

Emil was revered as if every waking moment was his apotheosis. Townspeople would call out to him by a God's name as he rode by their houses, tossing mail at their doorsteps. They would ask for his favor, drop to their knees, and pray in his name because of one thing;

Emil resembled a God. A glance in the mirror and he would find Beckett, the God of Retribution, smiling slyly back at him.

"Bless us!" The town called to him- whether in mockery or in genuine missight. Emil despised their scrutiny. His heart twinged when they compared him to beings whose existence he barely believed in. They looked upon Emil as a mortal embodiment of a higher power even before the last of Beckett's bloodline had died.

The boy who had been a descendant of Beckett had embodied the demeanor of salty ocean waves. He wanted Emil's job, he wanted Emil's face. It was often debated which of them was truly more godly; the one who resembled Beckett or the one who was related to him. They threw insults at each other like daggers until they were both too bloody to maintain the pretense of simple rivalry any longer.

Emil had slept at the edge of death for five days. He caught a glimpse of the boy's sneer in between spits of consciousness, and as he slept, simple resentment became the ache of hatred. He had been working, riding through town with a satchel full of letters at his hip when the pain struck him. In his heart, in his limbs, in his face: searing pain that burnt like a fire within him. Who else would do this to him but the boy?

"*Poison? Really?*" Emil had yelled when he could walk again.

The boy shook his head, that smirk lighting his features. "*The Gods must truly hate you. The poison wasn't me. I want you gone, but not like that.*"

“I’m not so gullible,” Emil snapped. *“The Gods don’t care about us. We are nothing to them.”*

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” he replied calmly, raising his chin.

Emil’s jaw clenched as he glared at the boy. *“You should have killed me.”*

Three days later, Emil watched as the boy’s corpse was lowered into the gentle earth. He didn’t mourn, but he wore black all the same.

The temple of the Gods was deserted after noon, though it hardly boasted a crowd in the morning. Pillars held up a thin stone roof, forming a skeleton enclosure. Within, it was all bright marble and ancient displays of gold, vines, and glass twisting around each pillar.

Lurking in the shadows, Emil drew in a cold breath. The impending night meant that the nyx wolves would soon emerge. They were swift, merciless creatures that deigned only to hunt in the dark of the night. He swore he could see their bright, pale eyes stalking his reflection in the pond outside the temple as he approached.

Emil’s steps were apprehensive in the stiff air. Quiet lingered in the temple like mist in a valley, but he could sense *something* in his presence, observing him as he crossed the plaza. The temple breathed a sigh of disdain as his feet came to a halt before a domed roof.

The rotunda was large and glowing in the fading daylight. Beneath its circular rooftop stood the seven lifelike statues of the Gods. Their eyes aglow, matching swords held aloft and touching at the tips.

The masses feared more than the judgment of the Gods or the threat of the wolves. More than any of that, the town’s fear stemmed from the sentience of the temple itself.

“Come forth,” a resounding voice announced, emanating from only the structure around Emil as he stepped into the circle of the Gods. “What do you seek?”

Emil drew in a shallow breath, eyes skipping over the faces of the Gods until his gaze found his own features staring back at him. The statue of Beckett seemed to watch him intently as he spoke.

“I am searching for prophecy.”

The conscious temple was silent for a moment as if stunned by such a blunt request of something so monumental. “You come here in pursuit of a glance into your future?” Asked the temple, voice cool. The vines twisting around each pillar moved gently, leaning toward him-questioning, but not threatening.

“Yes.”

“You believe you are entitled to such information from the Gods?”

“I believe only sparingly in those empty deities,” Emil responded quickly, bracing himself as the eyes of the statues seemed to flare with an angry light.

“Do not speak of the Gods in vain in this place,” the temple seethed.

“Why should I refrain? They seem to have forgotten *my* name entirely.” His voice rose as the fissures in his faith voiced themselves. “Beckett has given me his face, but not his fortune. He has not given me his respect, nor have any of the others.”

A beat and the temple’s response rattled the marble tiles beneath him. “The Gods do not forget.”

Emil tilted his head back, watching the sky fade through the glass dome above him.

“Don’t they?”

“They have not forgotten *you*.”

Emil blinked and saw scathing red. Deep, dark, seeping and thick. Leaking from under the door of a closet, staining floorboards, startling an unsuspecting butler. A corpse, still clammy

and warm. A boy that had been alive and breathing not five minutes before being found dead. Emil had gazed at the body of Beckett's descendant, face pale. He tried not to remember the dead boy's bright copper eyes glaring over at him the last time they spoke.

"I want you gone, but not like that."

They say that the God's Descendent had been dealt a bad hand by Beckett himself. The calamitous god was to be held responsible for the murder until the true killer emerged. He didn't argue with their rulings. His appearance was the God's exact likeness, and it was not easy for the town to separate him from their holy figurehead. Their accusatory glares seared through him like pins and needles buried in his heart.

With his fractured conscience, he could only stand the sting for so long.

"The Gods cannot see your future," the temple stated, voice lulling Emil back to reality.

He started, but the temple went on. "It would be in your best interest to leave this place now."

Emil's features darkened as his gaze dropped to the ground. Frustration and desperation curdled in his gut, his fingers curling into fists.

"For what reason?" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"The Gods cannot-"

"I *need* you to tell me," Emil whispered under his breath. "I did something. Something-something I never should have done." His eyes found a gap between two of the statues where the outside was visible. "The Gods were blind to me until I called upon them for something horrible."

The horizon was blurry.

"I don't know if I can live with it any longer."

The temple went silent. Cold as death, still as a corpse. Emil's head pulsed with anxiety as he locked eyes with the statue of Beckett. The God gazed back at him, inimitable.

"You are the picture of Beckett," the temple observed.

His eyes narrowed. "Aside from my appearance, I am nothing like him."

"The God of Retribution?" The temple said smugly. Emil caught the walls slowly converging out of the corner of his eye. His heart rate kicked up a beat, fist tightening around the tool. "Your resemblance to him goes past the surface."

Taking a minuscule step back, Emil blinked at the words.

The vines started to snake toward Emil's ankles and the ground began to rumble beyond friendly inquisition. "Retribution does not insinuate an act of justice or moral superiority," the temple sang, its walls moving ever closer with each passing second. "Retribution is *vengeance*."

Emil had never believed in a higher power. Faith was never for him, and only once did he fall so deep that he needed it.

The walls of the temple curled in around him and the pins and needles in his heart dug deeper. With a withering sense of self-preservation, Emil rose on wobbly legs. Beckett's scathing gaze followed him as he made for the plaza. He sprinted out of the temple lacking the very thing he sought to strengthen: his hope.

The world plunged deep into a cool, quiet night. Emil tried to breathe as he pushed forward toward where he had abandoned his bike.

A howl pierced the air.

Emil froze.

The scratch of clawed paws on marble reached his ears as he began to back up. Emil could hear his heartbeat in his ears, his conscience screeching in his head. The wolves' glowing

eyes peeked through the veil of darkness, growing larger in time with the beat of their approaching steps.

“The Gods cannot see your future.”

How could they, Emil realized, when he did not have one beyond the vicious structure of the temple?

When he had been lying in his sickbed, rage coursing through his veins, Emil had called upon the God of Retribution.

“Beckett, I do not believe you will ever hear this. If you do, I am sure it will be a fleeting cry among the many who call to you.

But I would never pray in any other case.

The town calls me by your name. I never asked them to, but they do all the same.

We are not alike, Beckett. We are nothing alike.

A boy has wronged me. One of your own blood, but I doubt that you are the type to care about such a circumstance.

I wish for him to suffer as I have today. I would pay to see it through, whatever you deem an acceptable price.”

And despite the sacrilegious request, a force unbeknownst to any person in town had murdered the boy two days later.

As Emil’s back pressed against a pillar of the temple, he realized what the price for the boy’s murder had been.

He stared his own death in the face. When he blinked, he saw copper eyes.

Within the temple, the statue of Beckett exploded with brightness; within Emil’s mind, a deep voice erupted.

“That boy never poisoned you,” it boomed.

Emil gasped at the sound of Beckett’s voice, started to tremble at his words.

“Then who-“

“I always knew your end. I always knew what your bloody wish would be.”

Eyes widening, Emil slid down the pillar until he was sitting on the freezing marble.

“The Gods don’t forget, Emil,” Beckett muttered.

“It was you,” Emil choked out. “*You* poisoned me.”

“*That* was the price for his death. This end?” Beckett said. He shook his head gravely,
“You brought this upon yourself.”

Emil barely registered the God’s words, his mind reeling. “He was innocent,” he
whispered, voice breaking. Then his head shot up. “*You* killed him.”

“I am the God of Retribution. I only heed the calls of those who ache for revenge.
Senseless or not.”

The beasts halted a breath away from Emil.

“That is sinister.”

The tether between Emil and the God snapped and the hungry creatures lunged.

“You really are like me,” Retribution laughed before he left Emil to the wolves.