

While he stared into the darkness he thought he could almost make out movement far in the distance; something long and slithery, like a snake, floating through the void. The man found himself to be staring out into the infinite and empty expanse beyond the small platform he sat upon.

When he realized he was awake and alive was when the panic came. He turned and spun, trying to get a sense of his surroundings. He was in the middle of a circular platform, maybe sixty feet across, covered in sand and what looked like oddly shaped bleached corals. The only source of light came from directly above him, shining down as if from a pinhole in an impossibly high ceiling. The light formed a circle that perfectly fit to the edges of the platform; either that or beyond the rim of light was so dark he could not see it.

“Hello?” He called out sheepishly. “Is anyone there? Maria? Where are you Maria?” After looking about the tiny platform and feeling the isolation sink in, he didn’t expect an answer. Nevertheless, one came.

“Fret not, dear one.”

“Maria, is that... No...”

A woman appeared from the darkness into the ring of light. “Forgive me child, for I am not your beloved.” Her skin was pale and her face was youthful, yet she spoke in a cadence maturity. “But do not worry, she is safe.”

For a moment the man was stricken by her appearance and melodious speech. Her silken gown went to the floor; she seemed to float across the ground.

“How can you know that?” Said the man, tears welling up in his eyes.

“I have seen her, and I will take you to her.”

“Who are you? And what is this place?” the man said, voice shaking.

“Do not fear, you are safe here.” She said, opening her arms and moving closer for an embrace.

He took a step back, edging closer to the border of light. His heart started to race as she drew near; the fog in his mind started to clear. He tried to breath deep, but felt like he had pneumonia. “You said you saw my Maria, how can that... I was... we were... at sea, in the water...” His posture lowered as he started to recall what had happened. The woman slowly approached him with arms held open, her dress shimmering in the light.

“Everything will be alright. Now hush, dear one, and let me comfort you.” She said in a kind tone.

Despite suspicion and wariness he found himself moving forward to accept her offer. Her warm smile had convinced him.

The woman was tall enough that he could barely rest his head on her shoulder. She leaned forward and curled her body around him, he felt like he was completely enwrapped by her. Her skin was soft and warm, her silver gown slick and cool.

He wrapped his arms limply around her at first; he couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. His ship in a storm. A breach in the hull. Water flooding the deck. His crew thrown by wind and waves. His wife, Maria, overboard. He dove in after her. He knew it was impossible to save her, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was Maria.

He recalled being thrashed by the storm, tossed like chaff on the threshing floor. He saw Maria's head sink below the surface. He tried to swim after her, but he was not strong enough. Water filled his lungs. He felt like he was drowning. He thought he had... drowned...

Before he knew it his arms were squeezing the woman as hard as he could. He wept deeply into her shoulder.

"Shh. Shh. It will be okay. Everything will be okay." Her voice was soft and loving. She leaned her head against his and gently stroked his hair.

In that brief moment he forgot his sorrow, he felt warmth and kindness. He could tell, somehow, that this woman truly wanted to help, that she truly cared. And he was at peace. Everything would be okay. Everything will be okay.

He didn't want to let go, if he could have, he would have stayed like that forever. She didn't move either, just held the embrace while a tendril appeared from the shadows behind the man. It moved silently and smoothly, hovering at the height of his neck. A razor sharp claw on the end lined up precisely at the base of his skull. She pulled his hair up to reveal the skin, and the claw quickly severed his spinal column, spilling a cloud of blood into the "air", instantly killing him.

She let the body drop to the sandy floor. More tendrils appeared from the shadows. They were long and bony with many points of articulation, same as the clawed tendril, but these had hook-like appendages that dug into the body. The razor-like tendril made quick work of cutting the man in half from the waist; more blood oozed onto the platform, and was carried away and off the side with the current. The hooked tendrils dragged the upper half off the edge of the platform.

By the time the upper half had been pulled into the shadows, the lower half was already swarmed by dozens of little many-legged crustaceans that slowly gnawed the flesh off the bones. Several months would pass before they were picked completely clean, plenty of time before the next human arrived.

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The girl's body materialized from nothing. She sat staring into the blank infinity like all the others before her. They always sat there expressionless, motionless, thoughtless, empty. Meanwhile, in the dark beyond the border, the woman in the silver dress prepared herself.

She had done the same routine thousands of times. She could tell with a glance what type of person they would be. They usually fell into a few categories: fear, sorrow, despair, and on rare occasions, acceptance.

She circled the platform to look at the girl's face; humans wore their whole story on their face. She stayed somewhat far away, and at an angle, so the girl wouldn't see her when she woke. She waited patiently, watching for the girl's consciousness to arrive. It would come like an eel made of light from the opening above and swim into her mind.

Sometimes it could take several hours, but the woman had time, so she waited. Eventually the consciousness did come, as expected, taking the form of light in the vague shape of an eel, as expected, and swam right into the mind of the girl staring blankly forward, as expected. But there was one thing that was... unusual.

The eel was longer than normal. Much longer. A normal human's mind would span maybe the length of their arm, but this one went on for leagues.

From the dark she watched the consciousness re-enter the girl's mind, staring intently at her face, ready to observe her expression when she finally came to.

A normal human would look surprised, or scared, or confused; but when the girl finally awoke, she looked prepared. Her eyes scanned the black expanse for a few seconds, as if searching for something. Her gaze froze on the woman. She circled the platform in an attempt to escape from the girl's stare, but her eyes followed.

Somehow she could see the woman through the pitch black shadows. The girl stood up and spoke. "Who are you? What is this place?"

The woman cautiously did not respond.

"I have been sent on a mission, and I believe I must pass through here. Can you help me?" Still unwilling to move into the light, the woman replied from the dark. "You cannot leave this place, you have died."

"Impossible," said the girl. "I cannot die."

"Are you certain of that?" said the woman, moving her razor tendrils into the light.

"You threaten me?" said the girl, entering a combat stance. "Then prepare yourself." She put her hand near her waist, reaching for something that wasn't there. She looked back up to see several long, spindly appendages encircling her.

The woman closed her tendrils around the girl, constricting her. The sections of the limbs were hard and bony, but each joint had a great range of motion, allowing them to clamp tightly. The girl struggled to free herself, but it was of no use.

"Let go of me!" yelled the girl. "Release me or face the wrath of ten thousand souls!"

One of the razor tendrils moved to the back of her neck, pointed at the base of her skull, then lunged forward with great force. The girl shrieked as a loud crack echoed through the vast expanse. The tip of the razor claw had snapped off.

The woman stayed still and quiet while the girl continued to struggle. How is this possible? She thought. Human flesh is not so resilient. Who is this girl?

The grip of the tendrils slackened and the girl finally pulled herself free of their grasp. She leapt out and landed on the sandy platform. She snatched one of the larger coral-like objects and turned toward the woman in the dark. "I warned you it would come to this, now taste the wrath of a legion of souls!"

The girl ran forward, brandishing the makeshift club, and leapt off the platform at the woman. She felt resistance during her charge, like all movement had slowed to a crawl. She soared into the dark, swinging down at the woman. What should have taken moments seemed to stretch into half a minute.

The woman watched the girl as she lunged toward her, but before she arrived the woman swiftly and smoothly moved out of the way. The girl was now headed straight into an endless black abyss with no way to reverse herself.

The girl looked down into infinite void and felt her insides fall and twist, her heart started pounding, and her mind was flooded with fear. The unknowable magnitude of nothingness filled her eyes and expanded beyond the measure of her understanding. The tremendous vastness of blank space threatened to consume her.

A tendril sprung out from somewhere below and grabbed her around the torso, pulling her back to the platform. With her hands and knees on the ground she sat stunned for a moment, trying to shake the feeling from her head.

She inhaled deeply, regaining her composure. The girl stood and scanned all around, but it seems the woman had disappeared along with all the tendrils.

"Why did you save me?" The girl called out. "You were so eager to kill me before, why not let me fall?"

No response.

"Don't withdraw into the shadows!" The girl screamed, indignant. "Come back and face me!"

No response.

The girl stood on the platform in silence for a while, waiting for the woman to return. After many hours of waiting she finally gave in and sat down. She didn't want to sleep for fear of being caught unawares, so instead she picked up the "club" she picked up earlier to inspect it.

It was pure white and had holes all over it. It was hard and rock-like, but was lighter and had an "alive" feeling to it that made her think it must be some sort of coral. All the different pieces had holes on the surface that revealed a porous interior. Besides the holes, the surface was smooth; like they had been ground down over many years.

She wasn't sure how long she had been looking at the object, but it felt like a long time. She set it down and instead focused on the air around her.

She noticed before that every movement was met with resistance, almost as if she were underwater. She could still breathe, but it felt thick, and was more difficult than normal. She waved her arm around to try and gauge how much resistance there would be. It didn't seem as dense as normal water, but it certainly wasn't air. She tried jumping straight up. She seemed to float down slowly, landing with little impact.

She sat back down, satisfied with what she learned, wondering how much time she had killed in the process. Probably only a minute or two. She thought, annoyed at herself. Why did this happen to me? What am I doing here?

Frustrated at her inability to answer those questions she began digging in the sand. As she dug she found more of the rocky white corals that littered the surface of the platform. The deeper she went the smaller the pieces became. She dug and dug, wondering if she would ever find an end to the sand, if there was something underneath holding it all up. She became so focused that she didn't even sense the tendril until it had already grabbed and pulled her out of her hole.

Two other tendrils smoothed the sand over and filled the hold back in, instantly destroying all of her work.

"Ah! No! I worked so hard!"

"It's all sand. There's nothing else." Said the woman, finally appearing in the light to the girl.

"So you've finally revealed your face to me! Know well that I have since gained a deep understanding of my surroundings and thus have the upper hand!" Said the girl, still held ten feet off the ground by the tendril.

The woman considered her briefly before asking. "Earlier you threatened me with a legion of souls. Why did you say that?"

"Because I wanted to threaten you!"

"No, why did you say the words 'ten thousand souls'?"

"Because... It sounds threatening... I think." The girl's face crinkled up as she also began to wonder, why did I say that?

"Where are you from?" Asked the woman.

"I... I don't... it doesn't matter! Now release me or face the-" The tendril dropped the girl back onto the sand. She looked back and saw it retreat below the platform. She turned back toward the woman to see her move backwards into the shadows, as if being pulled by something.

"Wait! Don't go!"

The woman slowly reappeared at the edge of the light. "What do you want?"

"I've answered your questions, so answer mine!"

The woman began to retreat again into the shadows.

The girl called after her. "What is this place?"

A response from the dark.

"Hell."

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The girl was digging in the sand again. She did hear what the woman had said, It's all sand. There's nothing else, but she had gotten bored enough that it didn't matter.

Days, or maybe weeks had passed since then. It was hard to keep track of time without a day and night cycle. She found herself killing time by digging, counting the corals, smoothing out

and drawing patterns in the sand, and watching the little creatures that would occasionally crawl up from the edge of the platform.

It was horrible.

She sat atop the mound of sand she had piled up, staring at the distant outlines of something way out in the void. It was so far away it was almost imperceptible.

Her concentration was disrupted by the sound of something landing softly on the sand behind her. She looked and saw a man was sitting near the center of the platform.

She scrambled down the hill of sand toward the man. "Hello? Who are you? How did you get you?"

She ran to his front to see his face. He sat hunched to one side, staring vacantly forward, expression blank.

"Hello..?"

He was old and weathered. He had a long beard and wrinkles all across his face. She looked at him and his empty eyes. She put her hand on his shoulder and gently shook him.

She continued to consider him for a moment, until her concentration was broken when she was picked up by a tendril and pulled out of the light.

She looked from afar at the platform and the circle of light, watching as other tendrils pushed the sand back into the hole.

"My!.. sand..."

The woman floated up from below and positioned herself in front of the man, still in the dark. The girl yelled at the woman. "What is happening!? Why were you gone for so long? Who is th-" a tendril wrapped around her mouth.

Unable to speak, she watched as a slithering stream of glowing light swam down from high above into the back of the man's head.

Two moments later his face lit up with confusion. "Where is this? What happened to my..." The woman moved into the light. "Fret not, aged one, there is nothing to fear anymore."

"Am I... Have I died?" Said the old man, voice falling.

"I'm afraid so, dear one. But death is not an end, it is the start of a new phase. You will see."
She had a smile on her face.

"Dear maiden, are you an angel? Come to guide me?" Said the old man, dazzled by her silver dress.

"I am as you wish me to be." She reassured him.

"So I was... Accepted by the gods? Praise be that I may be blessed to move on from one world to the next." He bowed on hands and knees, face against the sand. "But... my children, and the men on that ship... Are they ok?" He looked up. "We were all tossed so suddenly..." His face grew concerned, the woman could tell he was starting to panic.

"They are well, do not worry about them."

"How could I not worry, they're my... My children..." He choked on his words as his eye began to water.

The woman moved forward, one arm extended to help him up. "Everything will be ok, let me comfort you."

The old man put his hand on hers, then was pulled into an embrace. He breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "Thank you, Holy One."

"May your journey onward be blessed."

As the girl watched, she noticed for the first time how sweet and caring the woman sounded. She noticed as well her beauty and grace. The elegant silken gown, the long flowing blonde hair; her whole appearance was radiant. She thought for a moment she really could be an angel. But if she's an angel, why did she say this was hell? But she is so kind and affectionate toward that poor old man.

Just as she was beginning to convince herself that the woman may be benevolent after all, she saw a razor tendril appear from the shadows behind the man. It lined up exactly at the base of his skull, and deeply punctured his flesh. He went limp immediately, blood spewing from the wound. She watched in horror as he was sliced into two parts; upper half pulled off the edge, lower half left to the little crustaceans scurrying up from below.

The girl was brought back to the platform and released upon the sand. The woman once again retreated back toward the dark. "Why would you do that to him? He hadn't done anything wrong, had he?"

No response from the woman, who kept floating down below the platform.

"I know who you are!" Yelled the girl. The woman stopped her descent, the girl went on. "You're a Guardian, and this place is a Waystation." The woman reappeared in the light, her expression cold, but the girl continued. "I remembered just now, after seeing what you did to him. The punishment for breaking one of the Tenants is to be sawn asunder. And you, being a Guardian, have the ability to tell when a person has broken a Tenant, and thus the authority to administer the punishment."

"Have you remembered anything else, girl?"

"Well, nothing too important... My alias..." She seemed embarrassed as she said these words.

"An alias? Not a name?"

"No, I don't remember what my real name is, I think it's been a long time since I've been called it. But I believe that I have been known as Anna for a long time."

The woman looked at the girl, at Anna, trying to estimate her. "And you still don't know who you are or where you're from?"

"...No."

"Well, Anna, I suggest you get to know yourself a little better before you try to tell me who I am." With that, the woman began retreating to below the platform again.

"But that I do remember! I've been to Waystations many times; I've met your kind before!"

Before she vanished completely the woman replied from the shadows. "No, you haven't. I said it before, this is Hell, and I am the Devil."