

I looked carefully at him over the barrel of the pistol I was aiming at him. He equally surveyed me. We were an even match, anyone could tell. We had the same pistol, held it almost the exact same way, we both squinted just so.

The moment was charged, as was the air between us. Our eyes locked, and between us passed the understanding. You know the understanding, don't you?

My eyes widened a fraction. "I'm going to kill you."

His teeth gritted. "I know. And I'm going to kill you too."

The corner of my mouth jerked up. "I know. After all, fair is fair."

He blinked. "So who'll die first?"

It gave me pause. "I'm not sure. Perhaps I should go first, and let the dead know you're not far behind."

A tiny shake of his head. "How do I know you won't bar the way and send my soul to Damnation?"

"Ha ha ha! We're men of honor, aren't we? Though here in this God-forsaken battle we are enemies, I would gladly welcome you as a brother After."

"Surely, it is true I would do so for you, but I don't know you enough to trust you. Perhaps, since you feel so, I should go herald *your* entrance to the After."

My smirk faded. "And what do I know of your motivation? For what I know, you may tarnish my name as a foul brute and turn my soul away to Damnation itself."

"So you don't trust me after all?"

"What of it? Would you, in my place? You, who are the invader in this land? It is you that has caused this fight that will be our joint doom."

He almost laughed. "And you claim no responsibility? It is your side that has provoked us! Where is the honor in that?"

I bristled. "Spare me your justification speech. You are in the wrong, which is why you will die."

"Die, yes, but as a martyr for the cause, for it is your cause that is the unworthy one."

Suddenly we both stopped. A grim smile began to spread across my face. "So then, it is settled that we shall both die, therefore let us die together."

The same grim smile was mirrored on his face. "In this one thing I will trust you : that we will simultaneously fire."

I nodded. "Quite agreed. Are you ready?"

"Oh yes, quite ready."

"Then you shall count and say 'fire', and we shall enter the After together. Make your aim true."

"You as well." He corrected his aim, as did I. "3...2...1..." My finger grew tight on my trigger, and I saw his finger do likewise. "...fire..."

Quite calmly, we both shot. Our eyes were dazzled by the flash from the tips of our muzzles, and the small puffs of smoke quickly rose and dissipated into the air.

The bullets crossed each other midway between my foe and I. I nodded at him. "See you After."

He nodded back. "After."

Calmly we continued to stare each other in the eyes even as that vision was sprayed with crimson droplets spreading out from each of us. Then slowly, even the droplets began to fade . . .