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KATABASIS

A NOVEL

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Dedication

To Bennett, brilliant, beloved

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Chapter One

For I deem that the true votary of philosophy is likely to be misunderstood by other men; they do not perceive that he is always pursuing death and dying; and if this be so, and he has had the desire of death all his life long, why when his time comes should he repine at that which he has been always pursuing and desiring?

PLATO, PHAEDO

Cambridge, Michaelmas Term, October. The wind bit, the sun hid, and on the first day of class, when she ought to have been lecturing undergraduates about the dangers of using the Cartesian severance spell to revise without pee breaks, Alice Law set out to rescue her advisor's soul from the Eight Courts of Hell.

It was a terrible gruesome accident that killed Professor Jacob Grimes, and from a certain point of view it was her fault, and so for reasons of both moral obligation and self-interest—for without Professor Grimes she had no committee chair, and without a committee chair she could not defend her dissertation, graduate, or apply successfully for a tenure-track job in analytic magick—Alice found it necessary to beg for his life back from King Yama the Merciful, Ruler of the Underworld.

This was no small undertaking. Over the past month she had become a self-taught expert in Tartarology, which was not one of her subfields. These days it was not *anyone's* subfield, as Tartarologists rarely survived to publish their work. Since Professor Grimes's demise she had spent her every waking moment reading every monograph, paper, and shred of correspondence she could find on the journey to Hell and back. At least a dozen scholars had made the trip and lived to credibly tell the tale, but very few in the past century. All existing sources were unreliable to different degrees and devilishly tricky to translate besides. Dante's account was so distracted with spiteful potshots that the reportage got lost within. T. S. Eliot had supplied some of the more recent and detailed landscape descriptions on record, but *The Waste Land* was so self-referential that its

status as a sojourner's account was under serious dispute. Orpheus's notes, already in archaic Greek, were largely in shreds like the rest of him. And Aeneas—well, that was all Roman propaganda. Possibly there were more accounts in lesser-known languages—Alice could have spent decades poring through the archives—but her funding clock could not wait. Her progress review loomed at the end of the term, and without a living and breathing advisor, the best Alice could hope for was an extension of funding sufficient to last until she transferred elsewhere and found a new advisor.

But she didn't want to transfer elsewhere, she wanted a Cambridge degree. And she didn't want any advisor, she wanted Professor Jacob Grimes, department chair, Nobel Prize laureate, and twice-elected president of the Royal Academy of Magick. She wanted the golden recommendation letter that opened every door. She wanted to be at the top of every pile. This meant Alice had to go to Hell, and she had to go today.

She checked and double-checked her chalk inscriptions. She always left the closing of the circle to the end, when she was absolutely sure that uttering, and thereby activating, the pentagram wouldn't kill her. One always had to be sure. Magick demanded precision. She glared at the neat white lines until they swam before her eyes. It was, she concluded, as good as it ever was going to be. Human minds were fallible, but hers less than most, and hers was now the only mind she could trust.

She gripped her chalk. One smooth stroke and the pentagram was finished.

She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

There was of course a price. No one traveled to Hell unscathed. But she'd resolved at the outset to pay it, for it seemed so trivial in the grand scheme of things. She only hoped it wouldn't hurt.

"What are you doing?"

She knew that voice. She knew, before she turned around, whom she would find at the door.

Peter Murdoch: coat unbuttoned; shirt untucked; papers flapping from his satchel, threatening to tear away in the wind. Alice had always resented how Peter, who every day presented like he'd barely scooped himself out of bed, had still managed to become the darling of the department. Though this was no surprise: academia respected discipline, rewarded effort, but even more, it adored genius that didn't have to try. Peter Murdoch and his bird's-nest hair, scarecrow limbs balanced atop a rickety bicycle, looked like he'd

never tried at anything in his life. He was simply born brilliant, all that knowledge poured by gods without spillage into his brain.

Alice couldn't stand him.

"Leave me alone," she said.

Peter trudged into her circle, which was very rude. One should always ask before entering another magician's pentagram. "I know what you're planning."

"No, you don't."

"Tsu's Basic Transportative Pentagram, with Setiya's Modifications," he said, which impressed Alice, since he'd only glanced briefly at the ground, and from across the room besides. "Ramanujan's Summation with implications for the Casimir Effect to establish a psychic link to the target. Eight bars for eight courts." A grin split his face. "Alice Law, you naughty girl. You're trying to go to Hell."

"Well, if you know that much," Alice sniped, "you know there's only room for one of us."

Peter knelt, pushed his glasses up his nose, and with his own stick of chalk quickly etched some alterations into the pentagram. This was also very rude—one should always ask before altering another scholar's work. But standards of etiquette did not apply to Peter Murdoch. Peter moved through life with an obliviousness that, again, was excused only by his genius. Alice had witnessed Peter spill chocolate syrup all over the master of the college's robes at high table with no more rebuke than a shoulder clap and a laugh. When Peter erred it was cute. She had herself once spent all of dinner in the bathroom hyperventilating through her fingers because she'd knocked a bread basket onto the floor.

"One becomes two." Peter wagged his fingers. "Abracadabra. Now there's room."

Alice double-checked his inscriptions and realized to her dismay that his work was perfect. She would have preferred he'd made an error that left him limbless. And she would have truly preferred that he did not then declare, "I'm coming with you."

"No, you aren't."

Of all the people in Cambridge's Department of Analytic Magick, Peter Murdoch was the last person with whom she wanted to sojourn in the underworld. Perfect, brilliant, infuriating Peter, who won the department's top prizes at every milestone—Best First-Year Paper, Best Second-Year

Paper, Dean's Medals in logic and mathematics (which were Alice's worst subfields, to be fair, but until she came to Cambridge she was not used to losing). Peter was one of those academics descended from a family of academics, a magician born to a physicist and a biologist, which meant he'd been steeped in the ivory tower's unspoken rules since before he could walk. Peter already had every good thing in the world. He did not need Professor Grimes's letter to get a job.

Worst of all was how Peter was so unfailingly nice. Always stumbling around with that blithe smile on his face, always offering to help his colleagues puzzle through hiccups in their research, always asking everyone else in seminar how their weekend had been when he knew very well they'd spent it sobbing over proofs that he could have done in his sleep. Peter never crowed or condescended, he was just guilelessly *better than*, and that made everyone feel so much worse.

No, Alice wanted to solve this problem herself. She did not want Peter Murdoch yapping over her shoulder the entire time, nitpicking her pentagrams because he was just trying to be helpful. And, should she return with Professor Grimes's soul safely in tow, she especially did not want Peter sharing the credit.

"Hell's lonely," said Peter. "You'll want company."

"Hell is other people, I've heard."

"Very funny. Come on. You'll need help carrying supplies, at least."

Alice had stashed in her bag a brand-new Perpetual Flask (an enchanted water bottle that wouldn't run out for weeks) and Lembas Bread (stale, cardboard-y nutrition strips popular among graduate students because they took seconds to eat and kept one sated for hours. There was nothing enchanted about Lembas Bread; it was just the extracted protein of tons of peanuts and an ungodly percentage of sugar). She had flashlights, iodine, matches, rope, bandages, and a hypothermia blanket. She had a new, sparkling pack of Barkles' Chalk and every reliable map of Hell she could find in the university library carefully reproduced in a laminated binder. (Alas, they all claimed different topographies—she figured she would get somewhere high up and choose a map when she arrived.) She had a switchblade and two sharp hunting knives. And she had a volume of Proust, in case at night she ever got bored. (To be honest she had never gotten round to trying Proust, but Cambridge had made her the kind of person who

wanted to have read Proust, and she figured Hell was a good place to start.)
“I’m all set.”

“You’ll still need help puzzling through the courts,” Peter said. “Hell’s very metaphysically tricky, you know. Anscombe claims the constant spatial reorientations alone—”

Alice rolled her eyes. “Please don’t insinuate I’m not clever enough to go to Hell.”

“Do you have a copy of *Cleary’s*?”

“Of course.” Alice wouldn’t forget *Cleary’s Templates*. She didn’t forget anything.

“Have you cross-checked all twelve authoritative versions of Orpheus’s journey?”

“Of course I did Orpheus, it’s the obvious place to start—”

“Do you know how to cross the Lethe?”

“Please, Murdoch.”

“Do you know how to tame Cerberus?”

Alice hesitated. She knew this was a possible obstruction—she’d seen the threat of Cerberus mentioned in a letter from Dante to Bernardo Canaccio, only she hadn’t seen it referenced in any other materials she found, and the one book that might have contained a clue—Vandick’s *Dante and the Literal Inferno*—was already missing from the stacks.

In fact, quite a few books she needed had kept disappearing from the library these past few months, often checked out on the very morning she’d gone in. Every translation of the *Aeneid*. All the medieval scholarship on Lazarus. It was like some poltergeist haunted the stacks, anticipating her project’s every turn.

Realization dawned. “You’ve—”

“Been researching the same thing,” said Peter. “We’re too far into these degrees, Alice. No one else could supervise our dissertations. No one else is clever enough. And there’s still so much he hasn’t taught us. We have to bring him back. And two minds are better than one here.”

Alice had to laugh. All this time. Every empty slot on the shelves, every missing puzzle piece. It was Peter all along.

“Tell me how to tame Cerberus, then.”

“Nice try, Law.” Lightly, Peter punched her shoulder. “Come on. You know we’re always better together.”

Now this, Alice thought, was really laying it on thick.

He didn't mean it. She knew he didn't mean it because it was not true. It had not been true in well over a year, and that had been entirely Peter's choice. She recalled it well. So how could he act so chummy, toss those words out so casually, as if they were still first-years giggling in the lab, as if time had never passed?

But then, this was Peter's *modus operandi*. He was like this with everyone. All warmth and cheer—but the moment you tried to step closer, solid ground gave way to empty space.

Two bad options, then. Imperfect knowledge, or Peter. She supposed she could demand the relevant books—Peter was annoying, but he didn't hoard resources—and figure it all out on her own. But her funding clock was ticking, and certain body parts were rotting in a basement. There simply wasn't time.

"Fine," she said. "I hope you brought your own chalk."

"Two new packs of Shropley's," he said happily.

Yes, she knew he preferred Shropley's. Evidence of bad character. At least she wouldn't have to share.

She arranged her rucksack next to her feet, checking that none of the straps lay outside the pentagram. "Then all that's left is the incantation. Are you ready?"

"Hold on," said Peter. "You do know the price?"

Of course Alice knew. This was why scholars rarely ever went to Hell. It wasn't that getting there was so very *hard*. You only had to dig up all the right proofs and master them. It was that a trip down below rarely justified the price.

"Half my remaining lifespan," she said. Entering Hell meant crashing through borders between worlds, and this demanded a kind of organic energy that mere chalk could not contain. "Thirty years or so, gone. I know."

But she had hardly struggled with the choice. Would she rather graduate, produce brilliant research, and go out in a blaze of glory? Or would she rather live out her natural lifespan, gray haired and drooling, fading into irrelevance, consumed by regret? Had not Achilles chosen to die in battle? She had met professors emeriti at department receptions, those poor aphasic props, and she did not think old age an attractive prospect. She knew this choice would horrify anyone outside the academy. But no one outside the academy could possibly understand. She would sacrifice her

firstborn for a professorial post. She would sever a limb. She would give anything, so long as she still had her mind, so long as she could still think.

“I want to be a magician,” she said. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“I know,” said Peter. “Me too. And I—I need to do this. I must.”

A taut silence. Alice considered asking, but she knew Peter would not tell her. Peter, when it came to the personal, was a stone wall. How easily he vanished behind a placid smile.

“That’s settled, then.” Peter cleared his throat. “So maybe I’ll do the Latin, and you’ll do the Greek and Chinese.” He peered down at a segment near his right toe. “Say, why isn’t this in Sanskrit?”

“I’m not comfortable with Sanskrit,” Alice said, peeved. This was just like Peter. Condescending, even when ostensibly just asking for clarification. “I’ve done all the Buddhist sutra references in Classical Chinese instead.”

“Oh.” Peter hummed. “Well, that probably works. If you’re sure.”

She rolled her eyes. “In three, on go.”

“Right on.”

She counted down. “Go.”

And they began their chant.

THE DREADFUL, TRAGIC DEATH OF PROFESSOR Jacob Grimes had been both foreseeable and avoidable. It was also, unknown to most, entirely Alice’s fault.

That day’s exercise was nothing more risky nor radical than the thousands of routine experiments Professor Grimes had conducted in that laboratory space for decades. He was only retracing some basic principles of set theory cited in a new article he had coming out in *Arcana*, the top journal in their field. It was all utterly routine, and no more dangerous than riding a bike, so long as one double-checked their pentagrams. Undergraduate-level stuff.

Professor Grimes did not double-check his pentagrams. He’d long reached the stage of his career where one left that sort of grunt work to graduate students. Professor Grimes’s days were devoted to profound, deep *thinking*. He saw above the mountains and clouds to discern the truth, and then he descended to utter pronouncements like Moses coming down Mount Sinai, and then his underlings hammered out the details. He never

did his own arithmetic or translations anymore. And he was far above kneeling over tracing lines of chalk, straining his eyes, straining his back.

One might find it reckless, foolish even, for a magician to leave his life in the hands of underpaid and overworked graduate students. But for one thing, Professor Grimes's graduate students were the best in the world. For another, even graduate students at bottom-rate American institutions could identify the most dangerous mistakes in a pentagram. And this was Cambridge. After so many years of practice they stood out to any competent scholar like glaring red flags: gaps in the outer circles, misspelled words, false equivalencies, parentheses left unclosed. Anyone in a sound state of mind could have done it.

But Alice was not in a sound state of mind that day.

She was of course underpaid and overworked, but this condition was common among graduate students and no one cared much about it. But she had also not slept properly in three months. She'd drunk so much caffeine that the world shimmered, and her chalk trembled in her grip. She felt, as she often did, that her body had no defined boundaries from the material world; that if she stopped holding herself together as a subject, she would dissolve like a sugar cube in tea. She was in no state to work, and she had not been for a very long time. What Alice needed most then was a nice long holiday, and then perhaps institutionalization at some remote facility near the sea.

But missing lab was not an option. Professor Grimes had not asked her to assist on a paper since last year, and though the work was beneath her, and though coauthorship was out of the question, Alice was desperate to get back in his good graces.

Anyhow, tired to the point of collapse was a default state. The expectation was simply that, through some combination of strong coffee and Lembas Bread, one pushed through until all deadlines were met and one could collapse into an indefinite coma without consequence. Alice had spent most of graduate school in this state, and it was not so bad.

But she was also angry that afternoon, and resentful, and confused, and such a turbid mess of frustration and fury that the very sound of Professor Grimes's voice made her flinch. Perceiving his sheer physical proximity—sensing him move, kneeling in his shadow—made it hard to breathe. In the brief moments that their eyes met, her breath stopped, and she thought she might like to die.

It was very difficult to concentrate in such an environment.

So, when she drew the pentagrams, she did not close the requisite loops. With pentagrams, it was very important to close the requisite loops. Uttering incantations invoked the living-dead energy of chalk dust, and all that energy had an explosive effect unless contained properly within a defined space. Even the smallest hole could cause disaster. In fact, smaller holes were *worse*, as they concentrated all the energy to terrible effect. Therefore anyone who drew a pentagram performed what was known as the Ant Test: tracing a pencil tip from one point of the inscription all the way around to make sure any ant following the line would complete the journey.

Alice did not perform the Ant Test.

She did not, in effect, bother to ensure Professor Grimes's body remained intact.

It was the kind of mistake that could end careers. It would have, if anyone had seen Alice's name on the lab logs or known in any official capacity that she was assisting at all. There would have been an investigation. She would have been questioned before a board, forced to recount in painstaking detail her every last error while they deliberated over whether it was grounds for manslaughter or merely reckless endangerment. She would have lost her stipend, been booted from the program, been interrogated by the Royal Academy, and been barred from studying or practicing magick at any institution in the world, even the sketchy, nonaccredited ones overseas. All this if she did not go to prison.

But Professor Grimes did not generally credit his graduate students in his experiments. Assisting with his research, at the expense of their own, was simply an unspoken requirement of the program. No one knew, in any official capacity, that anyone was in that room on the day of the accident except for Professor Grimes. No one else saw when howling winds torn from infinite dimensions rushed into the pentagram. No one saw Professor Grimes's eyeballs stretch out of his face before popping like grapes; his intestines spooling out and around his body like a jump rope, crisscross applesauce; his mouth twisting in a soundless scream. No one saw Professor Grimes's body turn upside-down and spin for seven horrible cycles, exposed organs rippling, before flying apart in all directions, splattering every surface with blood and bone and guts. No one saw his brains on the chalkboard; the toothy jaw fragment landing plop into his afternoon cup of Darjeeling.

And no one saw Alice strip naked in the lab shower, scrub herself clean, throw her clothes in the incinerator, and hurry out the back door, dressed in clothes from the overnight bag she always kept at the lab. No one saw her flee in the early hours across campus back to her room in the college, where she stripped down for a second shower and alternated vomiting and crying until she fell asleep.

For all anyone knew, the first anyone heard of Professor Grimes's death was the janitor's screaming the next morning.

By then the blood and bits had ruined the pentagram, and all the chalk was smudged with gore, so that no one could discern precisely what had gone wrong. A piece of Professor Grimes later identified as his liver had, happily, landed square on that segment of the outer circle Alice had fudged. They could only conclude it was a terrible accident, one only waiting to befall the most brazen thinker of his time, and stop the investigations there.

Somehow, University Cleaning Services scooped together enough remains to fill a bucket, which were then transferred into a coffin. The college held a service. The department maintained a state of mourning for a week, during which all the students and faculty were forced to attend mandatory safety workshops run by colleagues bused in from Oxford, who with every sneering comment made it clear that *they* never would have been so foolish as to let a researcher explode himself all over a lab. Professor Grimes's nameplate was removed from his office door. His graduate seminar was reassigned to a poor postdoc who understood less of the material than the students did. The city papers printed some stuff about what a great loss this was—to Cambridge, to the discipline, to the world. And then the summer ended and everyone moved on. Except Alice.

She could have kept her mouth shut and gotten on with it. The university would have supported her to the end of her studies. Cambridge's Department of Analytic Magick was very proud of its high graduation rate, and the faculty would have dragged Alice across the finish line, one way or another, even if this meant lending her out for several years to their rivals at Oxford.

But Professor Grimes was the most influential analytic magician in England, and probably the world. Half the department chairs in the field were his close friends, and the other half were so frightened of him they would do anything he said. All of Professor Grimes's previous advisees had gone on to tenured jobs at top-tier programs—the ones who graduated,

anyhow. One recommendation letter from Professor Grimes as good as secured a post anywhere his students applied.

Good jobs were vanishingly rare in academia. Alice very much wanted one. She wouldn't know what to do with herself otherwise. She had trained her entire life to do this one thing, and if she could not do it, then she had no reason to live.

So the next morning after Professor Grimes's death, once his body was discovered and all the dust had settled, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to begin researching ways to go to Hell.

PETER HAD A VERY NICE SPELL-BINDING voice. Alice had always resented this about him, how his voice made hers seem reedy in comparison. She found it particularly disgruntling given how incongruous it was with his stick-thin frame. It seemed unfair such a rich sound could come from that stubbly goose throat. Every now and then a research paper surfaced on why male voices were better suited for magick, citing reasons of pitch, depth, or steadiness, and they always sparked a big hubbub involving outraged statements from women-in-magick societies and apologetic statements from journal editorial boards. Alas, no one had managed to conclusively prove these studies false. Unfortunately, Alice suspected the papers were right, and at this moment she was grateful. Peter's confidence made her confident in turn, and she found herself lulled along by his smooth, reassuring rumble.

"The target defined as Professor Jacob Grimes," they intoned in unison. "The destination defined as Hell, or the afterlife, or the Eight Courts, or the domain of Lord Yama the Merciful."

They finished. Nothing happened. A second passed, then several. Then a freeze suffused the room, a creeping chill from nowhere that cut straight into their bones. Alice shuddered.

"Hand?" Peter offered his palm.

She slapped it away. "Shush."

"Sorry." Peter's hand hung in the air for a moment before he pulled it back, and Alice realized belatedly he might have been asking her to hold *his*.

But it was too late. White light flared up from the lines of chalk, forming a silo around them. The lab room vanished. A great rumbling filled the air. Alice reached for Peter's arm—only for balance, mind—but the

ground lurched violently, and she toppled over onto her bum. For a moment she could see nothing, hear nothing over the roaring column. She felt a hooking sensation in her chest—not painful, only *sharp*, like some ghostly hand had reached in and yanked her heart out from between her ribs. The pressure was overwhelming. She could not breathe. She curled in on herself, hoping desperately she hadn't fallen out of the pentagram. The rumble grew and the light brightened to a blinding white, burning through her eyelids. Visions of apocalypse exploded in her mind's eye, oceans of blood beneath tongues of fire, planets collapsing into black holes, and for a brief, terrifying moment she was lost in the eruption, she forgot who she was—

She scrambled for her catechisms.

I am Alice Law I am a postgraduate at Cambridge I study analytic magick—

The light faded. The rumbling ceased.

Blinking, Alice turned her hands over before her eyes. She felt fine. Her skin was coated with a thin layer of ash, so that she looked dyed in gray, but it brushed away easily enough. She patted her chest. Her heart was in place. Her limbs were intact. Her entrails still stacked neatly inside her. If the price was paid, she couldn't feel it. All she felt then was a wild, burning elation. It had worked, she had done it, it worked. Chalk, dirt, hours of research—and then one world slipped into another. She had wrought this. A miracle.

Peter stood up, coughing. He brushed an ash-covered clump of hair out of his eyes. “So this is Hell.”

Alice peered about in wonder. All around them were gray fields, endless plains under a dark red sky. A sun—*their* sun? a shadow, a twin?—hung low and ponderous, its light maddeningly dim. She breathed in deep. She had brought a cloth mask, in case the air reeked. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Greeks had named Hell *Aornos*, “the place that is birdless,” for none could fly over its foul breath. But the air smelled of nothing but dust, and the temperature was just this side of chilly. She'd expected more tortured screaming, sulfur, and brimstone, but it turned out that perhaps the American theologians had been exaggerating. Meteorologically, Hell didn't seem much worse than an English spring.

She slung her rucksack over her shoulders. A faint dark mass loomed in the distance and there, she assumed, lay the Fields of Asphodel.

“You all right?” Peter asked.

“Never better.” Alice stepped out of the pentagram. “Shall we?”

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On Magick

Magick, the most mysterious and capricious of disciplines, admired for its power, derided for its frivolity, is in brief the act of telling lies about the world.

What magicians of ancient civilizations discovered through accident and ingenuity, and what the English philosopher-magicians of the eighteenth century onward codified into the Euro-American received canon, was that the natural laws of the world were set but fragile. You could cleverly reinterpret them. For brief periods of time one could even bewilder and suspend them, so long as you spun the right web of untruths. Linguistic trickery, logical conundrums, it all worked. All you had to do was find a set of premises that, even if just for a split second, made the world seem other than what it really was. The chalk, and whatever remnants of living-dead magical energy lay in the pulverized shells of those sea creatures that perished millions of years ago, did the rest.

Now, magick had progressed a lot since, say, the primitive rituals suggested by the Uffington chalk inscriptions, and there had since been a proliferation of flashy subfields that in fact had nothing to do with chalk, but rather all sorts of arcane objects, enchanted music, and visual illusions. One could now study the archaeology of magick, the history of magick, the music of magick, and on and on. Over in America, visual illusions and flashy showmanship were all the rage. In Europe they were going on about things called postmodernist and poststructuralist magick, which seemed to involve lots of spells doing the opposite of what their inventors wanted, and spells that did nothing at all, which everyone claimed was very profound.

But all the best magick was still done at Cambridge, and good, traditionalist Cambridge was dedicated to the bare bones of the art. Analytic magick. Chalk, surface, paradox.

The paradox—the crucial element. The word paradox comes from two Greek roots: para, meaning “against,” and doxa, meaning “belief.” The trick of magick is to defy, trouble, or, at the very least, dislodge belief. Magick succeeds by casting confusion and doubt. Magick taunts physics and makes her cry.

Take, for instance, the Sorites Paradox. Imagine a heap of sand. Very simple. To remove one grain of sand from the heap does not make it any less a heap. Neither does removing two. You could sit there with tweezers for hours, but you would not have diminished the heap. What if you remove a thousand grains? A million? Precisely how many grains of sand must you remove before it is no longer a heap? If you sit cross-legged with a pair of tweezers, plucking out the sand one grain at a time, what is the precise moment when you will succeed in your demolition of the heap? No one can name this moment. But if the difference between the heap and the heap-minus-one is minuscule, how can you ever transform a heap into a not-heap?

Come on. You know very well what a heap is. You know it when you see it. It is like porn. And you know that if you shovel giant piles of sand out of the heap, there will come a moment when you can definitely call it not-a-heap.

But just for that moment, when the paradox is laid out to you in that precise wording, you don't know. For a moment, you think it is true—that it is impossible, indeed, to turn a heap into a not-heap. In fact you are probably so exhausted from hearing the word heap that the very concept is a blank to you.

Confusion, doubt. And with that, for just a moment, the world blinks. The heap does not run out.

It was this blink that had seduced Alice to her field. In her freshman year of college she took an Introduction to Logic class. In their second week, they were treated to a magick demonstration. A visiting postdoc stood before the lecture hall and drew a chalk circle around a small pile of sand on a table. “Watch,” he said, and reached in to scoop a handful away. He did this again, and again, and again. He invited the class to line up and, one by one, try to empty the pile with their hands. They tried; they couldn't.

Each time their hands left the circle, the space around the pile blurred, and the sand did not diminish.

Alice watched the sand spill from her fingers, and something knocked over in her chest.

She could not breathe. Now, here was a miracle. Here was Jesus, turning five loaves and two fish into an endless supply. All the fields she had considered for her major—maths, physics, medicine, history—they all fell away, they seemed so irrelevant, for why would you study static truths when truth had just exited left? She felt it then. She felt it every time. The stomach-dropping awe, the wondrous delight of a child at a circus who'd just seen a rabbit disappear. Through all her years of study, this feeling never went away. You thought the world was one way and then it wasn't. One could become zero. One could become two. A blink of an eye, and the fact of the matter was not. If the world could be fluid for you once, how many more times could you make it dance according to your whims?

Everyone else lived in such an ossified world. They simply took the rules given to them. They were interested only in articulating their own limits; they moved about as if in stone. But magicians lived in air, dancing on a tentative staircase of ideas, and it was a source of endless delirium, to know that the instant the world began to bore you, you could snap your fingers, and you'd be in free fall once again.

All it took was to tell a lie—and to believe, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that all the rules could be suspended. You held a conclusion in your head and believed, through sheer force of will, that everything else was wrong. You had to see the world as it was not.

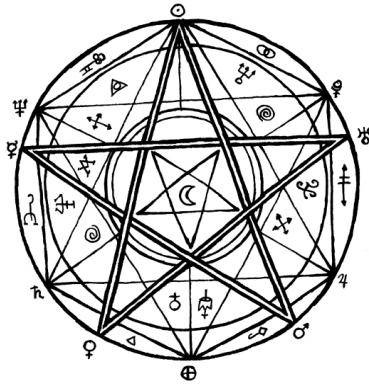
Now Alice, as she proceeded through her coursework, got very good at this. All skilled magicians were. Success in this field demanded a forceful, single-minded capacity for self-delusion. Alice could tip over her world and construct planks of belief from nothing. She believed that finite quantities would never run out, that time could loop back on itself, and that any damage could be repaired. She believed that academia was a meritocracy, that hard work was its own reward. She believed that department pettiness could not touch you, so long as you kept your head down and did not complain. She believed that when professors snapped at you, when they belittled and misused you, it was because they cared. And she believed, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, that she was all right, that

everything was all right, that she did not need help, that she could just stiffen her upper lip and keep on going.

She believed these things with all her might, with the same delirium it took to keep a heap of sand from ever running out. She had no choice. It was essential practice for everything that came after.

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Chapter Two

Hell stretched. Alice and Peter walked side by side over sand so silky-fine their footprints left hardly any marks. Indeed, the sand seemed to actively erase them as they walked on. She glanced over her shoulder and saw her footprints left first indiscernible outlines, then, three steps on and another glance back, nothing at all. It appeared that Hell's landscape resisted alteration. No matter where Alice looked, she could detect no landmarks—no hills, no shores, no foreboding clouds. She tried not to let this bother her. Hell, she had read, was an inconstant and shifting plane. Its landmarks were conceptual, not fixed. She did not know quite what this meant, but following scholarly convention she interpreted this as, *Hell reveals itself to you in whatever order it so chooses*.

Hell, for now, chose rolling dunes.

Alice longed for sunlight. Her eyes had adjusted now to the dim, though they ached from squinting. She rubbed her temples and hoped she'd grow used to this eternal dusk.

Around twenty minutes later, they crossed under a bridge. At first they heard it rather than saw it: chatter overhead, voices Alice almost recognized. She looked up and saw in the sky a mirror image of Cambridge, the campus turned upside-down and shudderingly translucent, as if projected across a staticky cable connection. She saw Jesus Green, Sidney Street, and the little winding alleys between St. John's and Trinity. She saw postgrads on their bicycles, weaving around cars. She saw little black masses moving quickly in clusters from one building to the next. Undergraduates, precious things, new and still-creased black robes flapping around their heels.

So this was the Viewing Pavilion. Alice had read about this: first in Penhaligon's *Primer on the Unitarian Hell*, and then corroborated by most ancient Chinese sources. Here was the bridge that all souls crossed before they passed into the Underworld for good; the liminal point between the worlds of the living and dead where each side could just barely glimpse the other.

A thought crossed Alice's mind. She squinted. Yes—if she cast her thoughts outward, she could zoom in to that mirror Cambridge and tunnel into the Graduate Lab Seven, where her and Peter's pentagram remained, their writing smudged and in parts eviscerated by winds blown from the boundaries between worlds. She saw two of her colleagues—Belinda and Michele—standing reverently at the door, peering around, slowly piecing together what had just happened.

She hadn't erased her tracks. No, rather the contrary: she'd left a note in her office announcing that she was off to retrieve Professor Grimes's soul from Hell, that no one should dare follow for the danger was so great, and that if she hadn't returned in fourteen days then they could go ahead and reassign her corner office to one of the first-years. She'd left the lab door unlocked. She wanted everyone to know where she had gone, if only so that when she returned in triumph, Professor Grimes in hand, there would be no doubts about her success.

Belinda and Michele were now kneeling by the outside of the pentagram, stooping low to read the inscriptions. Alice wished she could hear what they were saying. Belinda kept pressing her hand against her mouth. Michele responded with some gestures that were either very agitated or simply very Italian; with Michele, Alice had never been able to tell which. Suddenly Belinda paused—she stood right over the inscription that designated their destination as Hell—and craned her neck to read.

Alice reached up as far as she could with one hand. The bridge was very close—a low ceiling she could *just* touch, if she strained her arm and teetered on her tiptoes. Could she cross it? She wanted to try.

“*Boo.*”

Belinda shuddered; her hand flew to her neck. Alice was delighted. She wondered at the limits of ghostly mischief—whether, if she wanted to, she might simply haunt the halls of Cambridge forever.

Scholars concurred that most hauntings on record were facilitated through the Viewing Pavilion. It was the only place from which the dead could make their voices heard, from which they might exert some pressure on the living. But it was a dual kind of haunting. Ghosts lingered around the Viewing Pavilion because they were too enraptured with scenes from their lifetime; because they, in turn, were entranced and obsessed with the rituals of the living. They wanted to know what everyone was up to. They wanted

to see whether they'd been remembered. All the ghost stories were wrong; hauntings were so rarely malicious. The dead only wanted to feel included.

Belinda stumbled into Michele's arms. Alice snorted. What an English rose Belinda was—everything was always too much for her. Michele wrapped his arms around Belinda, speaking into her ear. Alice guessed at his words—*It's all right, they haven't died—they're not going to die.* Belinda kept shaking her head. *No, she seemed to say. No, they're dead, they're gone.*

“Having regrets?” Peter stood beside her, neck craned up. Though his eyes were not on Belinda and Michele, but the flocks of undergraduates bustling happily down the alley. Oblivious, excited for the start of term—or was their first day of classes over, were they now filtering into the college bar for a pint? “Want to head back?”

“Don't joke, Murdoch.”

There was no simple path out of Hell. They both knew this coming in. Entering Hell was easy; leaving was hard. If only they could just jump up into their pentagram, say their spells in reverse, and plop right back where they had begun. But if that were possible, the living could visit their dead all the time. No; to ascend from Hell required the permission of Lord Yama—that was, Thanatos, Anubis, Hades, the Darkness of Many Names, Ruler of the Underworld.

Often he granted it. Lord Yama did not like to suffer the living in his realm; they disturbed the dead, they upset the balance. He was more than happy to shoo them back off to whence they'd come. At least, all the stories promised so. Orpheus had made his way back, for better or worse. Dante ascended with no trouble at all. In all the stories, sojourners in Hell rarely perished there. It was in the world of the living where they met their tragic ends.

In any case, they could sort out the problem of living when they crossed that bridge. For now, the trouble was determining how much deeper in to go.

AN HOUR LATER THE GROUND BEGAN sloping upward. They were climbing something, though it wasn't immediately clear what. Alice's lungs grew tight, though she tried not to pant. Peter loped on beside her, completely unfazed, and she was too embarrassed to admit she was tired.

Then it was all revealed beneath them: a flat valley filled with Shades upon Shades, some grouped in clusters, some wandering the fields alone. Those were dead souls—translucent gray things, mere echoes of living bodies. Some went round and round in circles; some paced along the same tight trip. Some meandered, drifting more than walking. From high above it was like watching a colony of sluggish, dazed ants, moving with no purpose. Only an endless milling. Limbo, by one name. By another, the Fields of Asphodel.

The fields were not a court of Hell, only a holding area. Here lingered the shocked, disoriented souls of the recently deceased. Here they had infinite space and time to find their bearings before they decided to move on. Talamo's monograph described the Fields of Asphodel as a waiting zone. Not so different from the lobby at Cambridge South, only there was no coffee kiosk, and everyone was still deciding whether they wanted to get on the train.

Alice had good reason to think Professor Grimes might still be here. On the whole, the dead were not typically eager to move on. They needed time to process their memories, their regrets, their wishes. Some stayed in hopes of reuniting with loved ones before they sought reincarnation together. Some didn't believe in reincarnation at all. Some waited in the fields forever out of conviction that the great resurrection was coming, and that they need only sink into a stupor and wait for the end times. Others remained out of sheer terror of what the rest of Hell might hold, for an eternity of boredom was better than the punishments they deserved.

Professor Grimes, in Alice's view, had quite a lot to atone for. If she were him, she would stay put.

But how would they ever find him in such a crowd? The fields stretched on as far as the eye could see, and not a single one of these souls was recognizable to Alice's eyes. Even after they descended down into the valley, into the crowds, the Shades appeared as vague and indistinct as they had looked from a distance. Alice scrutinized every soul she passed but saw only blurry silhouettes, most of them faceless, expressions uniformly dour if not. She could never get close enough to get a better look. The dead flitted away every time they came close, like gnats swarming off from waving hands.

"Remind me what you used for an anchor?" Peter asked after a while.

One of the more vexing problems with a sojourn to Hell was figuring out where to go and where to find the soul you hoped to rescue. Many souls had died since the dawn of time, and Hell was unfortunately a very large place. The solution was a Dowsing Anchor: a clause in the pentagram that used a physical token or object to root one spatiotemporally in the underworld. But Alice's anchor, it seemed, had led them only into indistinct space.

"I used a token from his desk." Alice glanced around helplessly. "The plaque they gave him in Paris last year. He tosses most of his awards but he kept that one face out, so I thought it meant something to him."

"I know that plaque. It's just made of wood, right? No gold lettering?"

"Yes, only a carving."

Peter nodded, pondered a moment, and then asked, "Could I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, of course."

"Only I don't mean to be overcritical." He said this so courteously that Alice wanted to smack him.

He never used to mince words with her. He used to shout, *You daft cow, Alice, you've missed a line, you've fucked it all up*. And she would give as good as she got, and point out it was *his* line he'd skipped, and they would argue furiously, and laugh, and sort out the problem. It used to be they could quarrel, and that quarrelling was fun. It used to be they could speak frankly with each other. But that was a very long time ago.

"We're lost in Hell," she said. "Suggest anything you want."

"So Macedonio's *Apocrypha* states that most objects from the world of the living lose their directional force in Hell," said Peter. "Sorry—I took it out before you had a chance, you couldn't have known. But the idea is that the emotional attachments we invest in objects that have been around for a very long time are indeed quite shallow compared to their histories. Particularly something like a plaque, which is just wood whittled down. It's changed by its polishing, sure, but it still inherently just is that wood. Our particular encounters with that wood are fleeting in the long span of its existence."

It all seemed very obvious to Alice when Peter explained it. "I should have thought of that."

"So your plaque might have put us in the proximity of every carpenter who's ever lived."

“I see.”

“Or hiking enthusiast.”

“Fair enough.”

“Or even tree enthusiast.”

“What’s your point, Murdoch?”

“Actually, it’s a very interesting dilemma,” said Peter. “The way Hell is oriented spatially. Suppose Macedonio is right, and that the landscape of Hell reframes itself to form a mirror against the living world. What happens when those worlds overlap? When souls from different times and spaces interact? What Hell do they experience? I wonder—”

Alice cut him off. This was classic Murdoch; if you let him go on he rambled until he forgot what had gotten him started. Peter was always more interested in the problem than the answer. It made him a great scholar but so exhausting to work with. “Does Macedonio offer a solution?”

“Hm? Oh, yes! He says we should make the dead come to us.” Peter slung off his rucksack and knelt to the ground. “He suggests a sacrifice.”

He took out three objects from his rucksack: a packet of cigarettes, a slice of Lembas Bread, and a tiny sample bottle of tawny port. “A meal,” he explained. “Something very temporally rooted. You have to get the precise decade right, you see. Objects have long histories, but foods—the particular ingredients that go into them in those exact ratios, and the routes they have to pass to get there—those are extremely temporally specific.”

He assembled the cigarettes in a little pile, crumbled the Lembas Bread above them, and splashed the port on top. Then he struck a match and lit the whole thing on fire.

It all smelled disturbingly good to Alice, tobacco and all. It made her think of the department lounge—of Lembas Bread wrappers, of used mugs, of port-stained couches, of damp coffee filters sitting atop the rubbish bin. It smelled like home.

Thick black tendrils unfurled above the pile and dissipated into the grey. The fields blurred, then began thinning out around them. Whole clusters of Shades disappeared, one by one, until they stood alone against the fields.

A single blur appeared over the horizon, growing larger and larger as it approached.

Peter said, “That can’t be right.”

It was not Professor Grimes. It was the department cat.

Most departments at Cambridge owned a cat, which was to say, the cats owned them. For the cats wore no collars, nor did they sleep in any professors' homes, nor did they seem loyal to or even particularly friendly with any student or faculty member. All anyone knew was that one day a cat would show up mewling with hunger, and since no one could resist setting out food and water, the cat would stick around, growing increasingly pampered until eventually history was rewritten, and the cat had in fact always been a part of the institution.

Analytic Magick's department cat was a sleek, green-eyed, dark-gray thing with a magnificent feather-duster tail named Archimedes, and to the best of Alice's knowledge he was unquestionably alive. She had seen him just that morning, batting idiotically at butterflies in the front garden.

She knelt down. Archimedes did not like much to be pet, but he did prefer you make eye contact when speaking to him. Something to do with respect. "What are you doing here?"

Archimedes blinked, his tail swishing back and forth around his legs. He circled round the fire and gave it a sniff. If he was bothered to be in Hell, he did not show it.

"Cats *can* cross boundaries," Alice said in a hushed tone. "I read about this! They know the courts, they can see the dead."

"Can you help us, then?" Peter approached the cat. "Can you bring us to Grimes?"

For a moment Archimedes seemed to consider this. His eyes lingered on the fire for a long time, such a long time that Alice felt a swell of hope—he did look so wise, his gaze so significant. *I have crossed oceans of time*, said those eyes. *I have seen the hidden world*. Then he mewed in a very scornful way and streaked back over the dunes.

Alice stood up. "Useless."

"Look," said Peter.

Where Archimedes had disappeared, four figures now appeared on the horizon. Slight, tentative shapes. None with the tall, imposing grace of Professor Grimes. They drew closer, and the soft light of their faces became clear under the low, burning sun. Innocent things. Children still. Mottled patches of black spread across their skin like ink stains.

"Peter." Alice had a sinking feeling. "That isn't . . ."

"Oh, dear," said Peter. "I thought they'd have passed on by now."

“Apparently not,” said Alice, and braced herself to meet Professor Grimes’s first victims.

THIRTY YEARS AGO AT CAMBRIDGE, A spell went awry and four undergraduates died. The postdoc on duty was stripped of his degrees and banished back home to Bristol in disgrace. All involved parties were students of the then-young Professor Jacob Grimes.

Officially, the university blamed the deaths on a building fire—which was not technically false, because the resulting explosion had burned down the entire left wing—and sent the students’ ashes home to their parents, along with a letter assuring them that Cambridge was not in any way responsible, and that litigation would be a very bad idea. Conveniently an investigation revealed some faulty construction in the gas pipes, which allowed the university to place the blame on building codes and contractor malfeasance, not on what types of magical experiments could burn down half a building in the first place. All this meant the department was never blamed for what happened. It was a freak accident, nothing more.

But no one ever asked why Professor Grimes let a fire rip through the lab to begin with. No one ever considered that, as a supervisor responsible for both the intellectual development and the safety of his students, Professor Grimes should have been paying attention to the progress of the experiment instead of being burrowed away in his third-floor office, a formidable “DO NOT ENTER” sign hung over his door. (He was so proud of that sign; a graduating cohort had presented it to him as a joke, and he had accepted it without irony.) No one ever suggested that perhaps, in addition to doing his research, Professor Grimes should have been fulfilling his duties as a teacher. He wasn’t the only neglectful professor, after all—all the faculty in the department cut corners when it came to teaching duties. Why waste time babysitting undergraduates when one could work on literally anything else?

So none of this had any effect on Professor Grimes’s career. No one could prove it was his fault. You couldn’t draw a line between his actions and the fire. He hadn’t even been present. And anyhow, accidents were very common in magick. Just two weeks later an enchanted harp recovered from Assyria put half of Harvard’s department into a paralyzed slumber, and this greatly overshadowed the Cambridge fire on the conference gossip circuit.

(No counter-spells were effective; the cure at last involved enormous amounts of amphetamine, which a surprising number of grad students had in ready supply.) It was generally agreed that magick required taking risks—especially the visionary, field-defining magick for which Professor Grimes was known. In any case, it was the undergraduates' own fault, and they were dead already. That was punishment enough.

AS THE SHADES APPROACHED, ALICE OBSERVED with horror that their appearances seemed locked onto their bodies in the moment of death. One of them seemed mostly intact—she had just a few scratches on her face and arms. One student died of smoke inhalation, said the report. The flames never touched her. She'd crawled into a corner and hidden under a fireproof tarp, and according to the firefighters this was why no one had found her until nearly an hour after the fire was put out. She might have been alive a long time—no one knew for sure, and no one pressed the issue. Her parents held an open-casket funeral in Ely and invited the entire department. This was before Alice's time, but she was fairly sure Professor Grimes wouldn't have gone.

The others were burned beyond recognition. It turned Alice's stomach to look at them. It was one thing to read theories of the dead; witnessing them was quite another. Charred limbs, petrified faces; jawbones stripped clean of flesh, teeth stretched, rictus-like, in unwilling smiles. Only the eyes were uniformly unscarred; staring, pleading, plaintive, curious eyes. Did they spend all eternity like that? Or had they only chosen to present themselves as such for now? The literature on Shades and corporeality was scant and undecided. Some scholars thought Shades were preserved unwillingly as they were in the moment of their death. Others argued Shades had the agency to manifest however they liked. Either way Alice felt it rude to ask.

"Hello," she said cautiously. "We're from Cambridge."

The Shades shuffled closer. They seemed quite excited. Alice could not read the faces of the burnt three—they could never stop smiling—but the more intact girl's expression was open, delighted.

"We're looking for a soul who's only recently passed over," said Peter. "Professor Jacob Grimes."

The more intact girl gasped, and the sound spread across the Shades like wind across rocks.

“Professor Grimes?”

“Professor Grimes is here?”

“Grimes!”

So they could speak. Their voices were each an echo of the others’; one statement repeated four times in slightly different registers. Alice could not tell if Shades could speak no other way, or if, after decades clustered together and facing down infinity, their personalities had blended and congealed so that they no longer knew themselves as distinct from the others. They descended into excited chatter, communing among themselves in unintelligible clacks and whistles. All Alice could make out was, “Grimes,” “No way,” and “Mother of God!”

“Do you have any idea where he might be?” Peter cut in.

“Should still be a Shade,” said a girl with braids.

“Yes, a Shade, unless—”

“Unless!”

“But we wouldn’t know.”

“Doesn’t talk to us.”

“Too important,” huffed a boy with glasses. “Would have just sailed by.”

“Sailed.”

“Without speaking.”

“He did come by,” said the more intact girl. “So quickly I thought it was a dream. But now you say it—I did see. I saw. I waved. He said hello.”

The other three floated up and down in agitation.

“You saw him?”

“He said *hello*?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Oh, my God!” The more intact Shade flared for a moment; ever so briefly, her form took a more solid, distinct shape, and Alice glimpsed a flash of red in her hair. “Do you know how annoying it is to spend eternity with you lot? It was a memory all my own, something that *happened*, and I didn’t want to share.”

The other Shades looked miffed. Alice could actually see the shape of their irritation, spiky wisps of gray miasma drifting about their shoulders.

“Could have told us.”

“Could have.”

“No point keeping secrets.”

“There’s an eternity for secrets.”

“Hold on,” Alice said desperately, before she lost them to their chatter. “When did this happen?”

“Don’t know,” said the boy with glasses. “There is no time here.”

This was demonstrably metaphysically false, but Alice chose to ignore this. “What did he say to you?”

“Wanted directions,” sniffed the more intact girl. “Couldn’t stand the fields. Couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

“And where would we go?” asked Peter. “If we also wanted to get out of here?”

The undergraduates pointed. Alice and Peter turned, and there it was, a line of white in the distance—a wall or building, she could not tell for sure, but it was at least some structure that promised an end to the silt monotony. Alice did not think it had been there before. She squinted, and saw what from this distance reminded her of teeming ants around their anthill. Shades, thousands of them, lining up for whatever release lay behind the white.

The undergraduates sighed, deflating, all at once.

“The lines—”

“So long!”

“Never make it to the end—”

“Worse than concert tickets—”

“I only ever got to see one,” declared the boy with glasses. “I got to see the Chordettes. I stood in line for four hours to see the Chordettes.”

This set off another excited shuffle. “You saw *the Chordettes*?”

“Focus,” said Peter. “Please. Is that the only way into the next court?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Everyone has to stand in line.”

“Even Professor Grimes.”

“Wait their turn.”

“No exceptions.”

The more intact girl cocked her head. “Will you save him?”

At this question, all the undergraduates surged forth and flocked eagerly around Alice and Peter.

“Will you scoop him out of here?”

“Is this for your *research*?”

“Is it for a *paper*?”

Alice felt a pang of sympathy. She'd always been fond of undergraduates, no matter how much she enjoyed complaining about them. In truth, Cambridge students were a pleasure to teach. Naïve, eager things. With few exceptions they were never lazy, never insolent. Quite the opposite. They were generally cheerful, unformed minds who still asked for permission to use the restroom during section, who regularly forgot the order of operations when switching from maths to logic, who stuttered from nerves during office hours and opened their papers with inane declarations like "THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY DEFINES VALIDITY AS . . ." and "SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME, MANKIND HAS BEEN TROUBLED BY THE PROBLEM OF RATIONALITY." She used to see them bundling into the Pick together after lecture, pink cheeked from the cold, chattering happily over cheap beer and soggy chips. She liked to watch them chatting animatedly about their classes, hands waving about in the air, their vowels just a bit forced, their jargon heavy-handed. They made her wonder, envious, if ignorance was truly the secret to bliss.

"Shall we go in together, then?" Peter asked gently. "Isn't it about time you lot moved on, anyways?"

This was apparently the wrong question to ask. The undergraduates shrank back into a tight, glutinous mass of psychic distress. The air suddenly sharpened with cold. Alice's arms prickled. She made a mental note of this. *Shades can affect atmosphere, if upset.*

"Scared," said the more intact girl at last.

The others nodded.

"Of what, though?" Peter asked. "You're all such—I mean, I'm sure you have nothing much to atone for."

Violently they shook their heads. "That's not it."

"No, no . . ."

"We are scared to *pass*."

"Scared to not be—"

"Scared of the Lethe—"

"Scared to forget—"

"To become—"

"Scared to be other."

"It's only reincarnation," Peter said. "You won't remember a thing."

"Precisely. We were magicians," said the boy with glasses. "If we go . . ."

“We won’t be magicians.”

“You’re joking,” said Peter, with his classic lack of tact.

Alice thought he was being a bit daft. Of course these Shades were scared. Souls often lingered in Asphodel for years—decades—before trying for reincarnation. Loss of identity was a terrifying prospect. Who were you without your memories, your background, your relationships, your station? What if your lot in the next life was far worse than the life you’d just lived? It didn’t matter that in theory souls enjoyed infinite lives, and infinite chances to experience things good and bad. From the subjective perspective of the soul, reincarnation was no different from death.

What’s more, reincarnation was always a lottery. Alice could understand not wanting to try their chances.

“You’ve barely lived,” said Peter. “There’s so much more to life—wouldn’t you like to try again?”

The undergraduates quivered.

“But magick—”

“But Cambridge—”

“The throne of the intellectual world,” said the more intact girl. “Privileged beyond belief.”

“It is the only rational choice,” declared the boy with glasses. He spoke with such authority, the other undergraduates seemed momentarily to shrink behind him, as if giving him permission to speak for the group. His voice deepened. He gestured as he spoke, in imitation of a professor. “You see, given the population on Earth it is overwhelmingly likely we will be reincarnated into lives under the poverty level. Most of the world population never go to school, let alone come to Cambridge. An unexamined life is not worth living, as Socrates tells us. Therefore to seek reincarnation is to gamble with overwhelmingly bad odds on a life not worth living. For instance, once reincarnated, we could end up doing something like—I don’t know, working rice paddies in China.”

“Milking cows in Arkansas,” agreed the more intact girl.

“Mining diamonds in Africa.”

“Now, look here,” said Alice. “That’s rather prejudiced—”

“Being an idiot.”

“Being an idiot!” All four Shades shuddered; a quivering mass of jelly. “Oh, the horror! Oh, to not be clever!” And one of them wailed, “What if you never learn to *read!*”

“But you’re dead.” This had gone too far; Alice had to intervene. Undergraduates did this often—they worked each other up over the wrong ideas, compared problem sets and confused themselves so much that untangling their thoughts took twice the work. Undergraduates were five blind men and an elephant; were three blind mice leading one another in a circle. “You’re in Hell. That seems the worst state to be in.”

“We’re dead *magicians*,” said the boy with glasses. “That’s different.”

“It’s not different at all,” said Peter. “You’re still stuck here.”

“But why are you here?” asked the more intact girl. “Why’d you come?”

They seized on this line of interrogation with glee.

“Why?”

“Why indeed?”

“Half a lifetime—”

“The price—”

“The price!”

“That’s different,” said Alice. “We could still be magicians. *That’s* worth it.”

“Oh,” said the more intact girl. And then she employed that most annoying of argumentative tactics, which was to agree, while making it clear they thought her reasoning was stupid. “*All right* then.”

The other undergraduates said nothing. What rejoinder need they make? They only watched her, bearing identical expressions of silent reproach; until their forms began to fade, until their burns became glimmers, until they disappeared into still air.

“Wow,” said Peter. “I think we’ve been told to fuck off.”

“Oh, leave them to it,” Alice muttered. She felt a spasm of irritation, a lurking unease, and she did not want to think about these undergraduates anymore. Hell was full of minor tragedies. There was no point fretting over this one. “They have eternity to figure it out.”

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Chapter Three

The line of white was indeed a wall: a great, flat surface that disappeared into the sky and stretched infinitely into either direction. Below, a great mass of Shades shuffled impatiently about, their voices like wind rustling through dried leaves.

“Been here for *ages*—”

“Nothing’s moving—”

“Birth rate’s gone down, they said.”

“Has it?”

“Postwar boom’s over, everywhere’s developed, and all the girls are taking pills—”

“Oh, is *that* it?”

“My word.” Peter stood on the tips of his toes, trying to see over the crowd. “It’s worse than Fifth on a Friday.”

“You’ve been to Fifth?” Alice asked.

“I tried. Never got in.”

Alice did feel as if she were stuck outside a nightclub, only the doors were out of sight, and no one was enforcing the queue. “Do you think he’s still here?”

Perspective was not reliable here. It was impossible to tell how quickly the queue was moving, or how much distance separated them from the wall. Professor Grimes might have passed through days ago. He might have been stuck in line, several yards away. Alice wished she had consulted some material about birth and death rates. How many people in the world had died over the past two months? How many had reincarnated since? She did not recall any archival information about queuing to depart Asphodel—Orpheus and all the rest seemed to just walk right into the courts—but then all the sojourner accounts were from a period when the world was smaller, when a more manageable number of souls came and went. Possibly this wall was a recent development. A sort of postwar chthonic immigration control.

“We could shout for him,” said Peter.

“Oh, let’s not do that.” Alice had seen no sign of guardian deities yet, but she knew as a general rule it was best when sojourners did not draw attention to themselves. She sized up the queue, then squared her shoulders. “We might just try and go *through*.”

The lines looked dense, but weren’t Shades immaterial? Setiya and Penhaligon certainly thought so—Shades had only memories of their bodies, they were spirit stuff alone, and so they could not interact with the physical in any meaningful way. Alice and Peter were flesh and bone, and matter trumped empty space. So suppose she just *pushed*—but she wasn’t three steps in before she was swarmed by Shades. Irritation exploded around her.

“Cutting—”

“No cutting—”

“Get out—”

“*Rude!*”

Icy chill spread throughout her limbs. She felt a slimy pressure against her skin. So she was wrong—it seemed Shades could indeed become something resembling the material when it suited them. She recalled the more intact girl from before, how for an instant she had seemed more solid. The crowd formed a frothy irascible mass, pushing and squeezing from all sides until she could hardly breathe. The pressure sharpened. She yelped and jumped back out of line. “All right,” she said. “Jesus—no cutting, all right.”

The pressure vanished; the chill eased. The mass subsided back into the queue.

“So that’s out.” Alice rubbed her arms. “Seems like they—ow!”

A Shade had bumped past her, elbowing her so hard she nearly fell to the ground. He seemed to have invested all his corporeal memory into that elbow. It *hurt*.

“Blasted magicians,” hissed the Shade. “No respect.”

The pain to her ribs was terrible, but Alice was too excited to mind. “How do you know we’re magicians?”

“Chalk all over your hands,” said the Shade. “Chalk on your kneecaps. What else are you, cokeheads?”

Here Alice began to suspect this Shade was a mathematician. Mathematicians hated magicians.

“Have you seen another magician?” Peter asked eagerly. “Here? Recently?”

“*Have I seen a magician,*” muttered the Shade. “Have I seen a magician, a snotty arrogant magician, striding about like he owned the place, like the rest of us don’t exist—”

That sounded just like Professor Grimes. “When?” Alice demanded.

“A day,” said the Shade. “A week. A month. Who’s counting?”

“And he’s definitely crossed over?” Peter pressed. “He’s not queuing still?”

“The rate he was going?” The Shade snorted. “Marching on like he had somewhere to be. Would be surprised if he hasn’t reached the Eighth Court by now. They would have admitted him just to get him out of here. And good riddance.”

Alice wanted to sprint up to the gates right then. But the Shades were all casting her dirty looks now, and she doubted they would part politely if she asked. What to do, then? Wait their turn? But even if they got through, Alice didn’t know what deities guarded the end of the queue, or whether they were disposed to help the living. And Professor Grimes was moving fast, with purpose. If he didn’t want to delay, then he was bent on reincarnation. They couldn’t simply stand here. It was a race against time now, and Alice didn’t know how long the courts could hold a persona like Grimes.

“Say, Law.” Peter was eyeing the wall. From a distance it had seemed a smooth marble edifice, flawless and flat, but up close Alice saw now that the wall was constructed instead of thousands of little bones, stacked up on each other in a dense, ancient mass. Accumulated detritus of millions of years of life. A mountain of preserved time. Though horizontally it was endless, vertically it was not—it appeared to stretch forty, fifty meters before it topped out to a smooth straight line. No taller than the university library.

Peter asked, “How hard do you think that is to climb?”

THEY MARCHED PERPENDICULAR TO THE QUEUE until the crowds thinned away. Now they could approach the base of the wall undisturbed. The Shades, for whatever reason, seemed uninterested in climbing up—possibly because they had no incentive to rush, and possibly because their tenuous materiality could offer them no purchase against that surface.

A shame, thought Alice, because the wall really was ideal for climbing. Large bits of bone stuck out all over the place—lovely handholds, easily grasped—and the wall was littered too with grooves, perfect for digging one's toes in. Alice was grateful that the wall was made of bone only—it seemed all the hair, fur, blood, and gristly bits had eroded long ago. There was no smell nor gore. Texture-wise, they were grand. Alice looked upon the wall and saw the Flatirons and Peak District; saw plentiful bottlenecks, chimneys, and cracks. The only problem, she surmised, would be endurance. But perhaps they could rest at the top.

She took a deep breath, stretched out her shoulders, then dug into her bag.

“What are you doing?” Peter asked.

Alice was crumbling a stick of chalk between her fingers. “For the grip,” she explained. “It keeps you from slipping when your hands get sweaty.”

“How do you know that?”

She dusted the chalk across her palms. “I used to climb in Colorado. I climb sometimes still—there's a mountaineering club on campus.”

“How very American.”

“Hush.” She reached for the nearest bits of protruding bone, found her footholds, and hoisted herself up. “Follow my lead. Don't look down.”

Up they went. To her delight, Alice found the climb deliciously easy. The grips were good, the wall full of friction. She yanked at every hold out of caution before she placed her weight against it, but every inch of bone held firm. Eons of accumulation had packed these materials so densely there was not a single loose bit.

For a while she climbed and climbed, relishing the sureness of her grip; how effortlessly she could swing herself from hold to hold. The strain and repetition felt good. It was meditative; it took up all her concentration, so that the anxious radio in her head quieted down. It also felt good to realize she could still do this. She hadn't taken care of herself these last few months; she had been afraid all her muscles had atrophied. On the other hand, she was so much thinner now. Less weight to pull—which did make a difference, though she wasn't sure whether this lovely lightness came from actual agility or from starvation fuzzing up her head.

After a while she stopped to glance about. She had loved doing this whenever she climbed in Colorado. She loved to appreciate the sheer

distance to the ground. It never fazed her. At this height she was too far up to do anything about it but keep going, and this immovable fact helped to block out useless feelings like fear.

Hell stretched endless beneath her, plains of silt and rolling dunes. To her tired eyes, this side of Hell abstracted to two rippling blocks of color: silky gray below and an orange burning darkly above, punctuated by a sun that seemed perpetually on the verge of setting. It was quite beautiful.

“This is insane,” she said. “Lovely view, though. Are you doing all right?”

Peter did not answer.

“Murdoch?”

She glanced down. Peter was much further below her than she’d thought; he must have stopped moving some time ago. All four of his limbs trembled. His forehead shone slick with sweat. He blinked furiously at the wall, and he looked like he was trying not to vomit.

“Murdoch?”

For a moment Peter seemed not to register her voice. Then at last he replied, “I believe I am having a panic attack.”

It was wildly inappropriate, but Alice laughed. “Murdoch, are you afraid of heights?”

“I didn’t want to tell you,” he gasped. “Thought I could just—suck it up —”

“It was your idea to climb!”

“Yes, but I only meant it in *theory*,” he whined. “Oh, God, Law—”

“You’re fine, you’re fine,” she said quickly. “Look, you made it this far —”

“But now my brain’s caught up, and I can’t move.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “Oh God oh God—”

“Stop talking. Just breathe.” The gravity of the situation had caught up with her. Alice remained calm. She had talked undergraduates down from quitting Professor Grimes’s seminars before. She had, for better or worse, plenty of practice at talking away fear. “There’s a solid protruding block a few feet up. You can brace your feet against that and lean forward, which will give your arms a rest. Do you think you can make it just a few more holds?”

“I can’t let go.” Peter whined again. “My wrists . . .”

“Do it or you’ll die,” Alice snapped. “*Move*, Murdoch. Don’t think, just do it.”

Miraculously, Peter obeyed. His feet found purchase, and he leaned forward against the wall, hands splayed for balance. His chest heaved with exhaustion.

“Very good,” said Alice. “Now, let’s—let’s just take stock, have a reset . . .”

“My forearms are burning,” Peter gasped.

“You’re using your thumbs too much. Look.” She demonstrated with one hand. “Try hanging from your top four fingers instead. They’ll give you all the traction you need. Hook, don’t pinch.”

Peter spent a long moment breathing against the wall. Alice wondered if he’d heard her at all. But then he reached out with one tentative hand, the other bracing against the wall for balance, and flexed his fingers.

“Okay,” he said. “I think . . . that makes sense.”

“And if you ever need to rest, get your feet on a good hold, stand up straight, and lean against the wall like you are now. That’ll take some of the pressure off your arms. Do you understand?”

He nodded vigorously, eyes wide.

“Hesitation is your worst enemy. If you see a hold, just *swing* for it. The longer you dither back and forth, the more you exhaust yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Shush, Murdoch, I’m saving your life.” She dusted her hands with a fresh piece of chalk, then passed it down. “Chalk up, you’re sweating.”

Peter obeyed. Up again they went. From this angle Alice could not tell how far they’d come, whether they’d reached the halfway point or not. All distance and texture were reduced to abstractions, lines on canvas, and all she could see on either side was an endless stretch of jagged white, then sky, or ground. There was no pacing herself to the finish. All she could do was ignore the passage of time, and the rapidly approaching limits of her own endurance, and keep throwing one arm up over the next. A watched distance never shrank. Hands, hands, toes, toes. Hands, hands, toes, toes.

Finally her right hand met a flat, wide surface. She dared to tilt her head up. That was it—there was no more wall, only sky, she’d made it. Topping out, they called it at the gym. She took a deep breath and pushed herself

over the edge in one massive go. Then she scampered onto her knees and looked down.

Peter gazed up at her, eyes huge with fright. He was shaking quite badly. She was afraid he might let go, and he was still several feet below her, too far for her to pull him up.

“You’re so close,” she called. “You’re almost there. And it’s flat up here—almost three feet wide—we can rest up here, you’ve just got to finish out.”

He might have said something in response, but she couldn’t tell what. All she heard was a pained wheezing.

“Just look at me,” she said. He raised his head. “There you go.”

He reached with trembling hands for the next hold. Then the next.

“Now move your toes,” she whispered. “Steady now—good, good—now one more.”

He got one hand up to the top. She seized his wrist. He got another hand up, just far enough for her to pull him up and over. One great heave, and then Peter collapsed on top of her with a shout.

They lay still for a long moment, breathing hard. Alice felt something wet against her skin. She tilted her head down and saw Peter’s face crumpled against her neck. He was crying.

“You’re all right,” she murmured. “It’s okay.”

She would have wriggled away, but Peter was still shaking—a bit, Alice thought inappropriately, like a man after sex—and she thought it better to let him have this moment. She laid her head back and closed her eyes, relishing the sweet fatigue that pulsed through her limbs.

Good God. She hadn’t felt this sort of pain in a long time. She’d been exhausted, yes, but this throbbing soreness—this screaming reminder that she’d pushed her body to the limit, and hadn’t broken; indeed, that she *had* a body that could do what it did—felt good.

She tried to focus on that pleasant burn. Not Peter’s warmth against her chest. Not the absurdity of Peter lying on top of her, which was somehow, compared to rock climbing in Hell, the most ridiculous thing about this situation. Not the very weird stir in her gut she felt at his being vulnerable, *depending* on her, and how very unsatisfying this was despite the fact that she’d wished for so long that Peter might reveal to her any weakness at all. But all this did was make him seem human, and the more human Peter seemed, the more he baffled her.