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The gold light parted, showing a stairway of pure white marble, hundreds of feet wide and shallow, easy to climb. To the left, endless clouds, laced with flowing gold waves that dripped and poured over puffy edges that looked more like cotton pads than clouds. To the right, same thing.

They weren't alone. Other naked people walked up the stairs, eyes wide and looking around, struck with awe, same as the two of them. No one cared about the nudity. Everyone was too mesmerized, confused, and being drawn in by the warmth that told them to go up the stairs. Up, and up, to the giant golden gates waiting for them.

David and Mia both looked up and froze.

It was Heaven. The stairs, the clouds, the gold gates, yeah sure that definitely painted the image of Heaven, but it was the colossal floating islands above that convinced him. Enormous islands, hovering, the undersides titanic planes of cloud, topped with gold cities. Even from miles and miles away, he could tell they were giant, big enough to house millions and millions of people. www.loveelw.com

Mia squeezed his hand, and they walked up the stairs more. It looked like there were thousands upon thousands of steps ahead of them, but each step they took somehow took them up a thousand steps seamlessly. It'd take them no time at all to reach the golden gates at the top.

Mia stopped, forcing David to stop on the next step.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, I just... Sir!" Mia waved a hand at two people walking up next to them. "Hey, you look like you speak English."

The man was definitely an older gent, probably in his eighties, likely dead to old age or cancer. He smiled at Mia, and to his credit, he didn't even glance down at her naked body. No one cared about anyone's nudity here. No one could, with the gold aura flowing down the stairs filling everyone -- David assumed -- with the strange warmth that told them to relax, and be welcome.

"Yes young lady?"

"Hi, hi... hi. I um, I just... wanted to know if you know anything... about this?" She gestured around at the endless clouds, the floating islands in the distance, and the golden gate at the top of the stairs.

The man blinked at her, before donning a warm smile.

"Lady, my legs feel good."

"I'm sorry?"

"My legs." He gave his old, brittle-looking legs a slap. "My legs feel good! I spent the past ten years unable to walk. Legs couldn't take it. But I'm walking now. I feel good, now. What possible reason could there be for an old fart like me, to be walking up some white stairs, surrounded by white clouds, with golden mist pouring over us?"

"We're dead."

He shook his head. "Seems to me like we're just heading into a new phase of life. A pretty good one, by the feel of it." With a playful, classic, silently wise pat on her shoulder, the old man winked, and started up the stairs again. www.novelist.com

"Was that necessary?" David asked her.

"Just doing what you do. Gathering intel."

"I uh, I think even I'm satisfied, Mia. We're walking up the stairway to Heaven."

She groaned and ran her fingers through her long red hair. "So much for being an atheist."

He chuckled. Much as he tried to make it sound natural, it sounded nervous as hell, and he held out his hand again for her. No way he was walking up these stairs without his sister.

She took it.

The closer they got to the top, the more things came into view, distant objects growing sharper, and more people joined them on the stairs. People faded into view calmly and smoothly, never a jump scare, even when someone faded into view right in front or beside him. More, and more people, until at least a thousand surrounded them.

David hated crowds, and he knew Mia did, too. Maybe not as much as him, but the two of them avoided crowds like the plague. This didn't feel like a crowd. Everyone around him was someone, someone he could care for, someone he could love, someone he could ignore or walk away from if desired and not be bothered or judged for it. There were no strangers here. The glowing light told him everyone here was trustworthy, and there was no need for the mental barriers he usually put up to guard himself from others and their words.

One look at Mia told him she was feeling the same thing. No one, including them, tried to avoid touching shoulders with the others as they climbed the stairs. It didn't feel bad, or weird or strange or cringe, to suddenly touch skin on skin with the strangers they walked with. No one minded. www.novelist.com

There were plenty of young people, some way too young, but most of the people on the stairs were old. Everyone was smiling. The kids didn't seem to understand the gravity of what was happening, and many ran up the stairs giggling and hopping around. The elderly definitely understood, and they giggled and hopped around, too, many standing up straighter than necessary, just because they could, for the first time in a long time; they couldn't help but tell David that as they walked past. www.novelist.com

David looked up again, to the sky. Or were they above the sky, looking up into space? That didn't make any sense. Heaven or whatever this place was wasn't a physical location in the universe, right? And yet, they were surrounded by clouds, with more below them than above. The higher they climbed the stairs, the more they left the clouds behind, and the more the endless sky of the cosmos revealed itself.

Except, it wasn't a sky he recognized.

"What the fuck," Mia whispered, staring up.

"Yeah."

The giant floating islands still blocked a lot of his view, along with other clouds higher up, but much of the sky opened as they climbed, and showed distant stars. And nebulae. And swirling galaxies. It looked less like outer space, and more like an artist's representation of it, exaggerated and alive with motion. Like, having the aurora borealis in your kitchen.

"Wow," Mia said.

"Yeah."

They continued. As much as the floating islands and their gold cities, and the cosmic infinite above were hypnotizing, the golden gates ahead of them grew closer and closer. And they were huge. He'd thought they might have been fifty feet high at a distance, but as they got closer, he had to change his guess to five hundred feet, and more. Towering gates of gold, vertical bars thicker than skyscrapers and reaching just as high. The closer they got, the more details came in, ornate carvings on the giant metal, letters or maybe runes he didn't recognize. And thousands upon thousands of statues and carvings in the metal, too, angel wings and shields and swords, arranged in symmetrical patterns on the glorious display.