

Last Cigarette

I was skewered by a spear to the ground. Like a wild boar. The blade was buried deep. Too deep for me to pull loose. Even if the slightest twitch, shallowest breath, didn't send me screaming into a fire red hell.

Finally, the constant stream of blood quenched it. Cold descended, sharp and clean. Enough so, for a time, I could think clearly. Even, I imagined, my senses sharpened.

Death breathed, cold and sweet against my neck, but I wasn't ready to greet her yet.

I breathed, instead.

I was dying. It was the end. Of course it was. Spears in your middle do that.

So be it. Yet I wondered. What about —?

I turned my head, searching.

The pain and shock had been too much at first for me to wonder about anything else, much less pay attention.

I was astonished to find my Owner and enemy sitting close by, resting against the wall.

Close enough to reach. He'd collapsed after throwing the spear. A trail of blood suggested he'd dragged himself over here.

I stiffened, ready for him to finish me off, or more likely, do something malicious.

He was staring up at the star strewn sky instead, not even looking at me. Sunset burned fire across the horizon in front of us, the last of the setting sun. Soon it'd be true night. Good. I didn't want his attention. I was pleased to see his fashionable clothes, normally worn without a wrinkle, were torn and dirty, and stained with blood. Even his sleek hair was disheveled, stiff with

sweat. Even his eerily smooth skin which proclaimed him as an Owner, gleaming as if sprinkled with soft gold fairy dust, had a distinct pallor.

Best of all, I saw he was bloody as I was. And of course he had to crawl. The broken tip of my sword was sticking out of his right foot. I'd managed to stab him, even slice his chest with my broken blade, before he'd darted back and flung his spear.

Now we were both dying. Fine by me.

I tried moving my hands. My right was stiff and caked with blood, my fingers still curled, as if still gripping my sword hilt. Little lightning bolts of pain shot up my arm when I tried moving them. I let it lay on my lap.

My left hand moved with only a twinge of sore muscles. I fumbled in my coat pockets, searching. There!

"Heh."

My case of cigarettes and silver mage light had survived. Flicking open the case, I found five cigarettes, battered and mushed, but usable.

What better to do with Death on her way, than smoke a cigarette, and wait?

I hadn't smoked in years, and never often when I did. First, because I hated the idea of an ugly, hacking, painful death. Smoking all the time did that to a person.

And two, because I'd been forbidden. Cigarette burns are painful, especially from the very one I'd been enjoying. Also, it was no fun watching someone else finish it off.

Along with everything else, it just wasn't worth it fighting for a smoke. It helped I'd also been given medicine to stop the cravings.

There was a third reason, but it was X's reason, not mine. So, it didn't count. He hated the smell of smoke on my breath. Despite being a smoker himself, the hypocrite.

How like an Owner.

X has a name, of course. But it doesn't matter. I refuse to think of it.

After all, he's never bothered learning mine.

I was always 56. Or, Possession. His Belonging. Occasionally, if he was in a good mood, his Gem or Jewel, or Hand of My Desire.

I hated him, of course. I still do.

I lit up, took a puff, blew out.

It had an instant effect. I relaxed. Ah, such a sweet hit. Exactly what I needed, before the end.

And of course, there was the smoke. Lovely, twisting, coiling smoke. I tilted my head, watching it swirl in a myriad of shapes before drifting away on the breeze.

I drew another puff, watching the smoke. So easy to pretend I was a dragon. Always warm, invincible, and strong, able to fly away wherever it pleased, dressed in a gleaming armor of scales.

Oh, to be a dragon!

No one ever trained a dragon, or tamed one. Killed it, yes, tamed it, no. No one clamped a collar and leash around a dragon's neck. Not unless they were a fool who wanted to find out what 'burned to a crisp' felt like.

No one jerked a dragon's head down, relentlessly down, with a choke collar and leash, until they were gasping, unable to breathe.

No one demanded a dragon kneel and bow their head at the snap of a finger or flick of a hand. Or force them to kiss your feet.

Oh, to be a dragon.

As I lit a new cigarette, imagining I was flying and burning my enemies to ash, an intense gaze fixed on me. Through a fresh puff of smoke, I saw my enemy, the one who'd speared me.

Staring at me.

X.

I blew coils of smoke, annoyed at being chased out of my lovely daydream. X didn't move, or speak. Only watched.

I wondered if he wanted a smoke. Of course, he'd never ask. Lowering himself to the whim of a mere Possession? Never.

And yet, as I let loose another cloud of smoke, he spoke. Arrogant and proud as always.

"You're dying. A Possession, broken by the hand of their Owner. A fitting end." He clenched a hand.

"Ha." I blew more smoke, dismissive. Raised a fan of three fingers. "In three cigarette's time I won't be your Possession. Won't belong to anyone or be anything, except dead."

"You're mine." He spoke simply, stating a fact.

I flared. "Am not!"

He ignored this. He always ignored my words when they didn't suit him.

"My Possession. Though I could never be sure if you were a Gem or a mere, rough cut Stone."

"I am not a rock." I snapped, and half whispered, "As if you ever treated me like one."

"My Possession." He was unmoving at ever.

"If I'm your Possession, why'd I stab you in the foot?"

"Even disillusioned, you are still my Possession."

I sighed and let it go, blowing smoke. It was an old argument. We'd fought over my not being his Possession dozens and dozens of times. He'd never once conceded I was anything else.

Rolling the cigarette in my mouth, I glanced down. Three cigarettes. By the time I finished them, I'd be dead. Or near enough it wouldn't matter.

Already I was cold, stiff. My blood was steaming in the night air. So much blood. So cold.

Only the warmth of the cigarette, the hit when I drew in a puff, kept me alert. At least for a while longer.

I was dying. A thought struck me, gleeful. I could say anything I liked. Raising my head, I declared,

"I've always hated you."

No response. Not even a blink. Of course not. He knew. I let him know every chance I could, in gestures, in words and refusal.

None of it affected him, of course. I was only a Possession. Still, I plunged on. Why not?

"You might've killed me, but I got you good. That's the blade of my sword embedded in your foot. And you're bleeding as much as me."

Still, no response. Taking an angry puff, I changed tactics.

"Want to know why I hate you? I bet you don't even remember."

"I remember obtaining you, of course."

I snorted smoke, unable to tell if I was more surprised or annoyed.

"Obtained. A fine word to use, when what you actually did was kidnap me. Dragged me fighting and screaming down the street, after tossing a bag of coins at my parent's feet, thanking them for 'such a fascinating purchase.' They couldn't do anything but weep. Not with all your guards and magic spells around."

"And yet someone did try to take you from me."

"She wasn't taking me!" I shouted, so angry I almost lost my cigarette. I clenched it between my teeth. "She was my friend. My best friend. Do you even know what a friend is? She wasn't trying to make a claim on me. All she wanted was a chance to say goodbye."

I sucked in a breath, swearing. Blood it hurt to yell. But I couldn't help it.

"She thought she owned you, when you are my Possession, and no one else's." He replied with equal heat, leaning closer. His mouth turned down in a snarl. "She demanded I give her an hour alone with you. An hour! With my own Possession."

My cigarette broke off. I caught it, swearing, but was so furious, I couldn't manage my light. My fingers shook.

"She didn't demand, damn you, she begged! Begged and pleaded, even got down on her knees on the street, kissing your boots. Weeping. Asking for an hour, a single hour, a few minutes, to say goodbye – say goodbye – after a lifetime – a whole lifetime! – of us always being together. Sharing secrets and jokes, playing games and getting in trouble - she asked for an hour, a single hour to – close all that, and you killed her. You murderer."

"She had a clear claim on you. No one must have any claim on you except me. Because you're my Possession."

"Rahhh!" My wordless scream of rage made my chest throb. I clenched the mage light so tight it cut into my palm.

The pain, however, calmed me. I blew out a breath. No sense in wasting my anger. He wasn't listening.

Opening my fist, I rubbed the silver mage light. Managed a smile. Ziga's light.

She'd made it herself, all smooth and square, except for a rose, each petal a curl of metal. I thought she'd sell it, but no. She gave it to me instead. A token for the new year. Before X came.

I'd found it again, a memento left at the shrine by my parents. The priest said they'd come every day to pray for me. I'd taken the light, and my case of cigarettes, after my escape. Before X found me again, and we fought.

Now I was dying, a spear in my middle.

I added, mournfully,

"You took everything from me. My parents are dead now, did you know? And I'll never forget Ziga. Her blood on the steps, her hand still stretched out to take mine. Her whisper of, 'I'll always remember you'. The dearest person I knew, so splendid and caring. And you murdered her."

Hot tears stung my eyes, just remembering. I clicked the light, lit my third cigarette. Breathed in smoke. Had the lovely thought of soon I'd see Ziga again.

Smoking my cigarettes, using her mage light. A fitting end.

X didn't respond, but I continued talking anyway, twirling my cigarette, savoring it. I couldn't read his expression, but he didn't look away.

"You murdered Ziga, my best friend, and took me away to your house. Clamped on the collar and leash and the almost-not-there clothing pretending to be clothes. Made me a table."

"Of course." X replied. "All Possessions start as tables. It's excellent training."

I nearly spat at him; except I didn't have the energy. Taking a new breath, I blew out smoke. Pretended I was a dragon again. I seethed the words, as if they were flames.

"I was a table. A table. The dishes and tea tray were heavy and hot on my back. Your boot heels dug into my skin when you settled them on top after you'd finished eating. I couldn't

straighten. Couldn't dump the tea, scalding, on your lap. There was some contraption holding me up after my strength was spent. And a spell to shock me if I twitched or moved too much."

"Training." X muttered, though he looked pensive. I wondered at what.

Was I finally, here at the end, when it no longer mattered, was I finally getting through to him?

I barked out a laugh, took a drag of smoke.

"Heh. And I remember, how baffling it was - there I was, a person, forced on all fours, pretending to be a table for you - And there, in the same room, was an actual, bloody table! All solid oak, dark and gleaming with polish, the legs carved in whirls of shapes like waves in the sea. And yet you used me as a table instead of an actual table!"

I laughed, coughed a little on smoke, hissed at pain from my middle. Drew in another puff, blew out smoke. Thought of dragons.

"Practice." X murmured.

My fingers curled tight around my cigarette. I glared. Oh, how I wished to smack him. As if he knew.

"I was a table for you." I snarled the word. "A table. And that was only the beginning. In many ways it was the least of the shame you heaped on my head."

"Shame?" X straightened, glaring at my last remark. His elegant eyebrows flashed down. "You are my Possession. My Belonging, yes, even my favored Gem. There is no shame in that. None."

He was so vindictive and sincere. I couldn't argue, only puff smoke.

Until I replied.

"Hmph. I bet you don't even know my name."



"L – "

I stared, grabbing my cigarette before it could fall out of my open mouth.

"How?"

"An Owner always knows the names of their Belongings."

"But you never use it."

"Names are too precious to use lightly."

I frowned, not liking the ideas this comment fostered. Blowing smoke rings, I finished my third cigarette. It was growing colder. Shivering, I opened my case, my fingers fumbling. At last I got it open.

Two cigarettes left.

I stared at them. Stared at them for a long time.

Two cigarettes. Two of us.

I looked up. X was watching me. No, not me. The tip of the spent cigarette, crumbling to ash between my two fingers. He wanted a cigarette.

And yet never would he deign to stoop so low, even dying, to ask a Possession for something of theirs. A Possession was merely an extension of himself, after all. What was theirs, was his.

And yet he couldn't order me to give him a cigarette either. Not when his lack of power was clear, here at the end. He couldn't force me to give him a cigarette.

The thought was warming. And yet –

I stared at the cigarettes again. They wavered oddly. I blinked. My vision was growing fuzzy. Shadows played around the edges.

Flexing numb fingers, I watched the glowing tip of the finished cigarette drift to the ground.  
Watched the ember flare and go out.

It was some time before my attention returned to the two cigarettes, still in the case.

Damn. Even my mind was going. At this rate, I was only going to last another cigarette.

What a waste. Yet another unfinished deed, in an unfinished life.

I *could* smoke both at once. Except - I grimaced - I could just hear Ziga say,

"How greedy. Why couldn't you share?"

I looked at X again. With my dimming vision, it was hard to make out his face.

Looked back down at the two cigarettes. Only one of which I'd be able to finish.

It was my last choice. I had no time.

What did I want to do?

No. What *should* I do?

The end. It was the end.

Fishing a cigarette out of the case with numbing, frozen fingers and a wandering mind was almost impossible. Yet I managed it at last.

Held it out. Forced my numb lips to move, form words.

"Here. Have a – smoke."

X didn't take it at once. He was surprised, some distant part of me realized.

"You're giving me a cigarette? Of your own accord?"

"Yes." I forced out the word.

"Why? You hate me."

"Because." Unable to explain, I waved the cigarette, annoyed. "Will you take it or not?"

My arm was already dipping towards the ground. It was such an effort to move.

With a hiss, a scrape and rustle of cloth against stone, he moved. Caught the cigarette before my arm dropped.

As he slid closer, however, fear of how near he was made me move back. Or rather, try.

Twisting woke red hot pain in my middle, as my tattered insides, shredded muscles, nerves, and skin pulled against the spear, still fixing me to the ground.

I gasped and stopped moving, breathing curses.

The pain ebbed and I was finally able to lift my hand again, this time with the mage light. Because of course X didn't expect to light his own cigarette, unless he wanted to.

He lit up, blew out smoke. I heard him sigh.

Pain, brutal though it was, woke all my senses and banished Death further away. For a while longer.

It was easier to think, to move, though my sight continued to dim. I fumbled for my last cigarette.

"It's the end." I said, by way of explanation. "The end of everything. Death's on her way, and Death makes loathing and hatred into trifles."

X made a noise of agreement, I thought. I continued.

"After all, it's the end, and soon we'll both be dancing to her tune. Someday everyone will: Enemies, friends, and lovers. Owners and Belongings. My hatred won't matter. We'll hold hands just the same. Neither one of us will direct the dance or control the tune. Death will. So here's a cigarette while we both bleed to death and wait."

"Thank you." He said.

Or maybe I only imagined him speaking.

Everything was going dim. A shade fell across my vision. Damn. And I hadn't even lit my cigarette yet.

Taking a deep breath, I slammed my damaged right hand on the ground. Red hot pain zigzagged up my arm. I screamed and swore.

But I was awake. For a brief time, Death retreated again. I jammed the cigarette between my teeth, felt in vain for Ziga's mage light. Found it, and sighed in relief.

Except I couldn't light it. I cursed, my numb fingers refusing to bend, to flick the clip to free the flame.

Work! I demanded, forcing my whole will down into my frozen fingers. I was so cold I couldn't feel them. Work! I refused to die with an unlit cigarette in my mouth.

The mage light flickered to life at last, a tiny lavender and gold flame. I sighed with relief. Except sweet drifting smoke and a glowing red ember caught my attention.

Of course. Why fiddle with a light when I could light my cigarette with theirs? Ziga and I did it so many times before, to save the mage light. Besides, I couldn't raise my arms. They were frozen too.

I flopped forward, resting a solid, human shape. Softer and warmer than stone.

As they stirred in surprise, I lifted my chin, pressed the tip of my cigarette against theirs.

Mine flared to life.

Ah, what a hit.

I breathed in sweet smoke, blew it out. My senses cleared.

Death withdrew her hand for the last time.

"Don't speak," I muttered through my cigarette. "Since I can't see you, I can pretend you're Ziga. And I've got to lean against something, or I'll fall over."

To my great surprise, they stayed still. Didn't try to pull away, protest or speak. Good. Well, they were dying too.

I took another puff, blew out smoke. Even with my dimming vision it was beautiful. So beautiful and fascinating.

"I always enjoy how the smoke curls out, as if I'm a dragon."

The cigarette's tiny, but hot. So gloriously warm. I'm cold. Everything else's frozen. Smoke curls in fantastic shapes, so lovely.

I'm so – sleepy. I keep talking.

"It's easy to pretend you're Ziga. We did this all the time. Sharing cigarettes. I'll see her again, soon."

What a glorious thought.

Or was it Ziga I was leaning against?

If not her, then who . . . ?

My thought drifts away. It doesn't matter. So wonderful, watching the smoke twist and curl. Leaning against the solidness of another person, watching the sun set, and night fall. Except it'd been night now for a long time.

I'd done this so many times with Ziga, chatting about nothing, blowing smoke. Leaning against the solidness of another person.

You feel so warm. Or am I just growing colder?

It's not Ziga I'm leaning against, but - does it matter? We're both dying.

Night's fallen. I can't even see the stars. My cigarette's gone out too. Damn.

I light the tip again with yours. It's all I can see, a red orange ember in darkness.

I draw in a last breath. Breathe it out. Can't see the smoke, but I can imagine it. So beautiful.

Like a dragon.

Everything fades, except the warmth of the person I'm leaning against.

Let's pretend we're friends, not enemies.

The end is coming. Everything's turned into night.

Until I hear it. Feel it. See it.

Golden notes, dancing and curling, enchanting as dragons.

A glorious, triumphant music.

"Can't you hear the music, Ziga? It's so - beautiful."

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L would be furious to learn this, but I wasn't as injured as she thought. Death came close, but I was able to be revived by the medics.

She'd be even more furious to learn all Owners have a spell which activates when they're in danger or dying, to record their last thoughts, memories, and feelings. Since I was in danger of dying, it activated.

L's thoughts and emotions were so strong, it recorded them also.

So I've transcribed them here, for the curious fact of, despite years of training, how little Possessions, Belongings, and Furniture think of themselves as such.

How much they think of themselves as simply human, and value their choices, even to the end of their life.

X