

## 1060

Black spikes pointed toward the tunnel's center, accepting David and Mia like the mouth of a lamprey, but the walls spread out the further they fell, until the spikes and the screaming bodies between them couldn't reach her. Mia screamed again as movement finally drew her eyes away from the red and black below, to another body beside her. Another falling body, an old woman, emaciated and screeching. More joined them, young, old, phasing into existence below and above Mia, all of them naked, all of them wailing like banshees.

David pulled Mia in closer.

"Hold on," he yelled. He'd stopped screaming. She managed to look at him, almost expecting to see his face suddenly valiant with newfound courage. No. He was horrified. His eyes were just as wide as the people growing out of the walls and its teeth, and despite the hurricane winds crashing against her, she could feel his body trembling in her grip.

More and more people surrounded them. No children. Everyone who joined Mia and David, plummeting into the endless darkness and encroaching fire, was an adult. Somehow in the insanity, that's what her mind latched onto, that everyone who fell with her was as old or older than her. A lot of people, a lot of old people, falling into oblivion.

The tunnel opened wider and wider, and more people joined them, until at least a couple hundred souls surrounded Mia and David. The deeper they fell into the dark tunnel, the louder it got, the distant walls and their screams disappearing underneath a groaning howl that turned into a roar. She'd heard that roar before, in movies, when people worked an oversized furnace melting metal and burning wood.

The blackness disappeared in an explosion of fire, and everything erupted in amber light. The walls weren't just rock, spikes, and screaming bodies reaching out for them anymore. The walls were on fire, and dripping with something her eyes told her was lava. It made no sense. None of this made any sense.

Fire and scorching heat flicked against her skin, burning, making her eyes want to close. But she couldn't close them. They were just as petrified as the rest of her.

A gate waited below them, a giant circle of black metal. The closer they grew, the more colossal its size became, like the gates of Heaven, too big to wrap her mind around. Stone, metal, a huge circle at the end of the tunnel lined with a million skulls, each bleeding from their empty eye sockets.

She wanted to scream again, but all she could do was cry. Paralyzing waves of roaring bass vibrated through her as she passed through the titanic ring of metal and death, into an endlessness of swirling red.

Fire. They were falling into fire. She pulled David in closer until they were half hugging each other, half staring down into the flames that surrounded them. It burned, but it didn't burn away the skin, not close enough to set her on fire. And the roaring wind sizzled and crackled, like she'd stuck her head in a bonfire.

She managed to look up. The ring of metal hovered in the sky, and more people fell through it, tiny dots compared to the huge circle. Hundreds. Thousands, falling through the ring into the fire and air below, all of them screaming like a tortured choir.

Below her, the fire broke away, and she sucked in a breath as ground came into view. They weren't going to fall for forever. The ground was going to catch them, and end everything.

The ring above closed with a roaring shriek, shrinking on itself before vanishing in an explosion of swirling red that blended into the sky of flame. A tunnel of stone, metal, blood, and screaming bodies, had opened up, pulled David and Mia out from the gates of Heaven, and dropped them off in fire and misery. It'd dropped them off in Hell.

The wind no longer burned, and she found enough air to breathe normally as she free-fell toward the red world below. The portal hadn't opened up high enough for her to see the whole land, and the literally burning sky had blocked a lot of her view, but whatever land they were about to land on and splatter into a stain against, seemed to be a giant island, surrounded by a red ocean. Mountains of dark rock dotted the nearby landscape, jagged and cruel, many of them erupting with splatters of glowing amber; more lava. Lines of red cut through the land like veins. Red rivers?

She managed to tear her eyes away from the land coming up underneath her, and looked out to the distance. It wasn't a normal island. There was something in the center, water, but dark instead of red, a sea in the middle of the land. The land changed the further she looked out, a lot. In one direction around the donut island, the land turned black and the giant mountains tapered off. Past that, a giant white mountain cut through the land, covered in smooth bumps and ridges some part of her brain told her was bone the size of cities, but that wasn't possible. In the other direction, the land cut deep into itself, turning dark like the other side, before breaking way into a ravine that made the Grand Canyon look tiny. And again, something about it looked all too much like flesh and skin.

David's squeezing hand yanked her attention back to the ground that was going to kill her. They were falling toward one of the red rivers that cut between the jagged mountains, but even if they landed in the water, or blood if that's what it was, they'd still die instantly. If that was something they could even do in Hell. The long fall was giving her more than enough time to imagine the endless, eternal tortures that waited for her. Dying would be a mercy.

"We're slowing down!" he yelled.

"What!?"

"We're slowing down!" He gestured out with his free hand to the distant mountains. He was right. Their sharp tips and amber veins passed more and more slowly, and the air smashing into their naked skin eventually softened to a harsh wind. Eventually she could look around without losing everything under the blurs of tears.

What were those things, moving below? Tiny red and black dots getting closer and closer.

The red water below was still coming up to greet them though, and from the screams of the other people hitting the surface, it wasn't gentle. She looked to David, and he pulled her into him, hard. Before she could understand, David wrapped his arms around her, pinned her chest against his chest, and rolled.

Impact. Wet. Her eyes closed in reflex as the red water swallowed her and David, and her body screamed with the sudden stop. They had slowed before impact, but that didn't stop it from feeling like she'd slammed her head into an airbag after driving her car off a bridge into a river.

No, not an airbag. David's chest. He'd protected her from the impact.

Once the red water swallowed them, David let go.

She tried to scream his name, but the warm water flooded her mouth. She tried to squeeze his hand, but it was gone. She swung her hands out aimlessly in the water, trying to find him. He was gone.

Her head broke through the surface, and she screamed out as she looked around.

"David! David! Dav--"

Roaring and shrieking buried her face, and she snapped her head about as splashing water erupted around her. The water moved slowly, but it churned in a mess as hundreds of bodies fell in the river. She ducked under the water as more souls crashed into the red, and she swam toward the closest shore. If she stayed, she'd get crushed. She had to get to the shore and find David.

Once her feet found shallow water and she managed to stand up, she froze again. Not all the roaring and shrieking had come from the other souls landing in the river. Some of it came from the demons rushing down toward her.

She didn't know how she knew they were demons so quickly. She should have been in shock. She probably was. But the creatures coming down to greet the new souls with evil smiles and sharp teeth were so obviously demons, she almost laughed. Many of them ran on raptor feet, others on hooves. Some of them had wings, most didn't. Most of them had giant black horns coming out of their black and red skin, some didn't. They were all sort of humanoid, but also not, some leaning forward and running more like dinosaurs out of Jurassic Park, complete with long tails. A few of them ran on all fours, but switched to two once they got in the water.

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