

Soul Sand By Archon

He was not what they had expected, the death-cheater, the soulless one. They had expected pure black eyes, or scars, or the devil's mark, something other than the utter normalcy that sat before them, calmly shackled to the table. The only remotely interesting thing about his appearance was the long black coat he wore, and that was because a coat like that was worn for dramatic effect alone. They had not expected drama for its own sake from the man who had cheated death.

He smiled as if he knew what they were thinking.

"Well, then?" he invited, opening his arms as far as the chains would allow. The deathless one was a showman to the core and would never pass up an audience. "What have you to ask?"

The crowd shuffled uncertainly. A lifetime of tradition held them back, but the soulless one's smile beckoned. Superstition warred with curiosity, but it was not old wives' tales that killed the cat.

"Why?" someone finally called out, a teenage girl with electric blue sand in the hourglass around her neck. The death-cheater held up a hand, and in a second, the crowd went quiet.

"The question," he repeated, as if mediating his own interrogation, "is why. Why did I break a thousand years of custom, break every taboo this country has, break -" and he paused for effect, "- the so-called vessel of my very soul?"

Silence ruled the crowd as he lowered his voice to scarcely more than a whisper.

"Because I wanted to. I wanted to see if I could, and I wanted to see what would happen if I did."

The gasps of the crowd were audible. The audacity of him, to shake the foundations of society on a mere whim! A shocked murmur began to spread, but he held up his hand once more and it died.

"You all know the sound of sand," he continued. There were nods at this, and people's hands went to their own hourglasses. "You hear it, all of you. Day in, day out." More nods, more hands reaching for the timepieces at necks and wrists and belts that literally ruled their bearers' lives.

"You know what it's like to hear your life slip away."

They knew.

An old man with only a few golden grains left raised his gnarled fist in the air. It was joined by an old woman whose turquoise sand matched her rheumy eyes. A little boy, pale and thin, with sand the colour of blood raised his fist next. Then a young mother, whose spring-green sand spelled imminent doom. Then her children. Then the girl who had first dared to speak to the soulless one. Then others joined too, not only the dying but everyone. Soon, the whole courtyard was a sea of hands. The deathless one felt the embers of rebellion begin to glow.

Guards exchanged worried glances, but they too had hourglasses, hidden as they were beneath their armour, and every second, a little more life slipped away.

The death-cheater reached into his own pocket with one manacled hand and pulled out the proof of his heresy. The glass was half-gone, but its outline remained clear. Black sand lingered in the bottom bowl, but the top was all but empty.

“Do you see this, my friends?”

Every eye in the courtyard was fixed on the broken hourglass that hung from his hand, spinning slowly on its chain.

“When I defied the laws of our land, I had nothing left to lose. According to what we have been taught all our lives is the will of the gods, I should have died that day. And yet here I stand.”

The murmuring of the crowd this time was akin to a pot about to boil.

“Is it fair?” he goaded them. “Is it fair to the young? To those with families? Is it fair to let them die?”

“NO!” they shouted.

“Is it fair for all of you? To die by decree, instead of living out your natural end?”

“NO!”

“Then tell them! Tell the nobles, tell the Soulsmiths, tell the very gods! WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

“TIME!” was the answering cry, and the deathless one smiled as the first riot began.