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Into Paradise, a Human

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Up at the scenic overlook off Oleander Road, watching the lights of Middletown below, the rain had fallen as soft and quietly as if Nature herself were crying her commiseration with Greg's loss. He'd taken Olivia there since they'd been old enough to drive, two teens giggling at the frightening possibilities of life, but giggling together. When their college acceptances had come back only to dash any hope of their going away to the same school, it was while parked off of Oleander Road that they had decided they'd rather stay at home and go to State and be together. Greg had planned an extravagant evening, a year ago, but it had felt wrong to include the whole dining room of a fancy restaurant or to stand under a sky that wasn't theirs, and so he'd waited until they'd crested the hills surrounding Middletown and reached the scenic overlook before pulling off the road and pulling out a ring. A year later the rain picked up as he drove toward an empty apartment with a full

mind.

The swelling-river noises of tires on wet pavement quieted into nothing as its stifling scent evaporated in Greg's mind. The road, dim through the frantic wipers and fogged windshield, faded. He saw their bed, the rose-light of dawn a halo enveloping her, from the ripple of her bronze hair to the rising curve of her hips leaving the thin sheet. She smiled in the acuteness of a need as gentle as a sigh and as needful as air. Her hand reached for him. Her lips shaped three words. The blast of an oncoming car's horn heralded the end, as Greg snapped back to the present only to careen from his lane into the other and then across the treacherous road. He never clearly saw the tree or felt the glass.

Reeds swayed between his opening eyes and the light, light felt as a sensation more than as warmth, as a peace more than as the absence of darkness. The scent of the reeds woke him, a fragrance strange and sweet. As he became aware of consciousness returning, he turned his head and found that he lay amid a garden of reeds, something like moss cushioning his head. With a start, he came up on his elbows and looked at his body, his chest and arms, his hands, and touched his face. He was unhurt. No slashes nor blood, no cracked ribs nor even

a single bruise marred his body. He looked good; he thought he looked as good as he had senior year, a god of the track team. Then he heard singing.

The reeds crowded down to a pond or oasis of sorts, encircled by trees with bark like silver scales and leaves like wisps of emerald gauze. The water looked cool as it rippled, a molten azure, from a misty fountain hardly to be seen at the pond's center. Across the pond, figures lay with their legs in the water, or danced in pairs or groups of three or more, or embraced on the ground in the various poses and rhythms of lovemaking. All of them, though, all whose mouths were not otherwise occupied, sang. They sang a lilting song of words that Greg had never heard before—he was not even sure that he was hearing them now—and yet he knew their meanings: beauty, love, pleasure, peace. As he watched and his eyes grew sharper in the sourceless light, a reed blossom brushed his cheek and its softness awoke a shout within him.

“This,” he said, his voice a whisper of uncertain use, “this must be Paradise. I’ve died. I’ve crashed the car and I’ve died. But if I have, and this is Paradise, then Olivia must be here somewhere. Olivia.”

He scrambled to his feet, expecting soreness or the clumsiness that comes after a long convalescence, but

found only strength. He set off at a quick walk but was soon striding and then running and then sprinting and laughing as he ran, tears hot on his cheeks. He circled the pond and was nearly among the figures he'd seen from the other shore before they saw him. When they did, though, the cry that erupted from them was of horror and fear. Their screams were of panic, filling the air, shocking Greg to a stumbling halt. Some stared for a moment, their bodies recoiling of their own accord despite their minds' fascination, before they turned and bolted from the pond.

“Wait, where are you going?” Greg called after them. “Who are you?”

Only shouts of alarm replied.

“What are you?” he asked quietly of the empty shore.

They had looked, from a distance, as any man or woman might look. When he had drawn near, however, Greg had seen that they appeared quite different. Their skin was as white as cream, pierced nowhere, not for mouth nor nose nor even for eyes. Their curves connoted gender but nothing more. They had neither hair nor fingernails. And yet, for all their strangeness, Greg felt drawn to them. He felt no fear of them. They seemed to exude a warmth similar to that of the light of Paradise.

“I must have frightened them,” he thought aloud. “Perhaps my body is still partially alive somewhere and so I haven’t fully taken on the form of the others here. Well, it can’t be helped. Olivia must be here somewhere. I’ll simply have to calm these people down and ask how to find her.”

The trees thinned the farther from the pond Greg went. Through them, he saw a small village of sorts. Their homes were as white as plaster formed into domes and ovals, with many terraces and balconies, joined by gardens of peculiar fruit-bearing trees and flowers of multitudinous color and form and size. The few streets were paved with interlocking stones shaped like leaves. The people, though, were not as peaceful as their village. The returning bathers had spread warning and everywhere people were darting inside or racing off to the farther dwellings to bring word.

With a dash, Greg reached the back garden of one of the peripheral houses. He crept around until he could hear what was being said in the street. Their voices came to his mind, though, rather than to his ears, and it came only faintly. It was not until a woman screamed that he heard a word distinctly: “A human! A human has come, save us.”

“Yes, a human,” another said. “Unbelievable but

true: I saw it. Holes in its face, one filled with sharp fangs; the flesh above pulled back to reveal orbs of pulsating color; and tentacles—have mercy—it was covered with tiny tentacles from its head down its chest and then down both arms and legs. It was horrifying! A human.”

As the small clusters of people fled inside and closed their doors, Greg leaned his back to the wall and sank to the ground. “A human?” he thought. “Are they not humans? Where am I, then?”

He could hear doors closing throughout the village but looking up and down the row of houses, he noticed a forgotten door remained open. On the second floor, a balcony overlooking a garden, a rearward-facing door stood ajar. Wanting answers, Greg slipped off to that house.

He leaped into a tree nearby and pulled himself up into its limbs. After a quick scramble, he was close enough to jump onto the balcony. In a moment, he was through the doorway and into a bedroom. The décor was strange in form but inviting nonetheless; its softness was not diminished by the strangeness of its design. Careful to make no sound, Greg padded to the interior door and slowly opened it. From a landing, he looked down on a woman struggling to push what must have been a bookcase against of the front door, as a barricade.

She did not hear him descending the stairs and turned only when he was an arm's length from her. She recoiled in fear and shock but was unable to scream. Greg took her raised and shaking arms in his hands and held her by the wrists.

"Please don't hurt me," she cried. "Please don't hurt me. Don't drag me down to earth. I don't want to go, please."

"Listen. Listen!" he said. "I'm not going to hurt you. And I have no intention of going back to earth. This is Paradise, isn't it?" She nodded. "Well, where else would I want to be? I just arrived. I'm not sure why I don't look like everyone else here. Haven't others arrived? Isn't this where we go?"

"You can look like us?" she asked aghast. "You can cast a spell and appear Paradisian? Oh no, there are more of you."

"That's what I'm trying to find out," he said. "I'm looking for a woman, she would have arrived a couple months ago. Her name is Olivia."

"No, I've never seen a human before; I don't know!" she wailed. "I've heard the stories but never has a human come to our village. Please, let me go. Don't drag me down to the pit of earth."

"I don't understand," he said, exasperated, throwing

her hands away from him. "Why are you so afraid? And why do you speak about earth like that? Isn't this Paradise? Isn't this where humans go when we die?"

"What is die?" she asked, huddling away and into a corner. "A spell?"

"This doesn't make sense," he said, running his hands over his head. "Why are you so afraid? Of me, of earth?"

"It's earth," she said, growing breathless from shock. "It's full of humans. Humans everywhere. Hurting one another, slashing and beating and worse. Torture. Burning. Fire everywhere. Choking on the fires of earth. Poisoning the waters. Starving everyone and everything. Conflagrations of pain. Plagues sweeping the land unchecked. Powerful humans commanding towers built of skulls. Meager humans who hunger for torment, lashing out for the punishment they desire. There is war. There is hate. There is destruction. Earth is the prison of the wicked and humans are the embodiment of evil."

"That's what you think of earth?" he said.

"You are not the first, human," she said, shock calming her to a dreamy surrender. "Humans have always dragged themselves up from earth. But when they get here, they try to make an earth of Paradise."

"I had made a paradise of earth," he said quietly to himself. "Olivia and I had." More loudly, he said, "All I

want is to find her. If humans come here and are shunned by whatever you are, where do they go? Where would I find Olivia?"

The door shook with a mighty blow from without. Greg jumped back a step and watched as the blow was repeated again and again twice more. The last blow overturned the bookcase and the round door fell in. Over the wreck of the doorway, seven Paradisians swarmed in, each armed with a carafe of clear liquid or a glowing rod. The foremost of them swung its carafe in a wide arc, splashing Greg with its contents.

Screaming in pain, Greg stumbled back, crashing into the wall behind him. He slapped at the burning liquid, falling over a piece of furniture that smashed beneath him. His screams were terrible in their echoing reverberation; the Paradisians pulled back, wasting their advantage. Regaining his feet, Greg shouted, "What are you doing? What is that, acid?"

"It is Water of Growth and Renewal, human," the bold one shouted back. "Anathema to your evil kind."

Again the bold Paradisian swung his carafe and drenched Greg in a spray of burning fluid. Screaming his pain and anger, Greg retreated to the back room. The Paradisians ranged across the archway, shielding the woman who still huddled on the floor.

"Did he hurt you?" one asked her.

"He tried to cast a spell on me," she mumbled. "Tried to make me an Olivia, drag me down to earth."

"Human!" another shouted at Greg. "You will never have her."

"That's not what I said," Greg shouted back.

"Lies," the Paradisian cried. "It already weaves its spells and lies. No one listen to it! Quick, we must drive it away before it drags any of us to earth."

With that, four of the newcomers attacked in unison, either trying to douse Greg with the Water of Growth and Renewal or to club him with their glowing rods, of which Greg did not want to discover the effect. Bursting out through the garden door, Greg ran. But he did not escape his tormentors.

Through the trees that led toward the pond, more Paradisians came, armed like the seven inside. Everywhere Greg turned, more Paradisians loomed, always driving him on with shouts of, "Evil human! We shall drive you from Paradise. Back to Earth where you belong."

Charging between two houses, Greg emerged on the street only to find it blocked in both directions. His back then exploded in a searing heat that threatened to overwhelm him. He ran in the only direction not blocked

by a Paradisian: into a garden several homes down the street. Tripping in his haste, he fell to his knees on the stone flags, crawled in a mad scramble until he could rise again, and then burst through a hedge and onto a greensward. A circle had been drawn on the springy moss lawn, a large star inside a circle with many symbols between the points. When Greg reached the far side of the star he found he could go no farther. Some invisible force kept him from leaving the circle.

“Trapped, human,” a Paradisian said as the hunters surrounded him. “Trapped in the Expulsion Circle, just as we planned. You are not the first of your evil kind to soil Paradise with your presence. But your corruption ends now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he shouted and then held up his hands as another splash of water seared him. “I haven’t done anything to you!”

“And we mean to keep it that way,” another Paradisian said, striking from beyond the edge of the circle with its glowing rod. The blow drove Greg to his knees.

“Answer me, human,” the Paradisian said: “who summoned you to Paradise?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Greg repeated.

“We will remind you of the torment of earth if

we have to, human,” another Paradisian said and then splashed him. Greg screamed and frantically wiped the burning fluid from his skin. “Who summoned you?”

“I don’t know what happened,” he said, panting with pain. “I died; I woke up in the reeds by the pond; that’s all.”

The Paradisians exchanged looks before one spoke. “Perhaps he is a dull human,” one said. “It does not know why it was summoned. I’ve heard such is possible.”

“It lies, never forget that,” another Paradisian said. “They are capable of saying that which is untrue.”

“I will not harm any of you,” Greg said. “I only wished to find Olivia.”

“And what is an Olivia?” the Paradisian asked.

“No!” several others shouted. “Do not ask for its lies or you will be corrupted. No doubt this Olivia it seeks is something it wishes to destroy or harm or whatever it is humans do in their ghastly mirth. Let us send him back to earth.”

“I agree,” another Paradisian said. “Its lies have already begun. But don’t bother, human. You’ll not lure any of us away. You’ll be back in the pit of earth in time to torture someone for your next meal, don’t worry. Begin the ritual!”

In chanted words that Greg could not understand,

the gathering of Paradise caused the star and circle to glow. First a haziness filled Greg's vision, then his hearing became muffled, diffused; pain began in his spine and soon radiated out to all his limbs. He curled into a ball, screaming in agony until, without distinctly knowing it, the pain changed. It was not the pain of torment at all, now, it was the discomfort of confinement, of expectation.

He couldn't breathe. He was squeezed from all sides; his arms and legs flailed as if of their own accord but he could not get free. Something pushed, squeezing him tighter; he moved. Pain. The suffocation should have killed him already and yet somehow he remained conscious, alive. Cold. Thought impossible. Air. Light. Hands upon him.

"You can stop pushing now, Margaret," Dr. Winston said. "We have the placenta and it's time for Rick to do his stuff. How about it, daddy? Ready with those scissors?"

"Do you know what you're going to name him?" a new nursing intern asked, more excited than the new parents.

"We were thinking Greg," Margaret said between gasps, another nurse patting her sweaty forehead with a

cloth. "After my grandfather."