

Z had, on one horrific night, received the gift of empathy. At first he felt ecstatic. His boring, drudging life was made special. The next day, he discovered its downsides. By the end of the week, he regretted ever celebrating this power.

This gift, this empathy, was the worst curse that God had ever given him.

“Is it really so bad for people to be able to sense others’ emotions?” they ask. “If all of humanity were connected in a hive mind where we could feel each other’s emotions, then wars would not exist. The hungry would not be left unattended.”

To that he would say, fuck that. And fuck you, for ever assuming something so selfish.

They didn’t have this ability, he did. While Z could feel the woman having a bad day after her health issues flared up, the little girl crying after losing her doll and friend, the man behind the register counter who did not get any tips after working a twelve-hour shift, this power rarely served its purpose of highlighting the people he needed to be gentler with.

He could also feel the twisted rot that the lurker by the bridge felt when a young woman was walking alone. He regarded the hurting child with the same utter apathy that his father did. His vision faded and tunneled in accordance with the stranger atop the high-rise building who traveled up that stairwell every day.

Perhaps it was God’s mercy, that this ability was not given to a sadomasochist. They could have wreaked havoc with this “empathy”. That was the actual kicker of the situation. While Z could feel other people’s emotions, it did not prevent him from hurting them further. He could only wonder with festering hysteria, year after year, when his personality will finally be overtaken by the constant invasion of his mind, until nothing was left of him except a reflection of-

The worst of humanity.

He had not gotten with her out of any sort of love, but rather pity. She was an average-looking woman, a bit older than him, with a fascination for collecting coins. She also had a genetic predisposition for psychosis that flared up in her adult years and drove her away from everyone she cared about.

When Z had told her about his ability, she was one of a few people who said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

That’s when he decided to get into a relationship with her. It was selfish on both their ends: for him, an ironic show of empathy for his curse, and for her, a human-shaped hole that her heart lacked. They were both keenly aware that they would never work. And yet, he loved this woman. She reciprocated his feelings. There was a small but significant difference in the warm glow and sharp edges of love directed at others by others, but this love was all for him.

And so, he gave her all his heart in return.

To sacrifice and be sacrificed. She held up a mirror to him, and he could only see her image within it. Down and down. Dance with me, my darling. Fly with me, my dove. Fall with me, my love. He was a reflection of other people's pieces, broken and glued together with tar. But now there was one who showed up more than others, someone full of golden coins and faces in the shadows and nonsense. No one ever cared about him as much as she did. There was a person, with one face split into two, mind and body acting separately.

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Fall.

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He had killed his whole family and painted the walls with drawings of people she had seen in her psychosis.

He had reflected her so truly that he was able to do what she had never dared. When she had shown up, barely ten minutes after he had committed his unforgivable sin, she did not scream. His love had not even looked afraid.

She had taken the knife from his hands and called the police. She confessed to the crime done by his hands and turned herself in because she had always seen him for exactly who he was. The judge ruled her guilty of multiple counts of second-degree murder, and she had been sentenced to a lifetime of imprisonment.

Maklya Hess was the worst person he had ever known.

Yet every week, Z would go back to visit that prison.