

### *Notes about this story*

This is fanfiction based on a video game called [Dark Deception](#) by Glowstick Entertainment (led by Vince Livings). The complete version is available for \$28.95 on Steam, and separate chapters are around \$9 each.

This chapter (Chapter One - No Way Back) is a personalised novelisation of the game's events. These events depend on the character's choices - except, instead of being able to choose, our lovely mute protagonist has chosen *his* path. The story deviates from the original, but this is primarily seen in later chapters.

All words in this story are written by me: Ani Drexler. Some voice lines have been replicated from the source material. Besides that, **this entire document contains my writing in my free time.** No forms of AI-generated stories were used.

I hope you enjoy!! :)

Oh - and be warned: this story can be frightening...

# DARK DECEPTION

It is done.  
Now my faith lies in darkness.

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Darkness.

I am floating.

I am nothing.

I am not alone.

Through the numbing blackness, I see a shadow. A silhouette. Somebody is watching me.

“Oh! Another one. How nice to have some company again.”

A woman stands before me. My chest instantly twists - or at least I think it does. Everything is cloaked in inky haze except for the imperious figure now eyeing me critically. She's dressed in all black, spare for the glittering amethyst jewellery draped across her exposed décolletage. Her gown's dramatic sleeves drape out of view. The woman's hair is magnificently windswept despite the lack of seeming air. And her expression... disapproving.

“Come over here, love. Let's get a better look at you.”

My skin tingles as the woman eyes me. I wonder if she can sense my fear.

The woman's eyes are ringed in dark kohl. I can't tell the colour. The sheer intensity gives me a feeling of inferiority - and I *never* feel inferior. I'm frozen in the blackness. Finally, she throws out a hand dramatically. “You disappoint me, love,” the woman gripes, “you really do. So many fears... so many desires... I thought you'd be bigger.” A tiny rise of confusion breaks through the rising panic. “Oh, don't look so confused. I know everything you've got hidden in that brain of yours. So many good intentions laid to waste... I can see the regret, eating away at your soul.” She drags out the words in a whisper. The woman prods my chest with a sharp black fingernail. “Oh, it's not very healthy in there, is it?”

A spark flickers. *Good intentions?* I've begged and begged for redemption... is this mysterious lady a disguised archangel, or possibly a demon, come to take me to hell? There's one thought cemented into my mind - *save her*. Not the demon-woman; some other *her*, maybe two *hers*. Possibly a *them*. I glance vaguely down - the veins in my wrists are bulging from anxiety. A trickle of sweat rolls down my back.

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The woman rolls her eyes and folds her arms. “Don’t fret, love! You’ve got potential. I can see it in you! I can grant your greatest, deepest, darkest desires.” Her bejewelled earrings sparkle in the golden overhead light. The effect is *almost* angelic. Her eyes narrow. “But if you want a new life,” she says airily as if discussing drinks, “you’re going to have to suffer... quite a bit.”



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## The Ballroom

I stand in a ballroom.

The floor is gilt with magnificent inlaid patterns that glimmer beneath softly glowing bulbs. A fantastic staircase leads to a dark door, sealed closed and with a strange outwards dent as if something tried to break through. Situated on either side of the staircase are ten grey rings with padlocks over them. At the ballroom's centre is a headless statue, perhaps of a gargoyle judging by the bat-like wings, its claws raised to the heavens and presenting a copper orb.

According to the lady, I'm to call her Bierce. And she'll 'hopefully not have to call me by anything'. Bierce stands beside that eerie gargoyle statue. She's tall, but it towers over her. She notices me staring at the rings. "The pieces to a powerful ring are hidden in nightmares behind these portals." Bierce gestures imperiously to the gates. "Find them - and bring them to me - and you'll get your wish."

*What is my wish?* My hands go to my head. I've been struggling to remember anything. I know there was staggering pain, then darkness, then... Bierce... and now this grand ballroom. Or *part* of a ballroom - beyond the floor and rings and roof and pillars is a brief warning of cracked bricks before the structure falls into nothing. There's perfect blackness beyond this tiny pocket dimension. *I know I have to save her, or them, or... who are they? What happens if I fail?*

"Fail, and you'll find there are fates far worse than death out there."

There's a sudden resounding *boom*. My nerves are shot. Spinning on a polished black shoe, I see a major difference - the first nightmare portal has opened.

Bloody red runes swirl around a disorienting image. Still dripping, there's a crude drawing of some sort of creature with round, human-like ears. A monkey?

Entranced, I step towards it.

There's a brief flash of fiery heat as if I've been taken apart and scattered across a smouldering realm. Then I find myself standing outside the portal, staring down a narrow corridor of total blackness. Another gate swirls at the end. I approach, quickly picking up pace as the whispers begin. Thankfully intelligible.

I step into the redness.

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## Monkey Business

The horror behind the portal is a small yet brightly lit hotel. The front desk's bell glints from the soft ceiling lights. Adjacent to the empty reception is a table with a fringed lampshade and two comfortable quilted seats on either side. An elaborately framed portrait of an amethyst crystal hangs at ease. A happy little blackboard has a welcome message written in chalk: WELCOME! BREAKFAST AND MURDER UNTIL TEN AM.

Bierce speaks as if right beside me: "What a charming little hotel. Bring back any memories?"

Something is seriously off about this hotel.

A prickly hot feeling builds in my gut. I *know* this place. This is somewhere personal for some intangible reason, someplace the portal shouldn't be able to pluck out and distort. I follow the path through a frustratingly cheery hall and stop at the cardboard monkey cutout. With harsh colours and thick lines, it's a little smaller than an actual person. A friendly bellhop monkey waves with eerily small pupils directed at me.

It falls flat on its face.

I jump, not really knowing why. The build-up tension of just *being* in this realm is getting to me. This bizarre dream of an experience is slowly bleaching the disbelief, replacing it with dread. *Fates far worse than death?* Is that what's at stake here?

Sets of polished elevator doors line the hall. And at the very end is a grand set of wooden double doors, just closing as I walk in. *There was something inside that lift.* As the whatever-it-was is taken to another level, I grind my nails into my palm and watch the artwork. A classical painting of a horrific ape-looking thing with sharp teeth and a pie-frill around its neck; a repulsive piece of some ancient god devouring a human with a monkey's head crudely pasted onto the devourer; the Mona Lisa with a mysterious-looking primate posing over her remains.

The lift *dings* and I step cautiously inside. There are scratches on the otherwise-polished floor as if something inhuman has scuffled around in here. The

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buttons on the console are nothing I've seen - strange, abstract symbols, at least twelve in seemingly random order. I hover my finger over the controls - and the fifth button pops out in green. The doors swish closed after me and the ride automatically begins. The lift music is surprisingly relaxing - a blend of gentle snare, saxophone and jazz piano.

"Going up?" Bierce queries just as I start to let my nerves relax.

The lift jolts suddenly as if its wires seize up. My breath catches and I grip an interior rail for support. The elevator is large enough so I can't spread both hands on either wall; I don't think anything human-sized is designed to fit through here.

*"Leisure Towers - Fifth Circle. Enjoy your stay."*

The lift *dings* and the doors neatly slide open.

The hotel's wallpaper is strangely discoloured as if bleached. Everything lies in a sickly yellow-green haze, and the prior comfort of the lobby is absent. The rectangular room is scarcely furnished by a torn plush armchair and a cracked table with a singular flickering lampshade. The room's centre boasts the same hideous gargoyle statue, still holding a copper orb (now shrouded in glowing violet webs).

There are two doorways, both crudely boarded with brittle wood. I can't see how barriers so flimsy can keep out whatever's shredded the chair, or how it vanished from the elevator in the first place. *Maybe it went to a different floor.* A single glowing violet crystal hovers above the ground. The gem is angular and about the size of a ruler. It bobs gently up and down.

I step towards the jewel, fascinated.

"Now listen closely," Bierce commands so suddenly I flinch. I dig my nails into my palm. "See those floating bits of crystal?"

Through the boards, more glows follow. All of these identical gemstones bob above the ugly yellow rug. More vanish around the corners.

Sweat trickles down my back, hot and cold simultaneously. I pull uncomfortably at my shirt. How can this woman be so apathetic? "Those are soul shards, fragments of human spirit scattered throughout the halls of this little maze. Each shard is remnant of one who has met their end here. Gather them all, and the ring piece will be yours. Oh,

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and one more thing - you're not alone. There are monsters in here, and they're looking for you." My brain is already fabricating claws and teeth. I won't be as scared if I know what it looks like.

There's a *poof* of violet. An object appears in the air, promptly dropping into my trembling hands. An iPad. It nearly slips through my fingers with the shock of having something just... magically *appear* there.

Almost carelessly, Bierce says, "Oh, here. You'll need this. It was left by the last... guest to disappoint me here." Her voice turns wistful. "A very *clever* girl... just not a very fast runner." I wonder if this woman can sense my rising fear. Perhaps she enjoys it. There are two ghostly claps; totally invisible yet unavoidably *there*. "Enough instruction. Break those boards and let's get this party started!"

The last word from her is a dark chuckle. Then Bierce vanishes.

My heart threatens to crawl out of my throat. I force it down; panic will get me nowhere. Turning the iPad over, I inspect the screen. There's a slight crack that boasts a time of war and survival. Faint white outlines join together in a strange drawing - wait, no. *Map*. Little violet dots are scattered across the maze's halls. Above that is a tab reading a number - 290 - besides two empty balls that evidently serve no purpose.

The shard's light is reflected somewhat nauseatingly by the flickering lamp. For such explicit instructions, Bierce conveniently omitted what I actually have to *do*, like she already expects me to fail.

I reach out for the shard.

The glassy surface touches my palm. The sharp jewel feels like it's been dunked in a bucket of ice. Startled, I swat the air. The soul crystal is nowhere to be found. I check the tablet's number: 289.

The boards are weak and brittle. I take them in my hands and they crumble from my mere touch. Rusted nails jolt the carpet. Layers of fragile timber are raggedly crossed as I keep going. An awful lot of noise is made and dust rises from the debris. If that wasn't enough to alert the hotel's beasts, I don't know what is.

Hallways twist in sharp corners and sudden turns. The walls are uncomfortably tight, fit with symmetrical doors on either side. Nervously, I turn the handle of one. Locked.



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Two or three shards line each hall, vanishing around the side. I experimentally touch a few - the number depletes. Great; now I just have to survive.

*From what?*

Already, it feels like I'm running in circles. The map says I'm moving, but everywhere in this blasted hotel feels the same. The only checkpoints are certain paintings and the numbers on some doors. Running like a mouse in an obstacle course before the cats are let out.

Just barely, in the distance. Clumsy footsteps. Fumbling as if far too many feet are on one body. Coming from all directions but straight ahead. Those loud, clunky things pound closer. I hasten my pace to a jog.

Listening intently over my own footsteps and increasingly ragged breathing is tough. Multiple times, I find myself going around in a circle and having to check the tablet. Whenever I bring up the faintly cracked screen, I'm in danger of running blindly into a wall. That enormous number of lost souls declines one... by... one. The footsteps increase. A thousand images spring to mind, but I can't pinpoint one. Accompanying the thuds is a strange, springy, almost *mechanical* noise, like a metal spring being rhythmically shaken.

Thudding... and thudding... and thudding... like the entire labyrinth of bleached wallpaper and taunting paintings is being shaken by a gargantuan fist.

*SCREEEECH!*

A hulking beast clogs the hallway. Its hideous human-like feet pound up and down robotically. Its great ugly head is twice the size of its body and bobs in time to its lethal march. The monkey's crisp crimson bellhop uniform is trimmed with both gold and a more permanent shade of red. Protruding from those comically prissy sleeves are two jagged blades of wicked steel.

I skid on the carpet in terror. I expect it to pile under my feet like in a cartoon, but it thankfully holds stable. As the monkey's shrieks rip through the hotel, I scatter in the opposite direction. Only thirty shards in and I'm already being chased.

Tearing through the next hallway, there's another primal scream - a *second* monkey.

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The monkey's face is the worst. Teeth stick out from jagged, unnatural angles, skewered in all directions inside that gaping maw. The primate's eyes are milky and plastic, whizzing wildly in all directions without corresponding to each other. A teeny-tiny bellhop hat totters on its already unstable head.

"It's almost got you! Run!" Bierce shouts.

There's no time to scream back. All of my energy is expelled struggling to juggle the tablet, the shard count and my life. One set of clumsy footsteps grows fainter, then nearer again. Flicking my eyes to the tablet, I realise that I'm at the hotel's corner. A dangerous ring of doors is my only escape. If I'm too slow, those awful mechanical murderers will catch up.

My lungs gasp for air. My legs burn without stamina. My brain bursts in its frenzied haste to find a solution.

*One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! SEVEN! EIGHT! NINE -!*

My hands flail for the final three shards in the ring. A stabbing pain drives through my chest. Time freezes as I dare to look down. There, protruding from my ribs, is a kitchen blade.

A single trickle of blood stains my clothes.

Behind me, cackling in an insane human way, my killer trusts its arms out with a gleeful shriek. I pitch forward like a ragdoll. Its equally enthused friend rounds the corner and merrily stabs its blade through my stomach.

The pain is unbearable.

I remember screaming, and I remember those horrific bone-sharp chompers gnashing right above my head.

Then there's floating silence. Someone *tuts* from the shadows.

"Oh, dear, did I forget to mention you have multiple lives?" Bierce comments off-handedly as if none of this really matters to her. Almost *disdainfully*. I can't see myself, viewing the world as if through third-person. The woman's hands rub her temples. "Avoid the monsters, love. Or if you prove to be too incompetent, I shan't supply you with any more. Heavens know there are far better souls to dedicate my powers and time."

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I bite my tongue so hard that it draws blood. The coppery taste is still in my mouth. As much as I'm growing to despise Bierce, I can't speak back to her. She's the only chance at redemption I'll ever have. From now on, no words will come out of my mouth, especially not to her. My self-restraint has almost dissolved from being literally impaled, but I picture myself nodding.

The figure in the darkness waves her regal hand.

The musty scents of the hotel are back.

I fumble in a sudden frisson of panic. The tablet is back in my hand. And, resting my hand against my wounds, I curiously discover they're no longer there. Fear remains, though, and I can already hear those springy mechanical footsteps. I take a final look at the ring altar, inhale deeply, squeeze my free fist shut, and break the second set of boards.

I instantly take the outer route first. Maybe if I collect all the outer crystals and work my way in, I can keep myself in a straight line and therefore the monkeys behind. They can't corner me so easily then. Oh, and those three stuck floating the corner I missed. My building anxiety spike just thinking of it. Where are the monkeys now?

Golden bells suddenly ring. After a moment, they're gone, replaced by rhythmic thumps. The doors flashing past suddenly open, revealing more, smaller monkeys. They drum their knives on the wood before retreating like cuckoo clocks. The bells cease.

My strategy is to skirt the map's edges and take as many long, straight corridors as possible. I take bursts of running, pause at the twists, quickly check around, listen, and repeat. The thunder of the monkeys is always approaching - *slowly*. It's like they always know my location, but they're not quick enough to close in. The only way they can catch me is if I'm distracted.

It turns out there are quite a few distractions.

For one, a strange increasing crescendo of percussion cutlery. Pots, pans, forks, spoons, knives - all sorts of tools bashed together as if a clumsy yet talented band has fallen down the stairs and still endeavours to play. Faraway baritones echo through the peeling wallpaper. The clicking of knives and footsteps and the ruckus that's fired up seals the first nightmare into a noisy, disorienting labyrinth. I follow a line of purple

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crystals and end up in a different room without realising. Startled, I look up from the tablet. I haven't even been checking my surroundings.

A small kitchen lines the hall on either side. Smart black and white tiles break off from the vomit-green rugs, and polished marble replaces the peeling wallpaper. The kitchen counters fill the entire space, the alcoves behind seemingly having no entry or exit points besides leaping over the divider. I peer over the edge anyway. There's some littered mail and a note hastily tacked to the inside. Curious, my nails work at the pin.

A nearby shriek jars my focus. My heart pounds. *No time for collecting notes.*

The next minutes are a blur of exhausted terror. My hands have gone numb from gripping the tablet and lunging after soul shards. I have a stitch and my legs ache. Despite this, I hear: "You've gathered half the shards. I'm impressed." I can barely focus on Bierce's voice anymore. "I would have thought you'd be shredded by now..."

*I will be shredded if you keep talking*, I gripe. If Bierce hears me, her only response is a sniff.

There's a flickering golden object on my map. Frowning, I break eye contact with the screen. Up ahead is a golden orb. The monkeys are devastatingly close. With nothing to lose but my life, I touch the globe. Heat sears my body. The skull-rattling shrieks of the monkeys falter.

I turn the corner - and nearly scream.

My ankle catches the wall's corner. The carpet is ragged and I come crashing onto a hard set of feet. The wind-up key on the monkeys' backs are spluttering, and the continuous swing of knives roves like a pendulum. Just. Above. My. Head. The monster smells of rancid milk, old rot and dried blood. I scramble between the monkey's legs.

*Come on, come on... only fifty shards to go...*

The stun orb's gone out; the mechanical nightmares are back. I zip through the kitchen, around a knot of corners and find myself at the site of my prior death. My heart clenches; there's a nasty spill of fresh blood. My body is nowhere to be found. Eager to escape as fast as I can, I grab the three shards and follow the tablet's arrow. There are barely any left to collect...

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According to the tablet - which now has a little arrow pointing to the closest shards - the final ten are around a ring I purposely avoided. My lungs burn and I can barely stand from non-stop sprinting. The musty air of the hotel is making me dizzy. The ugly, contorted 'music' emanating from the walls grows louder. There's so much going on I can't think. As the tablet blurs before my eyes, I take a moment - and slowly *walk*, resting a hand against my heart. It has to be slamming at two hundred beats per minute.

Violent slashes of metal swish through the air. The monkeys are more furious than ever, enraged that their lunch has somehow arisen from the dead. I wonder dizzily what could possibly make me endure this torture. Maybe my BPM will go so high that I'll have a heart attack and the monsters won't even have to kill me.

I admit I say one word: a rather nasty swear.

I think it's justified.

I feverishly count the shards. Each number is tantalising despite dwindling in the single digits. I ache to run *just* a little bit faster, a little bit longer. *I have to hold on... I have to hold on...* The monkeys split, one hot on my tail and the other positioning itself in front of the exit. An easy catch for them.

The final shard rips along my fingertips.

I lunge and slide. A slit of scarlet makes me cry out in pain, but the monkeys are so confused they smash into each other. I turn back once, seeing them struggle to turn around. Ducking under the first monkey's side means a deep gash is inflicted on my forearm. Clutching it tightly and blinking back tears of pain, I speed-walk out of reach.

"You've gathered all of the soul shards!" Bierce almost sounds impressed. *Almost*. "The ring piece is now exposed... and the monsters will go into a frenzy." Sure enough, the monkeys are bawling at the top of their tinny lungs. There's dreadful rattling, and I power-walk past the kitchen. Something has entered through the STAFF ONLY doors. Something with hands that roar to the sound of a buzzsaw. "Get to the ring piece! Now!"

A springy theme plays as if through a badly tuned radio. The jolly sound gets closer and closer...

The altar (thank God!) is shown on the tablet. It isn't far, either.

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Broken wood litters the ground and I sprint over it. The violet barrier around the gargoyle's treasure is gone. A tiny, tiny floating thing lies inside, just begging to be taken...

Using the statue's wing to push me up, I make a crazed swipe for the ring piece. The monster in the doorway barely has time to scream in violent indignation before poofing in a cloud of purple mist. Almost a shame - the chef monkey had a nice Italian moustache.

A deep growl rattles the hotel. "Hrghh... who dares?!"

"Shoot, he knows you're here now," Bierce hisses. "You need to leave. Get to the portal, hurry!" The lift dings open. I throw myself inside. My lungs seize with panic - I don't know what floor the portal's on. But the lift lazily closes its doors.

A monkey has other ideas. Howling, the beast lunges for the half-open doors -  
- and they slam shut on its ugly snout.

Hideous dents slam through the gold. A spine-chilling shriek of metal puts my teeth on edge; the monkey's knives must have clattered against the door. I slump against the support rails, half-dead with exhaustion. I do have a watch, but there's no time nor chance to use it in the hotel. If timed, I think I took - what - one hour? A full sixty minutes of uncontrolled mayhem?

The lift's relaxing cello halts. After a charming *ding*, the doors open.

The halls are suspiciously quiet. After waiting for a few seconds, to catch my breath, I force my feet to carry me forwards.

Bierce yells, "Run!"

Every lift lining the corridor opens at once. There's no turning back; that uncomfortably brief break was enough to ready my body for more running - against time, against the monkeys, against my own fear. With the ring clutched in one hand and the tablet in the other, I tear around the corner, leap over the discarded bellhop cutout, swerve around the next bend and fly past the reception. A beast claws its way from behind the counter and lunges. The knife blade hits my ankle as I flee through the portal.

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## Preperation

The ring piece slips from my hands. It bounces once, twice, thrice across the ballroom floor, skidding close to the edge.

“Careful with that!” Bierce barks, reaching a hand. The piece is sucked into her palm. The woman gazes at the treasure as if reconciling with a long-lost child. Then her face snaps back into focus. *Her* focus; mine is on the gut-wrenching pain in my leg and forearm. I collapse before the portal, revelling in the platform’s cool touch. I can feel my chest struggling to relax. I close my eyes, just for a moment, and the monkeys’ jaws snapping are all I see.

Bierce steps delicately toward me. She doesn’t bother snapping at me to get to my feet; I think she has a slight twinge of empathy somewhere. “Open your eyes as I speak to you,” she commands. I peel my sticky palms away from my face. The shard tablet vanished when I broke through the portal.

The ring piece must have been placed at the altar already. I rub the fading teeth out of my eyes. Bierce’s fingers tap together. A slight smile touches her face. “Good! You gathered the first piece.”

*First*, I groan internally. My brain is on overdrive. *That... that was just the first...*

Bierce’s thin lips twist into a face of distaste. “And I see you met my friend, sooner than I was expecting.”

*What -?* I think hazily, closing my eyes again. Bierce claps twice, and the surface beneath me changes. Confused, I wriggle onto my back. She’s placed me on the staircase. Directly above my head is that bulb in the hellish door. With a sudden *bang*, the bulb snaps open. A lizardlike eye spins madly before settling on Bierce.

“Bierce!” drawls a voice. Deep and acidic. The eyeball is bloody red with a black pupil, the pupil ringed by ill pale yellow. There are cracks in the eye’s colour as if infected by some awful disease. Nonetheless, the door rolls its eye. “Still so persistent after all this time...” My thoughts are whizzing, something like *OH MY GOD NOW THERE’S A TALKING EYEBALL*, and I flinch when the eye suddenly roves to me. “Oh dear, look at the little mortal. A tad tired from your trip, I presume?”

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“The trip *you* put him through,” Bierce snaps. Her statement is odd - maybe she *does* care...?”

“Do not listen to her, mortal,” the door warns with a growl. “She’s just using you. Give her the ring and there will be... *consequences*.” The pain in my arm throbs. I roll a little to the right and the eye follows, unblinking. “This is your only warning. Help her, and you will *suffer*.”

*I’m already suffering*, I hiss in my head. But I can’t speak. Not even if I wanted to.

Bierce scoffs, “Pay no attention to *him*. His powers cannot reach you here! Trust me, you’re not the first to go through his frightening tactics. All bark and no bite. Mortal, join me at the ring altar.” She frowns. “*Now*.”

The eyeball hisses in contempt as I struggle to rise. Observed by both, I scoot onto my butt. I can’t stop squeezing my arm. I just can’t.

“Not very bright, is he?” the door inquires mildly. “Tell us, mortal. What’s your name?”

“Quit bugging him,” Bierce bristles. The eyeball goes quiet. The woman elegantly raises her hand, squinting at my wounds. I wince and peel my hands back - the skin has knitted over. The drying blood on my arm remains, but I run my hand over the smooth skin. I breathe a sigh of relief. “My mortals are none of your concern.”

“Because they never do anything to be concerned about,” the door jeers.

As they bicker, I descend the stairs. My steps are wobbly, so I cling to the ornate golden rail. At the ring altar, Bierce supremely ignores the door.

“The ring is called the Riddle of Heaven. An ironic name, don’t you think? A demon’s power is contained inside it: the creature of infinite cruelty that you just met. *Malak*.” Her blue eyes narrow at Malak’s door. She sniffs again, and the door’s eye snaps back shut. Her attention returns to me. “With the ring’s power, I can complete my - *your* - sincerest desire. There is no returning home until you bring me the ring, love.” Her blue eyes pierce me. “Eight more pieces left... are you ready for another nightmare?”

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Honestly, I’m not ready.



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The sensation of one death is enough to make me never want to enter a portal again. The second one has lit up with red - an image of a terrifying, grinning face. An *almost* human face. Spiky shoulder-length hair sweeps across her shoulders.

*Her. Her. Them. Them.*

I feel like I'm going mad. I don't know my own name. I don't know who I'm supposed to be dying for. All I know is that I must... keep... going...

...even if that means dealing with Bierce's attitudes and Malak's sarcasm and the monsters' cruelty and my own stupid human weakness.

I can't help but wonder what Bierce does in the ballroom all day. I've seen her standing almost frozen, watching space. How many people have been here? Are... have they all been converted to soul shards? *The shards that Bierce wears around her neck?*

Time is faulty. I've finally checked my watch, but the blinking numbers haywire whenever the screen flickers on. Finally fed up, I unstrapped the useless thing and chucked it into the abyss. I watched it fall into the blackness, and it never popped back up. Sinking with a sigh, I sit at the edge. I wonder if I'll fall forever or if there's some form of death down there. I don't know which is worse.

My body has slowly returned to normal. I wish I had a heart rate monitor to laugh at my spasmodic BPM. All of the time here is spent restlessly pondering questions I'll never have answers for - unless I enter that second portal.

Physically, despite the frantic response when I recall the monkeys, I feel reasonably okay. I get up and stare into the portal with nothing else to do. The beetle-black eyes of the ghost girl peer back.

"Clock's ticking," Bierce tuts. Whether she's talking to me or space, I don't know.

My throat aches from lack of speech. I want to say something, anything. I want to expel all of the stress this ballroom gives me. But, in the end, I can't bring myself to.

*I can give you a new life.*

*I can complete your sincerest desire.*

*There's no returning home... until you bring me the ring.*

And... even if I don't remember my name... or know why I'm here...

...there has to be a *reason*, right?

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Why I'm here... this has to be something *I* did. A world of nightmares and demons? Only death awaiting me? *It's like I'm in a hell.* And, as the legends and tales go, hell is where the worst of the worst head after death.

So the past self that I don't remember must have been terrible.

I glance over my shoulder at Bierce. She gestures imperiously. "Off you go, then."

My eyes are set on the second portal.

A flickering mirage of a little girl and her mother appears in my eyes. It's so sharp it's like a bellhop's blade - a child of eleven, her hair set in braids, her expression frightened. She tightly grips the hand of a lady whose blazer is buttoned with badges of positive messages. They watch me unblinkingly, shimmering in my vision.

I speak for the first time in what seems like forever. "Tammy... Elise..." My voice breaks. "This is for you."

I stare that stupid portal into its beady little gremlin eyes.

If facing my worst nightmares is what it takes to be good again, I'll pay the price.

