

The Gate

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Acknowledgements

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This short story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination.



And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night...

—Revelation 14:11

Chapter 1

Stop me if you've heard this one before. What do you call 1000 pieces of shit about to be shipped out through interoffice mail?

Answer. My boss.

Just half an hour until the next board meeting, and I look like a stay-at-home dad cutting up bite-sized pieces of steak to feed to my child. Except instead of steak, I'm carefully carving my boss into hundreds of mail-friendly pieces. And instead of a child's mouth, I'm stuffing the little blocks of my ex-boss into plastic-lined plain manila envelopes. *Holy Joe's*, they're called. I laugh at this irony as one particular piece of Brad refuses to stay in the envelope while I'm trying to seal it up. I'm really enjoying myself for the first time in a very long while at work, and I suddenly hear myself whistling a little tune as I go.

I glance at the coffee mug on Brad's desk. It was his favorite. White. Extra large. With a standard yellow smiley face sporting a pair of cartoon devil's horns and the words, "Have a nice day." I've hated that mug since the first time I saw it. It's sitting next to a framed photograph of Brad in his trademark black pin-striped suit, with his slicked-back black hair and that smirk he used to wear before I cut it off his face. And his goatee. How many times did I almost hold him down and forcefully shave that thing off? Talk about a cliché look...

Outside the office door, I hear the approaching click clack click clack of the high heel shoes of Brad's administrative assistant, Helen. She's the one who let me in here so I could be ready for Brad when he returned from his last meeting. She was incredibly easy to bribe and didn't ask too many questions, but as I look around at all the blood, I'm thinking she might be a little surprised by the mess I've made.

Helen's about to knock on the door and announce that the board meeting is starting soon and that they will be ready for Brad and me shortly. It's going to be a challenge getting her to calm down and to focus on mailing all these envelopes once she sees that Brad's not going to make the board meeting. I hope that Helen will be a professional about the situation and realize that things like this are just a part of the job sometimes.

I have to admit that I am a little nervous about whether or not she or anyone else will truly understand that I've done all of this for the greater good. But I keep

repeating in my head that today is the first day of the rest of my life, and with that, everything seems to be a little bit better.

I'm still chanting my refrain as one of my Italian leather loafers slips in a large pool of Brad's blood. I regain my balance and move over to the huge window behind his desk. What waits for me out there? The unknown. And my future. What will it hold?

Regardless of what is to come, right now I'm feeling pretty good. I'm at the top of my game. Number two in the company. Well, ok. I'm number one now, given Brad's timely passing. And the only ones above me (so to speak) are the board members—each of them a truly demonic asshole with no moral conscience at all.

The doorknob starts to turn, and I pause for a moment to reflect one last time before Helen walks in on my little mess. It's been an interesting ride since I first arrived. Depending on who you ask, I've either come a long way since that first day with the company, or I've fallen farther than anyone before me. It's like I've always said: How you view the world depends mostly on where you're sitting.

Before I can finish my thought, the sweet, used-to-be-hot blonde named Helen opens the door just enough to poke her head in and to quickly assess the situation.

Instead of freaking out, she steps in and calmly closes the door behind her.

She looks sharp for someone of her advanced years in her light grey couture business suit and her shiny black pumps. She remains standing as she takes in the huge pile of bloody envelopes and then looks at me right in my unsympathetic eyes.

"Well, I'm glad that's finally taken care of," she says matter-of-factly.

I raise my eyebrows involuntarily. Suddenly, Helen seems strangely more attractive, and I feel... relatively normal.

I smile and turn back to the window. I'm about to say something amusing about the first time I ever met Brad, when in the reflection of the window I catch an image of Helen coming at me with something blunt and heavy looking.

The next thing I see is complete blackness.

Chapter 2

I am lying on the cold, hard ground, naked and tangled up in the limbs of other naked people. I don't recognize any of them, but then again I can't remember anything before this point anyway.

My brain seems to accept that, regardless of how I ended up here, this is now the first day of the rest of my life. But my body? My insides try to escape through any and all of my holes.

Soon, the air is clogged with the smell of shit, vomit, and urine. And not just mine. There must be about a hundred of us all piled on together, and we step on each other just trying to stand up and to get our bearings. I see every ethnicity here. I hear what must be dozens of languages being spoken, although I can't even begin to understand much of what I'm hearing. Correction. I can hear dozens of languages being screamed or moaned—not spoken. The cacophony is louder than

my mind can process as the screams from my newly arrived group mingle with an underlying buzz of voices emanating from all around us.

As soon as I get to my feet, my legs shake, and my feet slip in human waste. I look in front of me, and I see a tightly packed crowd like an ocean of pulsing flesh stretching across the otherwise barren rock landscape. There must be a billion people all shoved in here together. The mass of bodies curves around me to my far left and to my far right. Several of the faces at the rear of that huge crowd glance back towards us in fear, while they push forward as if trying to get away from us. Behind me, there is only blackness. It's impossible to see what would await me back there in that unknown abyss, but I'm not going to find out. Not today, at least. I doubt it could be worse than what I see in front of me. Despite the lack of a discernible light source, everything as far as I can see is awash in an omnipresent dark reddish hue. Above, the ceiling is made of rock, and that's when I realize that I'm trapped with these other souls underground in a vast, seemingly measureless cavern.

Suddenly, a collective wave of panic shoots through my group as our screams of fear turn into roars of pain.

I look to my left and my right, and I'm not sure what I see. It looks like a gang of maybe twenty-five naked men, most of them bone white and thin, and all acting like a pack of wolves, tearing into the people I just woke up with. I see and I smell blood flying, and it brings back something familiar, but nothing I can pinpoint. The gang is flanking us on both sides, which means the middle path straight ahead of me is still free for the moment. Before I can think it through, my primal fight-or-flight instinct takes over, and I run. I don't care about my fellow humans at this point. My survival is my only priority. I sprint over top of the people in my group, stepping on them and bolting for the large crowd.

My foot hits the ground, and I run as fast as my quivering legs will allow, closing the fifty or so meters between the crowd and me. Behind me, our attackers are busy doing whatever they want to my unlucky travel partners, and thankfully they are too busy to worry about a lone escapee.

I am within one arm's length of melding with the crowd of also-naked people, when I hear her for the first time.

She screams in such pure terror that I turn to look before I know what I'm doing.

I see a woman with sandy brown hair, above-average bosom, and serious curves about to be molested by one of our attackers. She is beauty incarnate. Despite my surroundings and the sense of dread that permeates my every cell, I am completely focused on her radiance. Even surrounded by this horror, I cannot suppress my sexual attraction for her naked body. What does that say about me? That I adapt quickly to my surroundings, or that I have no sense for the true value of people? Maybe it just shows that I have poor timing.

When I see four wraith-like gang members join their friend and descend as a group upon her, something illogical and unsafe inside me takes over, and in an instant I am running back toward the slaughter. Away from anonymity. Away from relative safety. I rush to the one attacker who has positioned himself between the woman's held-open legs. I am not a fighter, but I want to hurt him. Naked and afraid, I have nothing other than my adrenaline at my disposal. And my knee. So I

bring that up as hard as I can into the man's skull, riding his head down until it connects with the rock floor. I am rewarded with a loud crack and a softness where once his solid cranium used to be. I roll off of his limp body, and his friends look at me with a combination of rage and disbelief.

This is when I see them closely for the first time. They are rail thin, and from various places on their skin, each has a variety of bony protrusions shooting out like small stubs or horns. Their teeth are sharpened and jagged. And their eyes are devoid of sentiment—empty of caring. Their mouths stink worse than anything I've ever smelled, reeking of rotting flesh. I think I've interrupted their feeding, or at least their playtime, and they are not happy.

Two of them step over the girl as they lunge toward me. I am not a fighter, but I don't back down either. The lead attacker is a bald Asian man, and he grabs low at my legs, as I clutch frantically and then savagely at his slick head. I start to topple from his momentum alone, but I close my eyes and punch as hard as I can into his windpipe. I feel it crush beneath my fist as he gags and sputters, clutching his throat. His friend is next up, but the Asian man who cannot breathe is now wedged between us like a shield. I throw the Asian man away from me as hard as I can, and I roll over to get to my feet. His body spoils his friend's efforts as I pull the girl up from the ground.

The three men, or whatever they are, spread out in front of us as I start to back away with the girl toward the wall of people. The man with the crushed windpipe is lying next to the guy with the shattered skull. The leader of the remaining three looks at me with a snarl that shows pieces of stringy flesh dangling from his teeth. Then he looks at his two fallen friends, and without hesitation he sinks down and begins ripping the flesh off of the bald Asian man's arm. Despite my own recent acts of violence, I can't watch this. I pull the girl with me into the crowd, forcing us into the mass as we quickly blend in with all the other naked people. I stop to catch my breath and check on my new companion.

She looks at me with compassion in her eyes, a sentiment I am not expecting to see. And then she actually smiles.

"Are you ok?" she asks.

"Am I ok? Are *you* ok?" I reply.

She answers in a soft but strong voice.

"I'm fine. Thanks to you. But, do you know where we are?"

"I wish I did," I say, pulling her gently but deeper into the crowd.

I crane my neck around as if hoping to find some clue to help answer her question.

Where are we? I have no idea. I'm not a religious man. I do not believe in any gods or devils, but in the face of my surroundings, there are not many guesses that come to mind, other than *Hell*.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Carrie."

"Why are you here?" I say, almost breaking into full-out tears. She doesn't understand my question, but she tells me that she also can't remember anything from before. She thinks I'm asking why she's here in Hell with me. But I'm not, because I haven't admitted to myself that this really is Hell, and until that time, I figure that this is all a creation of my sick and twisted mind. I'm really asking why

she's here in my dream of Hell with me. I wonder why I've created someone like her to join me in my nightmare.

Aside from this and the feeling of oppressive finality, I don't feel much of anything at this moment. I'm not hungry. Nor am I full. Nor tired or well rested. Just nothing. It's so hot being bunched together in this crowd that I can't take a full breath. In fact, I can't remember the last time I've taken a breath at all. Maybe I really am asleep and this is just a dream. A very bad dream in which body and blood odors cling to me and where my skin is slimy, and my own sweat mixes with that of others.

Now that the immediate danger to us has passed, the dread I've been holding back attacks me with full force. Except for Carrie, those around me seem to be going through similar emotional distress. Pressed in so close to so many people, I raise my arms above me like a drowning man trying to find something that floats to grab onto—trying somehow to lift myself above the ocean of people and to reach the surface where there is fresh air to breathe. Instead, all my arms find are more slimy limbs trying to do the same thing. We are all drowning in each other, and if I'm not dead already, it feels like I'm about to die. After a while, my mind can't take the feeling of imminent death anymore, and I give up trying to fight at all. I fall to the ground and lie on my side, staring blankly ahead of me at the densely packed forest of feet and legs surrounding me on all sides. I am stepped on and kicked, and I hear and feel my bones breaking, but I do not try to stand or even to help Carrie when she tries to pull me up with her diminutive hands. I am comfortable with my loss of control. I am ok letting my life slip away. I feel like I am falling down an endless tunnel with no hope of hitting the bottom, but at least it feels somewhat peaceful. Eventually, my last bit of adrenaline wears out completely, and more than anything I just want this all to end.

Despite my utter surrender, Carrie does not give up on me. She somehow levers herself under my arm and slides me up against the back of a large male in front of me, managing to get me almost completely to my feet.

"We have to keep moving," she says. "We're almost there, I'm sure of it."

"Almost where?" I ask.

"Where everyone's going, of course. Look ahead. I saw a bright light up there in front of us. I know I did. Everyone saw it. We can't be too far away now."

A light. In this land of bare humanity, the promise of a bright light is almost more than I can stand. I reclaim my fortitude to stand, and after a few moments I begin winding my way on unsteady legs through the packed crowd, with Carrie in tow once again. I don't even thank her for saving me, because I am not sure yet that I am truly thankful.

As we inch our way through the throng of people, I see over to my left a pile of about fifty bodies stacked on top of each other, all of them moaning. The larger mass of humanity seems to flow around this pile like it was just a rock in a stream of bodies. I know I shouldn't do it, but I need to see where I am. I need something more than Carrie's hope about a light she thinks she saw. I lead us to the stack of flesh, and I climb it like a small mountain, already forgetting that beneath my feet are living people. At the top of the human pile, the landscape of my surroundings unfolds before me.

We are not standing in an isolated mob. The crowd we are in goes on for as far as I can see without end. It's as if all of humanity is standing together on one vast plain, under a dark red cavern ceiling. The ceiling must be half a mile above us, but I can see now that it's made of the same stone upon which we all stand. I can also make out endless numbers of round holes all seemingly cut into the ceiling, evenly spaced apart. From my perch, I look back from where we came and can see the gang of attackers assaulting another group of new arrivals. At this rate, I can't imagine how many billions of people are all just waiting here in this crowd—perhaps as many as five billion. The number is too big to conceptualize, much less count.

Despite her hopefulness, Carrie is dead wrong about being close to finding the light she thinks she's taking us to. Every once in a while, however, in the very far distance, I do see what looks like a flash of light. I don't see how she could have seen this from down on the ground, but somehow there it is. It could be nothing, but it's as good a direction as any in which to move. And just like that, the light becomes our goal in life.

I scurry down the human mountain, and my head turns to follow a scream that rises above the din. Some white guy to the right of the mountain is pounding his heel into the scrotum of another man with brown skin. To my right, a woman is fighting off two men who are pushing her face down onto the ground, trying to spread her legs and take their turns with her. She's crying and cursing at them in Spanish. I see that Carrie is watching and about to do something about this. As much as I'd like to help all five billion people down here, I grab Carrie's arm and pull her along in the direction of the light, just as everywhere the volume of the violence seems to turn itself up even higher.

As we move along, an old man nearby starts screaming hysterically.

"We're dead! We're all dead!" he raves.

As I'm weaving us through the crowd, I tell Carrie that I did see a light while I was on my perch. It's further away than she thought, but we're heading in the right direction. Then I shift my weight the wrong way and slip on something slick. I fall to the rock floor, almost dragging Carrie down with me.

I see a quick flash of what might be a memory. There's a car, and I'm turning just in time to feel the kiss of molded plastic fender backed by a ton of engine and burning rubber tires. Was that me? Was that how my life ended? Am I in a coma now, with all of this a fevered hallucination?

Or maybe the old man is right, and this is all real. Instead of this place being a dream, maybe I'm awake and dead right now. Perhaps death is nothing more than waking up from the restless slumber of life. Strangely, I'm comforted by this thought. No more infernal bosses. No more commuting in endless traffic. No more cubicles. Why does this last thing cheer me the most? Still lost in my thoughts, I force myself to stand again.

A deep part of me wants to tell Carrie exactly what I saw up there on that mountain—that we are very far from finding a way out of this place, and that all of humanity stands in our way. Something about me being in my own darkness wants to crush her hope beyond all recognition. But part of me also is beginning to rely on her unbridled optimism. So for now, I flash her a smile that barely mimics a real one and move us along.

As we weave through the crowd, everyone is ripping and clawing at each other with increasing ferocity. A few people try their turn with us, but we just keep moving as fast as we can, and soon any would-be attackers are lured by easier prey or assaulted themselves by someone else. Once again, I tell myself that I do not believe in God. I do not believe in Hell. But wherever I am, I am now certain that this is not Heaven.

Chapter 3

As we move deeper into the sea of people, the crowd thins just a bit, and the violence dies down slightly. We make decent progress, and I do the best I can to keep us moving in the right direction. But at some point, I know I will have to gain higher ground again if I want the perspective it takes to move us closer to our goal.

After walking for what seems like hours, I notice that not everyone we pass is naked. People here and there have cloth rags covering their genital areas and strangely enough, some seem to be almost fully clothed. I also notice that not everyone here is strictly human. One man has the head of a cow, while a woman we pass appears to have a prehensile tail. Others have bone growths on their heads and at their joints similar to the small horns our attackers sported all over their bodies.

Every once in a while, we pass by groups of people just standing there talking about Hell, cowering, going nowhere. Other people band together discussing reincarnation. Mostly I hear talk of karma as people cling to the erroneous belief that the universe is a fair place where people get what they deserve. They must all think they did some pretty shitty things to have deserved ending up here.

Like a wave, fights break out, escalate, then die back down as names of men I've never heard of before are bellowed as fervent battle cries. The strangest and most bloody fights are the ones where everyone is screaming the same name out loud. I imagine each party is convinced that whichever deity they are invoking loves them more than their enemies. Despite the pervasive violence, it is obvious to me that, as we get further along, most people are just waiting. For what, I'm not sure. They really don't move anywhere in particular, other than to try to separate themselves from other people who seem to have different beliefs than them.

One man we walk past simply stands still, holding a sign on which he has written in a dark oozing substance, "This is The End. Repent now!" I ignore his message, but wonder where he laid his hands on the materials to make a sign down here.

Carrie seems as bewildered and even more shocked than I am as we walk through our new world. We don't talk much, but her presence becomes a comfort to me. Even without conversation, a companion is a good thing in Hell. After what feels like many more hours of walking, I am not yet hungry, nor am I tired, but I am still naked. Clothing has not magically appeared on my body. Neither has it done so for Carrie. The increasing occurrence of clothing on people only serves to remind me that Carrie is still nude. On the occasions when we rub against each other, I can't help but get excited. Death surrounds me, but my hormones don't

care. Just as I am thinking about taking a rest on general principle because it seems like something we should do, we come to a wall of people all wearing dark red robes. I try to squeeze through their ranks as I have with everyone else up to this point, but they do not budge and even push me back.

“Where are you going, brother?” he says. “Do you even know where you are?”

“We’re just following the light, friend,” I reply, as I take Carrie’s hand and start to walk to the left.

“We can help you get to the light!” he says, his expression toward me changing. He smiles with a strange emptiness in his eyes that might pass for the delusion of happiness.

“If you are a true believer in the light, you must join Brother Thomas’s flock. He is giving a sermon soon, and all believers and those who wish to believe are welcome inside.”

“Inside?” I say. “Inside of what? There’s nothing here. Just a bunch of people standing next to each other.”

“Please,” he says, stepping to the side so that we can pass, “ask anyone inside about the sermon, and they will direct you to the way to the light.”

“What is the light?” Carrie asks as we pass through.

“The way out, of course,” the robed man says. “It is the light of God’s love. It reminds us that despite the Hell we are in, God still loves us, and if we follow his way, we will live again and have salvation.”

“That’s beautiful,” Carrie says.

“That’s ridiculous,” I say under my breath as we pass through to the other side of the wall and finally realize what the robed man was referring to when he invited us inside.

Suddenly we find ourselves standing in a large, open area with people moving around and conversing almost like they were living in a different world from where we have just left. The line of robed guards serves as a giant retaining wall of muscle, cloth, and faith, effectively carving out a chunk of privacy and calmness amidst the chaos from the human mob outside. It is the first time I have felt any sense of calm since I arrived. Carrie seems almost relieved to be in this religious cocoon, but just as we begin to relax, I notice that most everyone inside the compound is clothed in green robes. And we are being looked at like we are savages who are desecrating their holy area with our unclean nudity. We walk up to a person in a white robe who is staring at us less cruelly than the others and ask about the sermon and where we might find some clothing.

The man’s face breaks from its solemnity, and he laughs.

“I am brother Irfan,” he says. “You only have to see yourself in your robes, and clothed you shall be. Life is but an illusion here, as is death, my brother. The trick is to make the illusion work *for* you instead of *against* you. Believe you are clothed, and you shall be shameful no more.”

I am not prepared for his answer, but before my better judgment kicks in, I close my eyes and attempt to conjure some clothing. When I open my eyes, I am still naked, but Carrie (sadly) is not. She is beaming. Her smile spreads across her face as she smooths her hand over the shimmering green robe she is now wearing.

“Where did you get that from?” I ask.

“I believed, and God provided them. I closed my eyes and did what that man told us to do. And when I opened them, I was clothed!”

Carrie is already sold on this God concept. I’m not. But at this point I will do just about anything to cover myself.

“Can you believe in some robes for me?” I ask. “I’m feeling a little self conscious.”

Without even a blink, she raises her hand and offers me a green robe as well.

“Normally I would want to teach a man to fish, but for you, my hero, here you are,” she says with a smile.

Even though my feelings are growing for this hopeful creature, I am simultaneously beginning to lose all tolerance for her eternally cheerful disposition in the face of such a terrible existence.

Regardless, I am grateful to slip the robe over my head and to let it cover my sex. People are smiling at us as if we belong now that our humanity is hidden. The man with whom we’ve been speaking beckons us to follow him, and we do.

Chapter 4

The area the believers have effectively roped off with the bodies of their guards is larger than I first imagine. We walk at least a mile within their makeshift nation state before arriving at an area of rock with steps cut into the earth and a central dais from which Brother Thomas will evidently deliver his sermon.

Many of the seats are already occupied, but Carrie and I are able to find space at the end of one of the rows about halfway down to the front of the dais. We settle in, happy to be sitting, despite our lack of exhaustion. From all directions, people are still filing in, numbering now in the thousands. All around, even though everyone is acting civilized, I see people who are scarier than most I have seen on the outside. I see a creature with feathers and a woman with small mouths opening and closing all across the surface of her arms. She is crying continually even as the men on either side of her seem to be sitting just a hair too close to her. Everywhere I look, there are horns and filed teeth and leering eyes and women who somehow manage to look sexual and dangerous at the same time. One person even has small wings sprouting from her shoulder blade areas. Surely she can’t really fly. Why would anyone choose to remain here if one could fly? Aside from this solitary defunct angel, and perhaps Carrie and me, the audience has the feel of a prison yard more than it does that of a congregation.

In about fifteen minutes, an old man in a decorative white robe with a short white beard floats across the floor and onto the dais. He does not just appear to float across the floor. He actually *does* float. We are not the only ones to notice this as the crowd goes silent. The old man looks up, directly into my eyes it seems, as he opens his arms wide and begins to speak.

“We welcome our new brothers and sisters who have found their way to us today,” he says. “It is God’s will that today’s sermon is all about finding your way. Praise be to Him. We all have to find our way here, brothers and sisters. We have

all been lost before and have all fallen short. Without God and His light, we have no direction, but with His love, we have a compass that no one can compromise!”

Several of the crowd members start to shift in their seats. The excitement in the crowd is building. Many people are holding their hands in the air, their palms open to the ceiling. I wonder if they’ve looked up and seen the solid rock ceiling perforated with its millions of holes looming high above.

“It is through God that we find our way. Not through our acts and deeds. We can be the best people in the world, but that will not deliver us to Heaven. We all know that right now we are living in Hell. We are surrounded by those who are content to stay here. But we are not satisfied living in this place. No, my brothers and sisters. We do not participate in or partake of what this world has to offer. We want more. We want what is owed to us. To be close to God and His heavenly family. And that is why tomorrow, we are ready to continue on our way to the light. To God’s light. It is time for action.”

Despite the fact that there are thousands of people watching Brother Thomas intently, his gaze seems to sweep through the crowd, and he somehow smiles directly at each one of us. Unfortunately, when his eyes rest on Carrie, she smiles back, like she is basking in the warmest light of the sun on a cool spring day.

Brother Thomas continues to preach his sermon about finding the way and how other people follow false Gods and even false versions of Brother Thomas himself. It seems that Brother Thomas was sent here by God to lead his chosen people from this horrible place, and that only he truly knows God’s intentions. I quickly grow tired of his condescension couched in his love for all humankind. I just want to get moving again, and apparently so does Brother Thomas.

“Tomorrow, we shall pack our meager belongings and begin our pilgrimage to the light,” Brother Thomas says. “I have been to the top of the mountain, and God has shown me the light which calls out to His true believers.”

I glance around as nonchalantly as possible, looking for a mountain, but I see none. I remember the light that both Carrie and I saw and assume that he’s talking about the same one. I wonder if he climbed a mountain made of people, similar to the one I climbed earlier.

Brother Thomas closes with a prayer that he reads from a book that he is suddenly holding.

“Let us read from the first book of Ahman. ‘For as lightning flashes in a land where it has never rained, so shall I signal to thee of my appearance. But do not fret that others shall bar your path. Those who do not believe cannot see my light for that which it truly is. And they shall hesitate when you shall act.’ And now, let us pray. ‘God, we know that you love us. That you love us so much that you have given us this land and this shelter so that we may do your work all the days of our lives. Protect us tomorrow as we begin our pilgrimage to the gate of your house. Grant us entrance, oh Lord, so that we may live with you for all eternity. In your hallowed name.’”

After Brother Thomas closes his prayer, the assembly disperses, his followers eager to prepare for tomorrow’s trip. Before I can say anything to Carrie, I look up to see Brother Thomas standing in front of us, focused completely on Carrie who seems to be about the right age to be his youngest daughter if he were to have one. I step between them and offer Brother Thomas my hand.

“Thank you for letting us take refuge inside your... walls, sir. If there’s anything we can do to help out around here before we continue on our way, please just ask.”

“Where could you possibly be going that would be more important than seeking the light, my brother?”

Now I feel stupid, because he’s completely right. What could be more important than escaping this place? Nothing. And in fact, even though I want to put some serious distance between these fanatics and the two of us, there’s probably not too much chance of avoiding them since we are all making a beeline for the same place anyway.

“You’re right,” I say. “We are on our way to the light and are hoping that it’s the way out of here.”

“My brother. The light is real. The gate is real. I have heard this from members of my flock who were sent ahead to scout the way. They reported a mighty wall that stretches as far as any of my people has ever dared to venture, a moat of fire wider across than any man could jump, and a single gate leading out of this place and to salvation. Hordes of people wait outside this gate, but most are too afraid to enter. They know how much their souls are burdened. The gate may look large, but it is only wide enough to fit one person at a time, and a dirty soul makes a person too large to fit. But I tell you this...”

I brace myself for the crazy that is about to spew from his mouth.

“No one may enter through that gate and into God’s arms without faith. I hear that you were not even able to create your own robe, my friend. If a robe stopped you in your tracks, how much more so will the gate to the Kingdom of Heaven? You and your lovely companion must stay with my flock. We can offer you protection and fellowship. Together, you may learn the way of God and perhaps, by His will, be ready to accept Him into your heart before we arrive at the exit to this Hell.”

I still don’t want to be traveling with this guy, but a security escort wouldn’t hurt, especially considering how far away the light probably is. I look over to Carrie, but she is staring star-struck at our host.

“You must ask for God to come into your heart and into your soul,” Brother Thomas says. “Only through your faith in Him will the gate open for you. Otherwise, you will never leave this Hell.”

“So when we get to the magical gate...” I start to say.

“Brother. I know you are new, and I sense much potential in you, but do not blaspheme in our house. We are not savages who believe in magic.”

I stifle a laugh, not because I don’t want to offend him, but because I don’t want him to throw us out.

“I didn’t mean any offense,” I say. “I just wanted to know if all we have to do is believe that your God is in our hearts and souls to be allowed through the gate.”

“You must ask Him to fill you,” he says, looking smugly superior. “And you have to mean it.”

Thankfully, Carrie steps in.

“Brother Thomas, if it’s ok with you, we’ll come with you on your journey tomorrow, and perhaps you can teach us about God along the way, so that we too can pass through the gate.”

“Of course, my child. Of course.”

Chapter 5

Carrie and I curl up close to each other in a clear space near where we first entered the compound, but our bodies do not touch. We both go through the motions of sleeping, but neither of us is tired, and we don't seem to need sleep in this place. This ruse is just to give us the illusion that we still live by human rituals that guide us through our existence. The concept of days and nights, even when not real, is comforting. This, of course, is contrary to the fact that we are underground and that a hidden light source casts everything down here in a never changing reddish brown hue. We haven't eaten or drank anything since we arrived, yet we still feel... nothing. Not full. Not hungry. Just dissatisfied in general. We are far from being human anymore.

After lying together for what may be hours, people around us begin to stir, and the wall made of robed guards rustles.

Carrie and I stand up and join the tail end of a broad line that is forming about twenty people wide. We start shuffling in the direction of the light that I saw the day before. As we march, the wall guards in their crimson robes march as well, forming a huge moving rectangle around the edges of our line of people, protecting the flock as we go. Like a spear of faith moving through the crowd of humanity. I can hear the sounds of pain and anguish beyond our walls. More rapes, attacks, killings and misery. And even though I can't hear them, I am also sure that most of the people we are passing are simply complacent and just watching us pass them by. Despite the noise of the outside world, because I am sheltered by the wall of robes, I soon forget that others less fortunate than me exist. I do not know how long we travel like this. Because the land never changes and because our view is limited by the moving wall of red cloth, it almost feels as if we are going nowhere at all. Time doesn't seem to pass. Nor does distance.

After what might be hours or even days, we come to a halt. Brother Thomas stands in front of our ordered mob and holds his arms outstretched to the ceiling. With a move of his hand, the line starts falling in on top of itself as follower after follower piles on top of each other to form a natural pyramid of people. It's obvious that they have done this before, and our turns are coming up soon. Carrie runs up to the pile and climbs the human structure which must be up to thirty feet height at this point, throwing herself across another worshipper, probably hoping that Brother Thomas will deign to step on her back on his way to the top. I fall in close to the bottom, pretending to help the cause, but really I just position myself to be able to run at a moment's notice in case the whole thing collapses.

And then comes Brother Thomas, bounding up to the top of his mountain of followers, until he stands like a god himself looking down upon the waves of people between our congregation and the source of the light. We can't see what he sees. But after studying our future, he looks up to the ceiling and addresses his flock. He tells us that we are getting close and that our course is true. With his

voice dripping with optimism and hope, it's no wonder he and Carrie get along so well.

After Brother Thomas descends to the ground, his followers peel themselves off one by one until only the bottom layer of people is left where the pyramid once stood. Many of those who were in the center of the pile are not moving, and we soon leave them to rot as we continue forward in our religious phalanx. As we get under way again, I notice that Carrie is not with me. I am sure she was ok since she was so close to the top of the heap, but I am still worried.

And that is when I spot him. The bald Asian man who was eaten by his fellow gang members is in line about twenty people ahead of me. He looks the same as when last we fought, skinny still and with boney stubs protruding from his head and limbs. But he is clothed this time, which is probably why I didn't recognize him at first. Despite my lack of belief in religion or magic, it seems that in this land some miracles actually do happen.

I make my way up to Brother Irfan whom I see standing off to the side of the line, and I whisper to him about who I have seen. I tell him there is a murderer and a dangerous man in the midst of the flock. Brother Irfan looks at me with a serious face as we continue to walk on the outskirts of the crowd, and when I point out the bald headed man to him, he nods and smiles.

"Yes, brother. That man is Li Kuang. Like you, he has been forgiven. But unlike you, he now accepts God into his heart. I assure you that it is quite safe to have him here with us."

"I saw what he did! And I saw what his friends did to him," I say. "They were eating him alive the last time I saw him. How could he live through that?"

Brother Irfan smiles again with glassy eyes like he has been partaking of some drug to which only he has access.

"We are not beings of the flesh here, my brother. You are not your body. Our bodies cannot be killed, because they do not actually exist in this place."

I hear his words, but they don't make sense to me. My body is who I am. I am nothing more than my feet and my hands and my head and everything that hooks these things together. By this time, I have mostly accepted that I am not dreaming, but I still wonder if I am perhaps very insane—if maybe my mind has no connection to reality at all. I know what I saw happen to Li Kuang, and yet there he stands.

Maybe the ability for our bodies to regenerate and to come back despite dying repeatedly is not a boon. Perhaps this is merely a way to prolong our hope and therefore to elongate our ultimate suffering here in Hell. Despite these theories, which constantly form and are then revised in my brain, I conclude that I may never know the real answers to where I am and to why I am here. I am only certain that I don't want to stay here and that my best course of action is to see what's at the end of our journey to the gate.

As Brother Irfan turns his attention to another member of the congregation, I step to the rear of the line and look back at the bodies of the fallen believers who were at the base of the pyramid. As I watch, they get up one by one and then hurry to join our group, as if nothing has happened. I don't know whether to be upset or relieved when I piece together that I too probably can't actually die here.

After marching for twice as long as we did before our last break, we stop once again, a mass of believers encased in a wall of robed guards. I keep waiting for the guards to be relieved with fresh troops, but this never happens, and they never stand down. They are truly tireless.

I start looking for Carrie again and am about to give up when from behind me I hear a voice low in my ear.

“Hello, friend. It’s good to see you again.”

I turn around, and right in my face, is Li Kuang.

“What do you want? I don’t know how you’ve fooled these people,” I barely say, trying to conceal my fear of this ghost. “But I know who you really are.”

He smiles with his sharpened teeth.

“Do not be afraid of me, brother,” he says. “I am here like you, as a pilgrim on my way to the light. After my friends betrayed me, I realized the errors of my ways—that I needed and wanted something more. You wouldn’t begrudge me that, would you brother?”

“Of course not,” I lie. “I just want a way out of here is all. Doesn’t matter to me either way what happens to you.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” he says, lowering his voice. “Let’s agree that you stay away from me, and that I’ll stay away from you.”

I turn my gaze from his.

“But not from your pretty friend,” he says after a pause. “She’s walking around in her shiny new clothes, pretending to be better than she is, but I know what she looks like underneath it all. And so do you. Isn’t that right, brother?”

And then Li Kuang laughs a kind of laugh that is devoid of humor or mirth.

He walks away, but I resolve to keep an eye on him and to protect Carrie, no matter the cost.

After walking up and down the line with its thousands of people for another hour or so, I finally find her, and it turns out she does not need my protection. At all.

Carrie is at the very front of the line, being carried along with Brother Thomas by a group of followers. Brother Thomas is gesturing to Carrie in a saintly fashion, and she is just sitting there, engulfed in whatever religious delusion he is feeding her. I try to walk up to them but am stopped by two large guards in dark red robes.

I call out her name, and she turns.

“Carrie! The bald man is here in line! His name is Li Kuang. Tell Brother Thomas!”

She nods tentatively, but looks like she feels untouchable. And to be honest, if I were in her place, I might feel the same way. It’s obvious that Brother Thomas has taken a liking to Carrie and has pulled her into his private circle. She doesn’t motion for me to come any closer, although Brother Thomas does wave and smile at me briefly, if not dismissively. I decide to walk along parallel to the front of the line anyway, watching and waiting, although for what I am not sure. I feel like her unwanted guardian angel.

After what must be another full day or two of walking, we stop again for another fake night’s rest. This time, I see about fifty of the wall guards detach and form a new room at the center of the compound for Brother Thomas. My heart breaks a

little as I see Carrie follow him inside. Once the guard positions himself to fill the gap, Brother Thomas and Carrie are essentially walled off and alone inside their own private chamber. This makes Brother Thomas the richest man in this entire place. Thankfully, the robes of the guards along with the ever constant background noise from outside our walls mostly mute or drown out the sounds emanating from the room. But not completely.

I still hear her moans and his pig-like grunts. Any hopes I may have been harboring about the validity of Brother Thomas and his mission vanish. He is not even remotely God-like to me anymore.

Chapter 6

While I am lying down trying to feign sleep, a group of guards jumps me and carries me forcibly to the perimeter of the wall. The red robes part, and I am ejected from the compound. I have grown so accustomed to the relative peacefulness inside the walls of religion that I am in shock at the stark contrast of the evil and chaos suddenly going on all around me. Everyone is fighting and killing and fucking someone or something. Fear and panic have turned to anger and rage. Animals run around attacking each other. More and more people look less and less like... people. Instead, animal-looking growths sprout from most bodies, mixing horns, hooves, and tails with human heads and limbs. The scene is horrific and wondrous at the same time.

I glance down at my body parts, expecting them suddenly to sprout monstrous protrusions, but nothing happens, and I remain distinctly more human than those around me.

At first, I try staying close to the robed wall, clinging to the memory of its safety. However, as Brother Thomas continues to move closer to his destination, I wonder if I am more of a target following so closely than if I were to move out on my own. Suddenly, two men with tentacles for fingers try to pull me down to the ground, but I slip out of their grasp, leaving my robes behind in their hands to fight over. Once again I am naked, with nothing to call my own but my self. I briefly close my eyes and try to conjure clothing, but once again I have no success. I know this is because I have not yet surrendered to my situation—because I refuse to believe at some fundamental level of my inner being that I am dead. That I am in this place called Hell.

I weave around anyone I can pass without making eye contact. As long as I am silent and quick, I slip through the crowd unhindered for the most part, always keeping my distance, but also keeping the robed wall in my line of sight. As I pass one group of men attacking a group of children and their mother, I surprise myself by reaching out, dragging one of the attackers away, and slamming his head repeatedly into the rock floor until his head feels like a bag of wet sand and seashells instead of a skull. I don his shirt and pants and continue on my way. Killing him comes easy to me, but I tell myself that it's ok as long as it's for the right reason—that I am not like Li Kuang, preying on the weak. I have only killed here out of self-defense or need. Besides, the man I just killed will get up and walk

it off in a few minutes anyway. If there is a God waiting for me at the gate, and he doesn't let me in because of this, then not many people at all must make it through to the other side of His gate.

As I continue to dodge every fight I can, I become more brazen whenever a battle is unavoidable. Just like the man whose clothes I now wear, I too will rise again if someone kills me. What was it that Brother Thomas said? This body of mine is just flesh. It is not who I am. I am starting to understand this, and this understanding is making me stronger.

Within hours, I am almost coming to enjoy my occasional scuffles. They at least relieve the monotony of my existence. Now I'm walking with new running shoes on my feet and a heavy club of wood in my hand. For the first time, other than when I was with the congregation, I feel almost in control of my own destiny. I realize that this perception of control itself is a delusion, but it still makes me feel better about things.

The robed wall is still moving, and even though I sometimes get as close as 100 meters away, it is still never far from my sight. I longingly wonder if Carrie even knows I am gone. Maybe she knows and doesn't care. Maybe she's the one who asked for me to be thrown out. Either way, I figure that she's found the perfect mate in Brother Thomas to feed her delusions of hope in this Hell.

Gradually, the crowds thicken and begin to merge with each other, and even the pace of the robed wall slows considerably. Brother Thomas has reinforced the front of his moving wall with more guards, and they are whipping the crowds in front of them with razor wire and pummeling through people with axes. The carnage is awful as people try to get out of the way but have nowhere to run. I wonder if this is what their God wants them to do to get to His light. I have no doubt that the robed butchers fully believe this to be the case. At the forefront of the slaughter, I see Li Kuang in a blood rage. What is worse is that he also sees me. I can tell that he wants nothing more than to leave his post and to chop me down into a thousand pieces so that it might take forever for me to reconstitute, but he stays the course and hatefully turns his attention back to the flesh in front of him with renewed vigor.

I clear my mind of the congregation and stare out into the distance. I can finally see something other than the porous rock ceiling curving down to meet the horizon. I see a wall. A real wall this time that looks like it's made of stone, although from this distance it's hard to tell. And the flashes are much brighter and easier to spot. I estimate no more than a day or so of traveling before we arrive. My extremities go slightly cold, as I am both anxious and excited about the prospect of finally leaving this place.

As we continue closer and closer to the source of the light, the violence surrounding me becomes its own animal. It wants to let loose and flex its anger, but with increasingly little room, it becomes self-limiting and desperately intense. As soon as a fight breaks out, it is over since there is no room for anyone to maneuver or to run. After several more hours, we are even closer to our destination, although the progress is even more difficult at this point. The violence is less prevalent as people instead simply fume as they are pressed into one another too close to do much of anything else. Each person I pass, it seems I have

to do so with force. I have traded up my wooden club for a more vicious knife. I am almost as efficient at parting the crowd as Li Kuang. I am becoming good at this.

When Brother Thomas finally decides it is time for his followers to rest, we are only 400 meters or so from the gate and the wall. The wall is high. Not so high as the hole-ridden ceiling, but too high and too smooth for anyone to scale on his or her own. Just as Brother Thomas's scouts had reported, there is a moat of fire surrounding the wall and a narrow land bridge leading across the moat to a black iron gate embedded into the rock wall on the other side. The wall itself is not made of rough rock like the floor nor is it like the ceiling, but instead it is made of a polished black stone that reflects the crowd and the flames. The image of the crowd reflected in the polished wall makes it seem as though we are all standing in flames already but just don't realize it. Even though I don't plan on spending the time to find out, I wonder how far the wall extends on either side of me. Does it go on forever? Are there other gates and other crowds at multiple locations along the wall, or is our gate really the only way out of here?

To my bewilderment, I notice that instead of a steady stream of travelers passing over the bridge and through the gate, people are only crossing sporadically, while the majority of the crowd remains on our side of the moat, simply watching as others take their chances. Their only real concern seems to be avoiding being pushed into the molten moat.

I turn to see that the robed phalanx is expanding its formation again into a large rectangle. This time, their task is harder, as there is just no room for people to move. As the guards push outward, people at the front of the crowd topple into the flames. Screams amplify and rise above the constant moans and lamentations of this place. The crowd starts to panic as one, and more and more people and man-beasts and mutants are pushed into the moat. I am shoved forward by the crowd as well, but thankfully I'm too far from the fire to be in any danger for now. I wonder if the people in the moat come back to life, still surrounded by flames, only to be immediately incinerated again over and over again, for all eternity. As the people burn, I swear I hear what sounds like breathing coming from the ceiling, as if this place is alive and feeding on the very suffering of its inhabitants.

Now that we are at the gate, I begin to fear for the first time that I will not be allowed through to the other side. I look at my blood-stained hands and ask myself over and over again what I was thinking and why I have committed such acts that will soon come back to haunt me. I am not a religious man. I do not believe in their God. But I am also at a loss as to how I will cleanse myself of the real burden I feel from my past actions. To whom can I repent if not to a God? I certainly can't seek redemption from a human being. Or maybe I can.

I start the arduous task of moving toward the great wall of robes that is no more than 50 meters from me now. I look for Li Kuang, but thankfully I don't see him outside the wall anymore. Maybe he was killed along the way and is busy reforming himself somewhere else. When I get to the wall, I walk up to one of the robed guards and hail him.

"Brother, I wish to speak to Brother Thomas. My eternal soul demands it," I say.

The guard looks at me, which is a hopeful beginning, but he says nothing. He steps back into the compound, and the wall closes in to fill the gap where he stood. Hours go by, but eventually he comes out and looks at me again.

“No,” is all he says.

I start to protest, but the guard has returned with a long spear that he begins to raise in my direction. I quickly back away and force my way back through the crowd. Soon I am only ten people away from the moat, but 100 meters or so away from the gate and the congregation. Like the rest of the indecisive crowd, I decide to wait and see what happens next.

Chapter 7

I do not have to wait long. The robed wall undulates and starts to extend outward so that it creates a direct lane to the gate bridge. I can't see the compound beyond their robes, but I can see the members of the flock as they cross in single file over the land bridge toward the gate. For some reason, they are all naked again, and I can only imagine that this is because they must leave here the same way that they arrived. As each person approaches and then passes through the gate, an intensely brilliant white light flashes out from just beyond the gate to bathe the crowd momentarily before disappearing again.

I can also see a man who is standing on a ledge at the top of the wall. He is dressed in a suit and appears to be watching the entrance of Brother Thomas's flock. I start to inch my way closer to the robed wall, trying hard not to maim or kill anyone along the way, although at times this is unavoidable. A few people try to harm me, but I only suffer minor wounds that I know will soon heal. For the most part, the crowd is more silent than I have ever witnessed since my arrival here. Most violence has subsided, and everyone is watching Brother Thomas's people pass through the gate, happy to have such a tangible excuse for delaying their own inevitable judgment days.

As I incrementally get closer, I focus increasingly on the man at the top of the wall. Could he actually be the God that Brother Thomas has been talking about? And what is the flashing light coming from the gate? Is it the light of Heaven? Then I turn my gaze back to the steady stream of followers that continues to cross over to the gate. As best I can tell, no one is being turned away. Maybe there is something to what Brother Thomas was saying after all. To his word, everyone is being accepted. Not a single person is being cast down into the fire below. Then I realize that even before Brother Thomas started loading people through the gate, I never saw any of the stragglers who went across the bridge on their own get sent back or be ejected into the fire moat. For the first time since my arrival, I feel something close to *hope*.

Finally, I am right next to the robed wall again, and this time the guards are turned inward to watch the exodus, and unaware of my arrival. The guards must be practically drooling, waiting to be called in from their posts to walk through the gate themselves. As two of them loosen their positions, I can finally see between their shoulders to the compound within. I see thousands of people milling around excitedly. Brother Thomas is corralling them all and giving each of them a slight touch on his or her forehead with the palm of his hand before each walks out onto the bridge. By Brother Thomas's side is the beautiful Carrie. I'm not sure what I

think about her at this point, but I still feel drawn to protect her for some reason, despite her impropriety with Brother Thomas and despite her abandonment.

Now that I am closer, I can see the man at the top of the wall more clearly. What an incredible view of humanity he must have from his perch. He is dressed in a tailored black pin-striped suit, calmly surveying the scene below. If he is God, he has impeccable taste in suits. I wait for him to look down at me so I can discern something—anything—about who or what he is, but he is focused on Brother Thomas and his flock. I turn my attention back to the line of people passing through the gate as well.

Each time a person exits through the gate, a brilliant white light flashes a second or two later like a door being opened in a dark room to the outside afternoon sun. I can't see beyond the gate, but I can tell that before proceeding, each person is met at the gate proper by a strange creature in a hooded grey robe. I can't actually see any of its body, but I can tell that the oddity is fundamentally different than a human. I watch for what seems like hours as person after person meets with the hooded guardian and then exits through the gate.

When I turn back to the congregation, I see that the crowd of followers inside the compound has finally begun to thin. Brother Thomas signals to the back part of the robed wall that it is finally their turn. Like a well-organized army, the rear guards enter the compound and begin their own marches to the gate. They drop their clothes, and walk through the compound, their heads held high like they are proud to have served as a part of the wall for the holy Brother Thomas. Their fellow guards making up the remaining parts of the wall close the gaps left behind, effectively shrinking the perimeter wall guard by guard, until there are only twenty or so guards left.

Throughout this exodus, I have stayed close until I am now only a few feet away from Brother Thomas, Carrie, and the last of his guards. I keep my head down, letting the back of one of the larger guards block me from Carrie's view. Finally, Brother Thomas motions to the remaining guards that it is their turn to cross over. All but four of them do. The wall is no more and all that remains is a small group of robed men loosely surrounding Brother Thomas and Carrie. The outside crowd closes in around them and me, and I know that this may be my last chance to speak with her.

I move to rush past the last of the guards and to take Carrie by her arm—to beg her to ask Brother Thomas one last time to help me through the gate. Despite my loathing for him, he is the only one I have met down here who might have a chance of washing away my sins before I am judged. But my momentum is cut short by a strong and bony hand suddenly wrapped around my throat and pulling me back. Before I can react, Li Kuang has kicked my legs out from under me, and I am horizontal in the air. At the last second, I raise my head up, straining it forward as I am slammed into the hard rock floor. Instantly, a clothed Li Kuang is on top of me, his fist cocked back as he prepares to unleash his anger on me. I lash out at him quickly before he can follow through with his strike. As if I am watching someone else's body, I notice that my right hand is studded with razor sharp ridges of bone that slice effortlessly through Li Kuang's chest, releasing a torrent of blood that washes down his torso.

I should not be surprised at how little the gash in his chest affects him considering the fact that he has been ripped apart and eaten alive by his own friends before. He does, however, pause for a fraction of a second, bewildered by my now deadly fist. That's all the time I need to bring my hips up, throw him off of me, and regain my feet. Before I can launch my next attack, his chest wound has already healed almost completely, and he too jumps to his feet. We square off for a few seconds. Then he crouches in front of me, waiting like an animal that knows his prey will soon do something stupid. Even though my hand is still a razor sharp weapon dripping with his blood, I am more familiar with my knife, so I pull it instead and hold it away from my body, ready to slash. Li Kuang laughs at this and throws himself at me, tearing and biting as he goes. He latches onto my left arm with his teeth, removing a chunk of my bicep. This hurts immensely, but my mind suppresses the pain as I come around and then up with my knife into the small of his back.

This does not seem to affect him as much as it should. I pry my knife against one of his vertebrae until I hear a pop, and Li Kuang finally howls in pain. He also clenches me around my mid-section and starts driving me backwards like he's a football player pushing a practice sled. I begin shredding his back with my knife and with my fists, both of which are now sporting the same sharp bony growths. His spine must be severed by now, but still Li Kuang pushes me backward as people desperately move out of our way as much as they can.

This is when I realize two things. First, despite his brutish nature, Li Kuang has achieved what I have only theorized. He has somehow figured out how to separate his physical body from his perception of self. Li Kuang is not his body. His body is not him. Li Kuang is only his hate and his will to destroy.

The second thing I realize is that Li Kuang is not pushing me aimlessly about. Instead, he is driving me directly toward the fire moat. I may believe that my body is under my control and that I can't be permanently killed down here, but I panic at the thought of endlessly dying and being reborn in the flames of the moat.

I continue to push, pull, and hack at Li Kuang—the man whose body no longer seems to follow any natural laws. And I finally realize that this is the key. Li Kuang doesn't need his body. So I stop slicing at it and start to focus on my own instead. I ball up my fists and I will the bony spikes sprouting from my hands to grow longer. Then I slam my fists down as hard as I can into the rocky ground across which I am being dragged. My bone protrusions rake across the floor, sending sparks into the air around me, but they barely slow my speed. I pull my fists back and try again. This time, my spikes catch, and Li Kuang slips to the side of me, loosening his grip slightly as my anchored body refuses to move forward anymore.

Still on my back, I crane my head around and see that we are only a few meters from the edge of the moat. The heat is unnatural and unmerciful, and my face feels like it's melting just from being this close to the flames.

Li Kuang kicks at my hands, then at my face. I hold on to the ground for my life as I am beat soundly across my neck and head. I close my eyes and search for calmness. This body is not me. I am not my body. I repeat this in my mind.

I also tell myself that I have almost made my way out of this place, and that I will not allow Li Kuang to stop me from leaving. With this assertion, my body and

my pain seem to separate from my self. I am watching what is being done to me like a removed observer.

I open my eyes and look up at Li Kuang through my swollen eyes almost with curiosity now. He continues striking me, and although I am sure I look hideously deformed and broken, I do not feel that way inside. Instead, I feel stronger and more secure than ever. I still don't have much strength left to attack, but I know that I can outwait and survive whatever this demon throws at me. So that is what I do. And eventually, the mighty Li Kuang begins to tire. He wears himself out, and now it is my time to strike.

I wait until he can barely raise his fist again, and then I lightly stand up. I try not to look at my body because I don't want to shatter the image of wholeness and strength to which I am clinging. I am strong. I cannot be killed. I will not be killed by the likes of Li Kuang. His body is whole, but I can tell that he is worn inside. He has given me all of his hate, and it was not enough to end me. Since he does not know of any other way, he is at a complete loss for how to proceed, and so he just cowers beneath me. When I look at Li Kuang, I see everything I'm afraid that I have become down here—a coward turned ruthless killer.

In another lifetime and another place, I might feel pity for this ruined man, but here at the exit to Hell, I just need him gone. Without much of a thought, I pick up Li Kuang by his throat and carry him to the edge of the moat. I pivot him around so that he is suspended above the flames of the moat. He looks at me and starts to open his mouth to say something, but I just drop him and let him fall into the abyss. Instantly, Li Kuang is only a memory, and I am past ready to leave this place. Even though I have just killed yet another man, this time perhaps for good, I still feel at peace and am ready to be judged despite the fact that my latest sins have not been forgiven. At the worst, I have removed a piece of evil from this place, and no one will be sorry for what I have done, except for perhaps Brother Thomas. Certainly, God will not only understand, but he will thank me for my deed.

I look over about fifty people from me and see Brother Thomas still talking with Carrie at the foot of the bridge. I close my eyes, and when I open them, my body is healed, and I am clothed somehow in my own flowing white robe. As I walk toward Brother Thomas and Carrie, the crowd parts for me. In seconds I am standing behind one of the last four guards. I walk past him and stand in front of Carrie.

I see Brother Thomas looking shocked out of the corner of my eye, but Carrie motions him and the guards to wait.

"Why are you here?" she says. "You don't believe. The gate and what lies beyond aren't for you."

Despite my persistent doubt that any of this is real and not some grand illusion created by my own insanity, her exclusionary words hurt me at my core.

"You're probably right. I'm not sure that thing up there will let me through, but I'm willing to try, especially if you'll be there, too."

She laughs a little and genuinely tries to suppress her grin.

"I will always be thankful that you saved my body when we first arrived, before I realized how little it means in this place. But, Thomas has saved my soul. Because of him, I am about to join God in a place far better than this. I think you should stay with him and let him teach you if he'll still have you," she says. "Once your sins are forgiven..."

“He’s not going with you?” I say.

“I never go with my flock,” Brother Thomas says, stepping up and placing his arm around Carrie’s shoulders. “My calling is to shepherd people out of this darkness to the light. I sacrifice my own salvation so that others may be prepared to pass through safely.”

I’m speechless. I want to hate Brother Thomas. For taking Carrie away and for making love with her when I should have been in his place. But now that I know he is staying, Brother Thomas has placed himself above my reproach.

“I have to go now,” she says, touching my chest lightly. “I wish you peace and happiness regardless of what path you choose.”

She turns around, drops her robe, and walks out across the bridge. And I follow. Ignoring the protests from Brother Thomas and his guards, I move to the mouth of the narrow bridge, realizing that I have learned what I needed to learn here. That I am ready to move on to whatever is next.

Brother Thomas just stands there, making no further attempts to stop me. He looks like he is trying hard not to let his face show some kind of emotion. Perhaps disdain. Perhaps a dark humor.

I let my bright white robes fall to the floor and step onto the stone bridge. Now I can clearly see Carrie speaking with the grey-robed creature on the other side. He says something that makes Carrie’s body tense up and then hesitate. I see her head bow and her hands cup her face as if she is sobbing, but that is all I can make out as the creature urges her forward through the gate. When the black iron bars of the gate open, I catch a quick glimpse of what lies beyond. Just past the gate door, there are two passageways. One leads to the right and one to the left. Both are dark. Carrie moves toward the passageway on the right and turns her head to look back at me. Or perhaps she is looking at Brother Thomas. Either way, I can see that her cheeks are tear-stained, and that she is horrified. This is not the way she should look on her way to meet her God.

I wish that I could talk with Carrie, and ask her questions before I too cross over the bridge to the unknown. But the time for that has passed, and instead I take my first tentative step across the stone pathway. Soon I am halfway across. I look up to the suited man standing on top of the wall. He nods to someone behind me, and when I turn around, Brother Thomas has his head bowed, as do the four remaining guards in their robes. The man standing above me looks out of place in his black pin-striped suit, and even more so as he raises a jumbo white coffee mug to his lips and takes a sip. I can barely make it out, but there is a cartoon effigy emblazoned on the front of his mug—a happy face with cartoon horns sprouting out of its forehead, and some words I cannot read at this angle. I look at him curiously but then turn my attention back to the grey-robed creature who beckons me to come forward.

Like an automaton, I continue across the bridge and notice that others have started to file in behind me. I set foot on the far side of the bridge, just in front of the gate, and the creature looks into my eyes. I don’t understand how it can be, but he seems to look into the very core of who I am. Now that I am close enough, I can see that the creature is definitely not human. His eyes are black and soulless like those of a shark, and his teeth are jagged like those of Li Huang and his gang.

“Are you judging my soul?” I ask.

The creature emits a sound that might be a deep laugh, but he does not smile.

“You have already been judged or you would not be here. But you still have a choice to make. The left passageway leads to suffering and damnation. The right takes you to a new life—one of inflicting suffering and pain on your fellow humans for eternity. Be sure—there is no God here. There is no salvation and certainly no Heaven that awaits you through either passageway. There is only this single choice to make, and you must make it now. Do you wish to become one of Hell’s denizens or to enlist as one of its workers?”

“Has anyone ever chosen to go left?” I manage to ask.

The creature seems to ponder this for a second before answering.

“No one who’s had the choice ever has. But *you* must choose now. As usual, Brother Thomas has done well, and the pump is primed. Others start to follow your lead, and I must continue with my job. We all have jobs to do here, as you may soon discover.”

And with that, I understand all. We haven’t been living in Hell, journeying towards the light of Heaven. We’ve spent all this time just waiting to get *into* Hell. And now I have a choice of either becoming one of the damned or of further blackening what soul I might have left by inflicting damnation on my fellow humans for all eternity. Even hopeful Carrie has chosen to work in Hell rather than to become one of its customers. I want to think that I make my own choice so that I can stay close to Carrie. So I can fulfill my promise to protect her. But the truth is, I am simply still a coward, and I choose only as a coward can. My only consolation is that Li Kuang will not have this decision to make. Instead, he will suffer an eternity of dying over and over again in the flames of the moat.

I turn from the creature and pass through the gate. Without hesitation and without looking back, I walk down the right passageway to another door that is waiting for me. I open it, and as soon as I step through, a flash of white light blinds me, and the smell of burning flesh sticks in my throat.

I tumble naked into a large room lit with harsh fluorescent tubes running all along the ceiling. The intensely bright room is filled with dozens of people in sharp business suits who barely notice my arrival. Immediately, I am thrown against a large rock that is covered in blood and human grime. I feel something pressing against my back and again the fresh smell of burning flesh. This time the flesh is mine. My right arm is stretched out from my body, and it too is struck with a fiery brand. I want to scream in pain, but I am still in shock as I try to cope with what is happening to me. My epiphany about being separate from my body is quickly slipping away on the waves of pain from which I cannot escape. I look at my arm, and on it there is now a long number written in bloody welts.

The number 6,348,935,687 is now a part of me forever. I imagine the same digits are burned into my back as well. I try to remember my name, but I cannot. It seems like I never even had one, and any remaining sense of myself is gone. I can barely even remember Carrie as I see her naked form in the near distance being escorted down a hallway by a woman in a navy blue business suit and shiny black pumps. To say I’m disoriented and confused is an understatement as I am forced to my knees. I look up, and the man in the black pin-striped suit from the top of the wall is towering in front me, smiling. He raises his coffee mug, and I can finally make out the words emblazoned in worn black letters on its white ceramic

surface. It simply reads, *Have a nice day*. I get the clear sense that the man in the suit means exactly the opposite while he peers down at me.

My mouth lolls open as he steps aside, and I am dragged to the mouth of the same hallway through which Carrie has just disappeared. In seconds, I am pulled back to my feet and am escorted away, stumbling down the hallway and squinting as the harsh fluorescents stab at my eyes.

Behind me, the man in the suit emits a short grunt tinged with mirth, and I suddenly want to kill him more than anything I have ever wanted before. I hope that one day I will get the chance to do so, and it is this hope alone that keeps me sane as I enter the first day of the rest of my life.

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