

THE GLASS TOWER

A Play in Three Acts

CHARACTERS

AUDEN - the Maker. Hands scarred, back bent, restless.

LIR - the Watcher. Pristine, unhurried, hands in his pockets.

SETTING: A long wooden pier jutting into a black sea, midnight. The pier is perfectly symmetrical, running to a vanishing point at the horizon. Fog. The cold will deepen steadily across the play, from bitter to lethal.

ACT I - THE CONFLICT OF PHILOSOPHY

(Midnight. The pier stretches into fog and black water. AUDEN kneels near the edge, surrounded by shards of sea glass - hundreds of them, arranged by size and colour into a half - built tower, fragile and impossibly tall for what it is. His hands are wrapped in torn cloth, already dark with blood. LIR stands several feet away, at the very lip of the pier, hands buried in his coat pockets, chin tilted up toward the horizon. He does not look down at the work.)

LIR

Still at it. The night hasn't once let you up off your knees.

AUDEN

(without looking up) It isn't finished. A half - built thing is just a promise, and I don't trust promises I haven't already kept.

LIR

It wanted finishing an hour ago. It wants it still. The tide's a thief - it takes back half of everything you hand it.

AUDEN

Then I'll hand it twice as much and let the sea choke on what it can't keep down.

(He reaches for a shard, misjudges the wet glass, and it bites into his palm. He does not react beyond a sharp breath. He keeps working.)

LIR

You're bleeding on it.

AUDEN

The glass doesn't care what colour the light wears when it finally comes through. Red, clear - it's all just light to glass.

LIR

(a short, dry laugh) That almost sounded like wisdom, from a man who can't feel his fingers.

AUDEN

I wasn't reaching for wisdom. I was reaching for the next piece. Wisdom can catch up if it wants to.

(A silence. LIR studies the horizon, unmoved by the cold that makes his breath visible.)

LIR

There's a ship out there, gold as a held breath, that comes for the ones who kept faith long enough. My grandmother kept this pier. My father kept it after her. I think the turn is mine.

AUDEN

You haven't moved your feet since I got here. Your shadows only shifted with the moon.

LIR

Why would I move? Motion is what people do when they don't trust the world to come find them.

AUDEN

(finally looking up) The world doesn't come find anyone, Lir. It gets built. Cut, placed, paid for - in whatever currency it names. Sometimes that currency is your own blood, poured out like wine nobody asked you to pour.

LIR

That's an exhausting thing to build a life on.

AUDEN

It's the only thing that still tells me I'm alive. If I put down the tools, tucked my hands away the way you do - I wouldn't call that rest. I'd call it the first hour of my own drowning, miles from any sea.

LIR

And if I clawed at the world the way you do - hands split open, spine curled like a question mark before I'm forty - I wouldn't call that building. I'd call it a slow, patient drowning that learned to dress itself up and call itself purpose.

(AUDEN sets another piece of glass. The tower catches what little light there is and holds it, trembling, impossibly balanced.)

AUDEN

Maybe you're right. But when the light comes - if it comes - something of mine will be standing inside it. Tell me what of yours will be standing there.

LIR

Me. Just me - untouched, and ready for whatever wants to claim me.

(AUDEN shakes his head, almost fond, almost furious, and returns to the glass. The wind picks up. The temperature is dropping.)

ACT II - THE PRICE OF COMPLETION

(Hours later. Pre - dawn. The air has turned savage - a brutal, bone - deep freeze. Frost silvers the planks. AUDEN's breath comes in ragged clouds; his hands, unwrapped now, are cut in a dozen places, stiff and nearly useless. The tower is almost complete - a soaring, delicate spiral of glass, missing only its very top. LIR has not moved.)

AUDEN

(quietly, mostly to himself) One piece. Just one, and the whole thing closes like a fist.

(He searches the piles around him. Nothing fits. He looks toward the water - and goes still.)

AUDEN

(continuing) There. Under the pier. A white shard - I saw it catch the moon an hour ago, turning in the undertow like something still alive.

LIR

(finally turning his head, mildly) That water will stop your heart before a minute's out.

AUDEN

Then I've been handed a minute, and I won't spend half of it talking to you.

LIR

Auden. Let it stand unfinished. A tower short one stone is still a tower.

AUDEN

Not to my eye. Not to anyone who looks at it after. A thing that's almost whole is just a thing that failed politely, and put on a nicer coat to do it in.

LIR

Then let it fail. You're still breathing. Breath outlasts every tower I've ever heard of.

AUDEN

(a long look at LIR) Will you hold the rope.

(It is not really a question. LIR looks at him for a moment - and does not move his hands from his pockets.)

LIR

I told you what that water does. I won't be the man who watched and pretends afterward he never warned you.

AUDEN

That's not a nod to the rope. That's a no to getting cold.

LIR

Call it whatever helps you climb down.

(AUDEN laughs once, without much humour, and begins lowering himself over the edge of the pier without help. LIR watches, coldly, chin still tilted toward the horizon more than toward the man beside him.)

AUDEN

(before he drops) Tell them I finished it.

LIR

I'll tell them what I saw. Nothing more, and nothing less.

(AUDEN drops into the black water. A violent splash, then a silence that stretches far too long. LIR does not move toward the edge. He does not call out. He simply waits, watching the horizon, as if the sound had nothing to do with him.)

ACT III - THE FINAL STROKE

(Long second's pass. Then AUDEN's hand appears on the planking - white - blue, shaking uncontrollably. He hauls himself up, inch by inch, his whole body wracked with violent shivering, lips gone grey. In his fist, held against his chest like something sacred, is a single shard of white glass.)

AUDEN

(barely audible, teeth chattering) Got it. I've still got it.

(LIR looks down at him now - the first time he has looked directly at AUDEN all night - with something that might almost be curiosity but is not quite concern.)

LIR

You're not getting back on your feet tonight.

AUDEN

(dragging himself forward on his elbows) Don't need my feet. My hands still work. Once more - just once more, and I'm done.

(He crawls the last few feet to the tower, his movements slowing, his breath coming in shallow, widening gaps. He reaches up - his arm barely obeying him - and sets the final white shard at the very apex of the spiral.)

(The tower is complete. Perfectly, unbearably symmetrical.)

AUDEN

(a whisper, almost a smile) There. Nothing left unkept.

(His arm falls. His head follows. He does not get up again. His hands lie open on the frozen planks, palms up, bleeding, empty of everything but the work they finished. LIR watches from where he stands. He does not kneel. He does not speak. Above them, the black sky begins, almost imperceptibly, to grey at its farthest edge.)

(Dawn breaks - not gently, but suddenly, a hard blade of first light cutting flat across the water. It strikes the glass tower dead centre. Because of AUDEN's flawless, bled - for symmetry, the whole structure ignites into a single blinding beam, refracted and thrown for miles across the sea like a lighthouse built by accident out of grief.)

LIR

(shielding his eyes, then slowly lowering his hand, transfixed) What is that - light breaking out of nothing, setting the whole sea on fire?

(Far out on the water, a shape answers the light - a ship, gold - hulled, exactly as the old stories described it, turning toward the pier as though it had been waiting all along for precisely this signal.)

LIR

(quiet wonder, no grief in it at all) It's coming. Finally. It's coming for me.

(He does not look down at AUDEN's body. He does not seem to connect, even for a moment, that the beacon calling the ship home was built from another man's hands and finished with another man's dying breath. To him, the light is simply confirmation - proof that the waiting was, after all, the correct thing to have done.)

(The gangplank lowers, its foot landing on the planks inches from AUDEN's outstretched hand. LIR steps forward at last - his first steps of the entire night. He does not kneel, does not close AUDEN's eyes, does not so much as glance down with anything resembling grief. He simply lifts one foot, and then the other, stepping over the body as one step over a coiled rope left carelessly in the way.)

LIR

(to no one, boarding) Didn't I say so. Patience is a virtue - and here's my reward for it.

(He climbs aboard. The ship begins to turn, gold light spilling across its deck. LIR takes his place at the bow, hands finally out of his pockets, spread wide to the warmth of a sunrise he did nothing to earn. He does not look back.)

(On the pier, the tide begins to rise - faster now, urgent, as though the sea has only been waiting for the ship to leave. Water climbs over the planks, over AUDEN's open hands, over the base of the tower. The glass groans, shifts, and then collapses all at once, shard by shard, swallowed back into the dark water it was dragged from. Within moments there is no tower. There is no light. There is only the pier, empty, and the sea, indifferent, closing back over everything he was.)

A CLOSING WORD

This is not a story about a race that was lost fairly. Auden did everything - bled for it, froze for it, gave the last of his body to it - and the story does not reward him for that. It kills him for it. Lir did nothing - refused even the small decency of holding a rope - and the story hands him the one thing every waiting person on that pier had ever wanted. The light that saves Lir is not a blessing that finds him; it is a byproduct of someone else's death, and he never even turns to look at where it came from.

That is the unfairness the play sits inside of: effort and outcome are not actually tied together, no matter how badly we want them to be. The world does not keep score. It does not notice who bled and who simply waited with warm hands. Sometimes the person who builds the light is the one left in the dark, and the person who never lifted a finger is the one who gets to sail into the sun - and the sea closes back over the proof of what it cost, so that by morning it looks, to anyone arriving late, as if it had always been this easy.

END OF PLAY

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