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Crucible

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Crucible

Cover Page Footnote
Memento Mori

I woke up in unfamiliar surroundings. When I pondered why this could be, I realized that I couldn't think of any kind of surroundings that I could call familiar. I couldn't remember where I was before now. Upon further introspection, I found that I couldn't remember anything from before this point, just that there indeed was something before. The present situation seemed odd to me, but I don't know why, as I have nothing with which to compare.

The environment around me consisted of a glassy sky overhead with a constant glow of sunrise, a small river before me and on the other side, some stone gate, beyond which I couldn't see anything. As I stepped towards the river, I heard something behind me, as though someone had called out to me. But there was nothing behind me, just more of the sky. Some part of me wanted to see what that noise was, to step back and investigate. But something deep in my bones propelled me to the river, away from some conflict. I had no idea what that conflict could be.

As I waded through the small river, a memory stirred in me. I mentally grasped at it, hoping that I could glean something about this situation from it. Finally, I realized what it was. I had recalled my name: Christopher. I hadn't recalled a memory of this place; I had only remembered a story of a river-crossing saint who shares my name.

As I made it across, I saw feathers strewn about in front of the gate. Feathers and blood. Something once more stirred in my mind, something of my father. I couldn't recall it fully yet, so I searched about for the corpse of the bird that must be the source of these feathers. After I had searched for a while to no avail, I decided to go through the gate before me, as there was nowhere else to go. Upon crossing, it dawned on me that the feathers weren't the article I associated with my father: it was the blood.

A memory surfaced: my father smacked me across the face with the pan he was cooking with, it was still hot, and burned my face. The burn distracted me for a few seconds from realizing I had bitten my tongue, and there was blood everywhere. I immediately wanted to forget it again—go back to ignorantly chasing feathers.

However, that wasn't an option, so onward I pressed. As I came to the other side of the gate, I found a grotesque sight before me. A strange, impossible sort of creature splayed out before me. It had four heads, a few wings, what may have been an arm or a leg, and a sword poking out of it. I had found the source of the blood. No, no the source of the feathers first, I mustn't dwell on that blood or that memory. I had found the source of the feathers in this slain monster.

I walked up to it and humored a strange urge to touch it. Its fur was soft, and still a bit warm, as if it had only recently died. As I stepped away, I nearly tripped over a small knife beside the creature. I took it with me as a small source of security in case I should encounter such a monster living, yet what I thought an inadequate tool felt too powerful in my hand to be thought of as such. Many memories came to mind of times when I had a knife in my hand. For what reason would I have had a knife in my hand so often? I gave it a few practice swings, and was surprised by the deadliness with which I conducted myself. I seemed far too practiced...

Beyond the beast was a corridor, followed by another, followed by another, followed by yet another. Even though the corridors were endless, I felt calm, unflustered. How could that be? As I dwelled upon it, it occurred to me that I've been in similar situations. Slowly, silently hunting down my prey through hallway after hallway, alley after alley, city after city. Who was I? Why do I have such memories? All signs point to me being a killer...

And a killer I am. As I come to the end of yet another corridor, I find a corpse. I know this corpse, no no no; I know this person, *person!* As I racked my brain, I found the answer quite readily: this person was the first one I killed. The first? There are more, many more. At the end of each new corridor, I encounter a new body, each one someone I've killed. A new sin at every turn.

After about a dozen, (or was it two?) I found one that I would recognize anywhere, only he wasn't dead. He was holding a knife in the same manner he had once held that frying pan. What good reason would I have to kill my own father, let alone all of these others? Before he could say anything, I instinctively reacted, removing his knife and putting mine to his throat. Horror rose up in me as I realized I've had him like this before. I just had to move my knife a little and he would be dead...

I dropped my knife and fled. I ran back to where the beast was. I ran as hard as I could. But how could I run from myself? This was all my doing. There is nowhere for me to run.

I came back to the room with the monster to find it gone. No sign of it whatsoever. It was still alive. It doesn't matter where it went. I wished with all my might that it would find me: that it would kill me and do justice. I wouldn't be able to hurt again. I went back out of the gates and found the river again. And on the riverbank, was the beast.

Holding the sword that had slain him, he stood in the radiant light of dawn. He looked majestic, beautiful, now that I could see him properly. As soon as I exited the gate, which vanished behind me as I came through, he turned to me and called out my name.

Trembling, I came before him, and fell at his feet, crying out some sort of apology. I don't know why, it's not as if he could understand. I knew it was too late for me; that nothing I could do could make up for what I did. Yet I persisted in apologizing. Sobbing like a baby before him, the being spoke to me, "Peace be with you." Shocked into silence I looked up at him. "Be not afraid, for you are forgiven."

"But why? I have killed."

"Killed whom, exactly? You met a man in the crucible who threatened your life, but you didn't respond in kind. You showed mercy. How could I condemn a human who shows mercy?" Mercy. Something finally clicked in my head. Mercy. I showed mercy. Not just my father, but also everyone I met.

My memory returned. I recalled my lifelong service saving people. I remembered how I had worked as an intelligence officer for my country. I remembered an annoyance that my captured targets were attributed to my 'killed' numbers, even though I had never killed in my life. I remembered one final altercation with my father, where I forgave him. Finally, I remembered what the creature before me was.

"So a cherub has come to greet me. I must be dead then, huh?"

"Yes, you died trying to protect a child from gunfire."

"Did I save the child?" The cherub nods his many heads. "Then I don't mind being dead." I say smiling.

I had received judgement for my actions, entering a crucible in which I had to face them. Either my sins would crush me, or I would crush them. This was final judgement, and I survived. Amidst a fanfare of trumpets, I contentedly walked with the cherub to the new set of gates that would lead me where I belong: The Pearly Gates.