

Chokehold

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I believe in so many things
I know that none of them are true
And my feet firm upon a pathway
I am too far blind to see
Leading me...

—Toad the Wet Sprocket, I Think About

He couldn't breathe.

And it always struck him as strange why that should be. There was always something boring down on him like an immeasurable weight on his chest, squeezing the air from his lungs as though fate had him in one giant, inescapable bear hug. The billowing smoke from his town choked him every day. The green... it drowned him nightly. There was no escape from the horrible lack of breath. But he was never asphyxiated; he never died.

That also struck him as strange.

But, then again, this was a dream, wasn't it? Nothing ever made sense in dreams. The only thing he believed about them was that they were recurring events pulled from the deepest edge of his mind to haunt him when his guard was down, to creep up in the night. Dreams never came true because they were always the past. This was the past now, wasn't it?

The smoky heavens, the burning flames consuming everything he had ever known. This was that one moment in time where the world had come crashing down around him. This had happened on that one day, five years ago, the only day he would remember for the rest of life. It was the rest of his life. It had all happened too quickly, but when it was done, he had nothing left. It was suiting, he guessed. Maybe he deserved nothing.

He stepped into the burning town, wandering into the square. There the well stood, quietly majestic, alone in front of the silhouette of flames. That was also suiting. The one thing that defined his past there would always remain forever and ever. One little symbol. One tiny ruin that would mark the great graveyard for the dead.

Then that, too, caught the golden sparks.

It was slowly eaten away, even the well water not dousing the fire. The support was burned slowly, the flames crackling hungrily in the night. Then it collapsed, the water flowing from it in a river. And with it went his life, tumbling down and flowing over the cobblestone road to collect in the gutters as mud. If only he had seen it then, he might've been able to save a flask for the future.

It probably would have slipped through his hands now, too.

He forced himself to move on, to continue with the dream. It hurt him to do so; he knew what would happen. It happened every night. Over and over, again and again. But something always made him walk onward, some inexplicable force made him step over the half-melted bodies and cracked and burnt flesh and onto his hell. It was a dream, but dreams were often manifestations of the truth. He didn't want to see the truth; he hated it. But he went to look, anyway.

It was a circus act. A trite circus act with the same ringleader – that was Sephiroth. He always decided what happened each night. Sephiroth never had a taste for anything new. He just liked to burn the town full of happy, little clowns down before taking out each and every one of his comrades. The center light wasn't bright enough with four people in it, he guessed. He didn't know, though. It didn't really matter much to him.

All that mattered to him was that he couldn't ever be right. He never knew the truth. He had illusions for everything, excuses and lies and silly little acts that he always got caught in. He must have known the truth then, before it all happened. He just had to find it again. Maybe he had found it. How would he know, anyway? He was never one for truth. Lies always hurt less. And if you believed in them enough, who's to say they can't be the truth?

As the mighty ringleader left the circus, he stepped into himself, forcing himself to stand up. His friends were gone. He knew where they were. They never changed either; they also were content to play the same roles. They were always content to die.

Snorting through the mask, he hurried through the jagged cliffs and slippery paths into the mountains. He missed a step and fell, scraping his knees. There wasn't any pain. He always missed his step there. He had been expecting it. Looked like he was content to play the same role, too.

He found the Mako Reactor.

He didn't want to go into it.

It always held the same story, its walls always said the same thing. Come in, and I'll show you, they said. Come in and see the one day that ruined the rest of their lives. Come in and see what happened.

As much as he didn't want to, he climbed the steel staircase and made his way into the reactor. It wasn't a pretty place. He climbed down a chain and onto the lower platform, his eyes wandering over the green reflections on stainless metal. Oh, how he hated that color. It was the worst color to ever be found. Green always hurt him. Green drowning, damn green eyes, always haunting him in the night.

He hurried across the bridge.

And he never knew exactly what had transpired in those few moments where the green gripped him. All he knew was that he had failed. Failed in every single promise he had ever made. To him. To her. To himself. A complete, utter failure.

He was lying stretched across the few containers still left intact, bloody froth on his lips, his arms stretched to both his sides as though he had been waiting for an angel to come down from heaven and embrace him in a loving hug.

She was crumpled on the floor, a long gash down her front, her clothes stained with her own blood as her heart pumped it away. He reached down to her. If he imagined hard enough, she could be sleeping, dreaming of some moment in the past in which she was happy. There was only one moment in his past that he could remember such pure happiness. Even now that moment was starting to look like a curse.

The stars were out that night. They had been beautiful, but nothing could rival her as she sat on that well gazing up at them with longing eyes. He would've flown to the sun and back if only to give her any one of those stars. He could've given her the world in this little town. Instead, he had given her a promise he couldn't fulfill.

He was to be her hero, to save her should she ever need it.

He fell to his knees, the reactor melting to blackness around him and her body. The blood washed away, and suddenly they were back on that well, making their empty promises to each other. He could have been there to save her. If only he had. She drowned in the well that night. And the stars had cried for her. He let her go to drown in the well that night. Like he had in the mountains that time before. He could never save her.

What a failure he was.

Her peaceful face contorted sharply, the blood washing away with hate. She hated him, she hated him, she hated him. Was it because he was a failure? No, no. A failure implied that he had tried to save her. He had never tried to save her. He was

just weak. Worthless, that was what he was. No failure there. He just never tried.

She started choking him then. That was why he couldn't breathe. That was what he was dying from. Not from smoke. Not from the green horror. She was killing him slowly because she hated him. How could she love him when he didn't even try? So she was killing him. No problem.

He let her do it. He had lost his life long ago. It was about time someone took it away, officially.

But part of him didn't want to die. That part believed he could always try again. Or try at all. Even if he had never strived for anything important in his entire life, there was always tomorrow. Or so he said. But death was too certain. He hated that. It was always nice to have limitless possibilities.

And, so, with instinct winning over his will, he hit her.

And she shattered.

And he lost her.

And, goddamn it, he lost her.