

But the stranger ignored the voice, instead choosing to look up at the brilliant night sky above him with his last fleeting moments of life. A smile lifted onto his lips. Despite knowing he was about to die, despite the words of the evil voice, despite all the ugliness that surrounded him, he would choose to see the beauty and the light of the world, if that was the last thing he would ever see.

How, he wondered, could such a cruelly beautiful world exist? Why, he thought, was he destined to die so quickly, without ever understanding it fully? Yet he knew, deep down, that even though what happened to him was cruel, even though he had seen so much ugliness, he would do it all again in an instant, if given the chance. He would do anything to be able to relive those first few moments of wonder. He would give everything, just to get another look at that sky, to feel the gentle breeze, to smell the fragrance of flowers. Perhaps he was mad, or just downright foolish, but he longed to go back to those first few moments, just one last time.

“Please, cruel fate, just one more chance,” he muttered, as he felt life leaving his body. His vision blurred, turning the dotted stars into streaks of light, like shooting stars. “Just one more chance,” he wished. Then he was plunged into darkness.

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