To travel to the Great Below was to traverse a path of no return.
It was a known tale, one that every mother told her child. A tale of caution shared amongst one's brethren, a wise old saying that prevented men of spirit from undertaking journeys that would consume their very souls.
Such tales meant nothing to her. Caution, after all, was merely an excuse. One used by vermin when faced with that which transcended them.
For this was the domain of the Underworld. The Blackness of the Grave. Her sister's dominion.
Turns out…those mothers?
They had it right.

Inanna was bound in chains.

Three sets of shadow-forged metal entwined her waist, the cold, poisonous links tearing into her flesh. They pried at her back and kept her upright while the collar around her neck constantly pulled her head down. Four more chains wrung around her wrist and ankles, holding her spread-eagled, leaving her breasts to dangle freely as she hung in midair.

All the while, countless spectators—denizens of the Great Below, fallen gods, creatures of the night and the grave, and even wraiths whose names had been lost to time—gathered around to watch her heinous degradation. Jackals howling at the sight of a wounded lioness.

"I do hope you are enjoying the royal treatment, dear sister."

Inanna raised her head, ignoring the accursed metal that dug into her neck. Her shadowed eyes took in the audience, feasting upon their hesitant features as her gaze passed over them. *Vermin.* Even in this state, she made them cower in fear of her.

It made her smile.

She glanced up at the towering spine of basalt that rose like a cruel peak, with a magnificent throne of bones at the top. Seated upon it was a tall, willowy woman wearing robes of pitch black belted with joined fragments of bone. A tall crown of more bones rested upon her head, framed by white hair that spilled over her shoulders. Distant and cold, she looked as lovely and merciless as moonlit snow.

Ereshkigal. Empress of the Dead. Queen of the Great Below.

Her eyes were illusion. Her touch, death.

And yet, Inanna thought, *merely an imitation.* A soft chuckle escaped her throat.

"Laughing, are you?" the empress's voice boomed from her throne, throaty and suggestive. "Even in such a state, you think yourself my better?"

"I *am* your better, Ereshkigal," Inanna softly chided, as if talking to a slow child. "But then, you have always known that. Have you not, little sister?"

The Empress of the Dead stood up from her throne, her robes billowing in the harsh winds of the Underworld. At once, every single entity in the chamber knelt, their heads bowed in quiet reverence. Inanna felt her legs being pulled on either side. Yet, not a single sound escaped her throat. Her sister's righteous fury was met with casual indifference.

The message was sent. Silent, but loud and clear.

Ereshkigal heard it all too well.

You will not break me.

"Enough," the empress rumbled. The monsters of the night near her drew back, leaving nothing between the dangling Inanna and the Stone Table beneath her. A single golden chain erupted out of the polished surface, its tip spearing into her navel. Precious, crimson lifeblood oozed down the chain into the table below, and the sigils on its surface glowed with maleficent power.

Inanna glanced down at the construction—no, *conduit*. One that dragged everything from the victim and gave it to…something else. But what? She could not say. If she'd had her pendant with her, she could have read its Truths, seen its concept of creation.

The golden chain pulled, and Inanna fell spread-eagled upon the table, her jaw dislocated from the fall.

She looked like a wasted slave.

Debased.

Demeaned.

Gleeful laughter rang in her ears. The squealers and climbers howled like mad dogs at her disgrace. The specters soon showed their conceited joy, joined by hordes of fallen gods, bestial abominations that lived on as symbionts, and other existences she had slain with her bare hands.

They will pay for it, Inanna promised. *Over and over.*

“How the mighty have fallen!” Ereshkigal declared. “Supreme Queen of An and Ki. Daughter of the stars themselves! Destroyer of civilizations and plunderer of pantheons! How does it feel to be reviled by so many?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe, sweet sister,” Inanna replied, licking her lips. Her thin smile could pierce through solid stone. “I could have you fucked on all fours for weeks on end and you would not feel what I feel.” Her eyes shone with mirth. “Orgasmic, I tell you.”

That sparked a reaction. Not from her sister, but from a worthless vermin. Another rabisu, one of the rabid spirits that followed her sister, leaped up on the pedestal and drove a spear through her shoulder.

“Do not insult our queen!” it snarled, its tentacular maw quivering.

“Step away,” Ereshkigal ordered, walking down the hill of basalt. With a flick of her fingers, the spear disintegrated, though the injury remained fresh.

Still the same. She could never stand anyone else being so close to me.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sudden pull on her neck. She was thrown atop the Stone Table, a painful mix of blood and drool dripping from the corners of her lips as she rested upon her injured knees and palms.

Like a dog.

“You were saying?” her younger sister offered, her head slightly tilted. She always did have the best expressions. Even now, as Ereshkigal stood tall, Inanna noticed the slight whitening of her sister’s knuckles. It reminded her of back then, at—

Inanna drew in a rusty, painful breath. The constant drain of her life blood was affecting her. Her mind ran in odd directions. Splotches of darkness began to invade her sight.

“I was saying that it is the prerogative of vermin, Ereshkigal,” she continued, uncaring of the slow tightening of the chains binding her. “To stand in a herd, untrusting of one’s own might, acting in unison against an opponent like a pack of angry dogs. Barking is something you are intimately familiar with, after all.”

The chains constricted further.

Her smile only widened.

“Do not fool yourself. You did not force me down here. You are nothing but a filthy thief of power, a snake priding herself on collecting the scraps I discarded on my path to power. A

back-biting coward who assembles has-beens and hustlers, standing on my shoulders and calling herself tall."

"And yet, chains can be forged," Ereshkigal softly, but firmly, replied. "And clearly, predators can be bound. Call me a backstabber. Call me a traitor. But today, I will see to it that justice prevails."

Inanna began to laugh. She laughed and laughed and *laughed* at the sheer hilarity, at the hypocrisy of it all. "Justice?" she spat. "Is that what they call it these days? Very well, begin this farce! Make me stand in judgment of my many grievous sins."

The collar around her neck was yanked to the right by an unseen force, compelling her to look upon the hordes of rabisu. Their fangs were bared, bodily fluids dripping from their maws as they gazed upon her with hunger.

"Do you remember them? Priests of the fallen god Marduk. You tore him apart, obliterated his kingdom, usurped his Truths. You violated all that these people held dear, even their right to exist."

"And what of it?" Inanna demanded. "When titans clash, the grass will suffer."

Ereshkigal stiffened. "As my parents did?"

Inanna's expression twisted into a sneer.

"Why did you do it?" A slight tremor entered the empress's voice. "Why did you spare me? Train me to fight? What—what was I to you? Nothing more than a *puppet* to entertain yourself?"

"Precisely." Inanna grinned. "I took you in. I made you everything you are today, Empress of the Dead. Perhaps I should have left you there, lying in that ditch."

"But why?" Ereshkigal repeated. "Why even bother? Why not just kill us? Why make us the way we are? We stood by you through every trial imaginable. We faced gods for you. Yet you treat us like slaves. You took away everything I valued! My parents. My husband. *Everything.* You made me suffer alone." She staggered forward. "Why?!"

"Why do you pick flowers?" Inanna asked mockingly. "Everything I did, it was simply because I could. You may have me in chains, but do not pretend, *girl.* Killing me is a feat beyond your ability."

Ereshkigal recoiled.

“There exists no curse that can taint me, nothing sacred I cannot violate. You seek my remorse, yet I have none to share. Try me, Ereshkigal. I am willing,” Inanna said. “You may steal my power. Bind me away in the depths of the Underworld. Tear me down for the rabble to feed on.” Her voice lowered to an icy whisper. “But you will never get what you truly want. You will never. Become. Me.”

“I have already become you!” her sister roared. “Do not forget which of us sits on a throne, while the other lies defeated, shackled by chains.”

“Come, now. Even you cannot be so deluded as to believe your chains will hold me forever.” Inanna’s shackles clinked, as if acknowledging her words. “And without your trickery or your bindings, do you truly think you can face me?” Inanna swiveled her head to stare at her audience. “I *will* tear my way out of this prison and destroy everything you hold dear. Your power, your Truths, your sacred relics—I will take everything. And upon the hill of your corpses, I will build a new world. Those by my side will become the new gods.”

She looked toward Neti, the gatekeeper of the Underworld, who flinched away.

“And if you are foolish enough to not fear my vengeance, ask yourself this.” She pulled at her chains. “Who does? Who is the weakest? The most afraid? Who will break first? Is there still time for it to be you?”

Uncertain, hesitant eyes glanced around the room. Quite a few stepped back. Some even fell to their knees.

“Kill everything that moved!” came the order, cold and unforgiving. The rabisu leaped upon the hapless crows and tore the offenders to pieces before they could plead for mercy.

Utter silence shocked the chamber.

“Now then.” Ereshkigal darkly smiled, her icy blue eyes gleaming. “Who else is willing to stand by my sister?”

Inanna could not help herself. She chuckled. “To think you would learn to use fear as a weapon now of all times. Even in your betrayal, you find ways to emulate me. You make me proud.”

The Empress of the Dead strode forward, her robes smoothly gliding across the stone floor. Inanna stared back at her, devoid of hatred, allowing her younger sister to see a defiant, uncaring queen. The tables were turned against her, but she would prevail. She had done so in the past several times.

This would be no different.

Ereshkigal's right hand came up and caressed Inanna's bloodied cheek. It felt warm, familial, and welcoming. "In my heart of hearts, I knew this would not work," she lamented. "Agony does not faze you. Death does not frighten you. You will never succumb to mortal wounds. But you raise a fair point."

She gently cupped Inanna's chin.

"The Supreme Queen cannot die. But she can suffer."

Suddenly, the chains binding Inanna disappeared, and she weakly fell onto the floor like a sack of flesh. Ereshkigal swooped down and lifted her head up by the neck. She brought Inanna's face close to her own, until she was able to whisper in her ears.

"You were right. You made me what I am. You are my Creator. And for that…I will always respect you. And now, I will take your place."

And the Underworld *changed*.

A massive stone archway rose out of the ground like an eerie tombstone. Even through the red haze of her vision, Inanna could not miss the sigils engraved upon it, glowing with a bright, silvery sheen.

And there were six others behind it, forming a long, narrow passage for someone to walk through.

"Welcome, sister," Ereshkigal's voice boomed, "to the Seven Gates of the Underworld!"

Seven gates. Seven archways. The edifices standing before her were the gates that drew the line between the living and the dead. Each Gate held authority over one of the seven fundamental tenets of existence itself. Passing through them would mean an absolute suppression of each one.

This was no judgment. It was an eternal prison. A manifestation of isolationism in its truest form. An existence neither alive nor dead. The soul would remain, but all else would fade.

For the first time since she entered the Underworld, Inanna felt her heart tremble.

"YOU, WHO HAVE ALWAYS TAKEN, SHALL FEEL WHAT IT MEANS TO BE DEPRIVED."

As Ereshkigal's voice echoed around her, Inanna felt an unseen might drag her to her feet. Chains, unseen and unbreakable, formed around her fists, her waist, her ankles, and her neck, unhurriedly dragging her through the First Gate.

The Trap of Opulence, Inanna quietly recognized. Everything that was her and hers would stay. Everything that was not, ceased to be hers. Her blazing connection to the divine Ax of Marduk faded. Her opal ring, the symbol of her victory over the Goddess of the Night, slid down her finger. Her necklace and her divine bracelets, smidgens of Truth that once belonged to Gula, now dropped onto the floor.

"MY HUSBAND WAS LOST TO YOUR UNABATED LUSTS. LIVE AN ETERNITY BEREFT OF THEM."

The Second Gate, the Trap of Passion, tore at her sacral knot. Once the Goddess of Desire, Inanna would no longer feel pleasure. Her body shriveled like a prune and her breasts sagged. Her cheeks wrinkled as every bit of her sensuality and charm faded away, leaving a twisted, ugly caricature of herself behind. One that would forever be unable to feel another's touch.

"WARS HAVE FOLLOWED YOUR FOOTSTEPS. CIVILIZATIONS BURNED AND LIVES TORN APART, ALL FOR YOUR PRIDE. FOREVER LOSE YOUR DOMINANCE AND CONVICTION."

The Trap of Self-Esteem revoked her authority as the Monarch of the Heavens. Her golden crown appeared in an earthen heap on the floor as she was flung through the Third Gate. No longer would she hold the title of queen.

"YOU WHO HAVE COMMANDED LEGIONS TO BRING FORTH DESTRUCTION SHALL BE CURSED WITH ETERNAL SILENCE."

Her lips were sealed together, not allowing even the slightest murmur to escape as the chains dragged her through the Fourth Gate: the Trap of Expression.

"YOUR MIGHT RISES WITH FEAR. BE ISOLATED FROM ALL EXISTENCE. YOUR THRONE, YOUR RELICS, YOUR TEMPLES, YOUR WORSHIPPERS. MAY YOUR FAITH BE ENTIRELY LOST."

The Fifth Gate, the Trap of Connectivity, untethered the memories of her temples and the collective faith of her worshippers. Once aware of everything on Heaven and Earth, Inanna could no longer see past the archway that stood before her.

"QUEEN. CONQUEROR. PLUNDERER. YOU WHO CONSIDER YOURSELF ABOVE ALL ELSE SHALL BREED NO THOUGHT. LIVE AS WOULD A PEBBLE."

Inanna turned around, her dry, parched lips wanting to speak to her sister. To explain, to—

To do what?

She no longer knew as she was dragged through the Trap of—

Of—

"LET THE MEMORIES OF THE RUTHLESS GODDESS FADE AWAY. LET HER DOMAIN BE BURIED IN TIME. NO LONGER SHALL YOU BE ONE OF US. I CAST YOU…OUT!"

Inanna trembled before the Seventh and final Gate's power as it drank from her very soul, etching upon it a curse that marked her as a denizen of the Underworld. The world above lost its meaning to her, as she dropped like a marionette with its strings severed.

Naked and unmoving, she lay on the cold floor. Her glassy eyes stared lifelessly ahead at her sister, a single tear trickling down her cheek.

"Always remember, dear sister," Ereshkigal murmured fondly. "Whatever I do, I do for love."

She flicked her hand, and Inanna's limp body was carelessly tossed against the wall. At the last moment, a rocky spike erupted outwards, piercing her through the chest.

Straight through her heart.