conversations with ghosts

by Acacius

Summary

Cross-posted from my tumblr. Regis' thoughts during and after his death at Castle Stygga.

Notes

"You needn't be a chamber
To house all the echoes and voices of those that have left you."

Death was a mix of coldness and heat—or as close to an approximation of it as Regis could imagine given his general inability to feel most temperatures. He could feel the pain that temperatures induced by magic, like the frigid bite of an ice spell, its tendrils sinking deep into the marrow of his bones like blades.

Fire, it turned out, was much worse. It sobered him up in the span of milliseconds, the once leisurely, teasing manner in which he dispatched soldier after soldier, drinking his fill when time allowed, screeching to a halt as he unwittingly transformed from bat to human-like form at the first waft of burning flesh.

If ice felt like daggers, then fire felt like being devoured alive. A throbbing pain bloomed at the base of his skull, as if the fire had a maw of its own, crushing his skull in its red-orange jaws,
robbing him of all his faculties minus those of survival. He had been like an animal at the time of his death, no sentient thought, no logic in the way he flailed his limbs, swiping at empty air as he howled desperately into the night.

Though he could not see beyond the thicket of flames, he could still hear. He heard the slow, even beat of Vilgefortz's heart as he burned the life out of him, heard the gasp and sorrow-stricken "No!" that rumbled from Geralt's chest, the witcher’s heart thudding a rapid staccato. Though trained to conceal his emotions, Geralt could not hide the autonomic reactions of his body, the depth of his concern and feelings for Regis--a monster his caste was raised to kill--as deep as the Yaruga.

Regis heard himself attempt speech though the fire scorched his throat, unable to form even a syllable on his tongue. He wanted to scream Let me go! and It hurts, it hurts! and Please just let me die!, but only blood bubbled down his melting chin. He flailed harder against his captor, his thoughts losing their focus.

It was now all reflex, a simple neural circuit that had his limbs pushing futilely against the very grip of death itself. Regis was afraid, fear being the only emotion his fire-addled brain could conjure between life and whatever afterlife vampires were privy to. In a moment where his vocal cords had regenerated enough to function, he let out an anguished scream, funneling the white-hot flames into his mouth which only quickened the melting of his teeth to the root, the charring his tongue and buccal mucosa. The pain became so great that he, for the briefest moment, wished Geralt had driven the sword through his throat so long ago. Surely dying by the hand of his friend, something swift and almost kind, would be better than this--this torture. Hadn't he suffered enough already?

A merciful death, something once beyond his understanding, now swung before him like a pendulum, but it continued to evade his grasp.

A twitching in the tendons of his hands. Vampires did not die easily—survival was writ in every inch of genetic code, even the cells of his skin, that which burned and burned, peeling away in parchment-thin strips, multiplying in a vain attempt to restitch onto his melting skull.

Memories darted beneath him in a sulfur lake, each ripple of pain burning away another memory. He could not extract himself from the pain— from that which he felt in the present, and that which he had so foolishly caused in his youth. They melted together in a grotesque image of a man-turned-pillar-of-ash, time no longer dividing the sections of his life. He wasn’t a leather-bound tome of memories set to flame. He was becoming an aberration to even his own species. He should have died already, every cell that made up his person unspooling like thread, denaturing at its phosphodiester backbone, until nothing—nothing could be remade, not even for a higher vampire.

But he didn’t.

Regis was a ghost trapped in the home of his body, pacing the sprawling halls of his mind with a sort of frenzy, throwing open the doors to the monsters of his past, those which he had sworn to keep under lock and key. Unlike his previous regeneration, which had felt like a long, drawn-out dream, Regis could not escape the thoughts that plagued him. He was alone in his head—and nothing could soothe the scorching pain that remained long after the fire stopped.

Swing.
He was a haunting, a terror to the remnants of a house filled with smoke. The barriers he had laid so carefully in his mind had been burned away, and now—now, he only tasted ash, thick as the congealed smear of blood his physical form was reduced to. Pinned to the slab of rock in the ruins of the castle, Emiel Regis, barber-surgeon from Dillingen, existed only in a limbo of consciousness, a brain without a body. His memories, more often bad than good, kept him tied to the decaying castle as he, in the sort of grief that comes with knowing you cannot die, thought of the callused hands of the scarred mage, the flames that followed, and how he might have walked away from the battle if he had only aimed for Vilgefortz’s throat instead of his eyes.

He thought of the hansa—and how he had failed them. He fervently hoped that they had survived despite the odds, despite what he knew, deep down, to be their fate. They were all so terribly young, so many human years ahead of them. Years to travel and to laugh and to enjoy their lives together, no longer strangers, or outcasts, but a company knit together by Fate and Destiny, and, perhaps most importantly of all: Love.

He did not want to think of them all snuffed out as easily as candles—even when he opened a door in his mind that revealed the horror of what he’d seen in his bat form as he flew into the thick of battle to where he sensed Geralt was. There was first Milva sprawled lifeless against the stone, an arrow lodged in the middle of her chest, a bloody hand reaching out for someone in death. He saw Cahir’s glassy, wide-open eyes, blood running down his faintly stubbled chin, helmet knocked away to reveal his messy tangle of brown locks. He saw Angouleme as ashen as stone, a still-bleeding gash trickling through the fabric of her trousers, looking so small curled up in a ball, her youth much more apparent in death.

It was almost too much to bear, the unfairness of losing those he had swore to protect—but what else could he give them, the family he had made for himself, now so cruelly dead in their prime, then to remember them? Even if he did not possess a corporeal body, they would live on with him, he thought, something akin to contentment settling in his mind amidst the horror of his existence as neither alive nor dead.

Regis remained long after the survivors of Castle Stygga had shuffled on, their mourning apparent in the harsh slope of their shoulders. Just as Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri crossed the crumbling threshold of what was once the castle gate, hand-in-hand, the first flickers of dawn lighting the road before them, the witcher turned back to stare at the place where Regis had died. He shook his head a moment later, grief as bare as the scars from the Striga's claws on his neck. The wolf-head medallion, which had given a gentle, feather-like tug upon its chain, now rested placidly against his sternum. It was just his imagination playing tricks on him, he thought resolutely—all of his friends, those of his hansa who had journeyed with him to save his beloved daughter, were gone... even the vampire, the words of the girl Regis had saved from being burned alive as a witch, haunting him in the silence. Geralt realized now what her ramblings were: a prophecy come to fruition.

"...Even that which never dies shall die."

Years passed in a nightmarish haze of pain, consciousness, and memories Regis could not place within the timeline of his life, until one day, a raven with eyes as old as the ruined battlements of the castle flew past. It made a sharp turn in the chilly winter breeze, flying until its shadow swallowed up the remains of Regis’ corporeal form, and gave a haunting cry.

End Notes
i added a bit more to this drabble than what is originally on my tumblr (@riviae) & fixed up some grammar stuff too along the way. but yeah, sometimes u just have to experiment w/ ur writing style by delving into the mind of ur fave character during the worst moment of their life, ya know? also, i got to use all the ghost metaphors i wanted in this piece so that was neat™

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