



Afraid to Rise, Avensbeck

The man climbed out of his shelter and stretched his aching bones. His breath clouding in the early chill, he squinted at the somber landscape. Dull plains reached toward the gray horizon, covered in ash and rocks and bones, the edges of it blending into the shadows until the rest of the world became shrouded in darkness. Just like he'd done every morning for more years than he cared to count, the man sat down on the wooden bench he'd made, a bench that now creaked and groaned with age.

As the moments passed by, light bled dimly from the horizon, enough for him to see both the new wrinkles and familiar battle scars on his clenched hands. Soon the sun would stop, leaving him without enough light to discern what the hulking, shadowy objects standing in the distance were, but enough for him to *imagine* how terrible they might be.

He un-curling his fingers and glanced at his watch. Cracks sliced through the glass, but after a moment he made out the hour hand trembling around the six o'clock mark. Ten more minutes. Then the great ball of fire that was afraid to rise would swing back on its invisible pendulum, and the world would go dark again.

The man glanced up, his gaze snagging on a doorway carved of stone some dozen feet away. The silhouette looked like a steep bridge with a flat top. A wretched bridge that would not take him home until the sun rose.

His gut twisting within him, the man glared at the doorway. It stood there, empty, just as it had ever since the day he became trapped here.

Fire rose in his chest, and he snatched up a club from the ground. Memories flashed across his vision as he staggered toward the doorway. Bodies falling. His own slumping from exhaustion-- but living. He *lived*, and now this stone doorway taunted him.



Upon reaching it, he raised the club, his arms shaking. The doorway was weak. It would shatter. He'd never have to look at it again. He could stop watching for a sunrise that never came. He could stop hoping to see his homeland once more... or his family.

The club fell from his trembling hands. The man tripped, falling to his knees. Hot tears stung his eyes, and he dragged his hands over his face. Was he not even strong enough to destroy his last link to a world that would punish him? Or was *this* his punishment for being a coward, living for eternity in a world with no sun?

"Why won't you rise?" He choked, letting his hands fall to his sides. His voice rose. "Why won't you rise?!"

The gray horizon did not change.

The man shut his eyes. His ears rang from the persistent silence. When had he last seen a sunrise? Back home, with his wife? Yes, yes. They had both watched the sun rise many mornings, so many mornings that the details had blurred together until they all looked the same. A land with no sunrise, he'd said, would not bother him after he had seen so many.

"It does," he gasped, his fingers tracing patterns in the ash. It did so much. Could not one of those thousand sunrises come here and teach this sun how to rise?

No. He opened his eyes and stood, brushing off his pants. Foolish hope. He would not give up. He'd find another way. He *had* to.

He turned back to his shelter, picturing his wife's face. *I'm coming*. He took a step, then paused. Had there always been mountains in the distance? Or...grass? Was that grass?

Goosebumps broke out on his arms. He looked behind him.

A sliver of brightness rimmed the edge of the world.



His heart battered against his ribcage. It couldn't be.

The sliver grew to a dome, an archway of light that stretched upward. It would crack soon, like an egg. Or would it not? Would the sun swing downward again? The man could not breathe.

A beam of light pierced the bottom of the arch.

The man cried out and threw up a hand to shield his eyes. The first beam stayed alone for barely a heartbeat before hundreds of others joined it, racing upward and outward across the land in an explosion of fiery orange and unfamiliar warmth.

Tears slipped down the man's face. The light blinded him to what lay on the ground before him. It splashed the firmament of gray in a pale blue and sketched the edges of the horizon in deep yellow. A single cloud dangling in the heavens ignited in blazing red hues. The sun crawled higher, as though its beams were rope that pulled the mighty sphere of light over the edge of the earth.

The man fell backwards, covering his face, but laughing. Turning his back on the sun, he faced the west. His pulse hammered like it had not since the day of the battle.

The stone doorway was filled with color.

He staggered toward it, catching it and holding on for support. An image of a lake gleamed on the other side, alive with a still reflection of a cloudy sky splattered in tinges of rose and crimson.

Alive with another sunrise.

He glanced over his shoulder once more. The sun had fully crested the horizon and now hovered higher, as though boosted by its luminous rays. The shadows which had previously haunted him now revealed themselves as mere rocks and trees dotting the plains, bathed in a pastel glow. He blinked. How could the world he'd feared for so long be so beautiful? It was not very unlike his own.



A sound pierced his hearing, and he paused. Was that...? He raised his head and saw that a figure had come and stood by the lake, and was holding out her arms. She was calling out a name. It...was *his*.

A grin stretched his face. It ached as his muscles remembered the expression. Leaving the once gray land behind him, he walked through the open doorway into the glorious, new light of the morning sun.