

You really shouldn't be here, not under any circumstances. That nagging fear flits around your mind on repeat as, flashlight in hand, you let darkness overtake you. The jumbled mess of caution tape and government-issue danger signs posted outside spell everything out clearly. And if those warnings aren't enough, the grotto's entrance itself stands sealed. Controlled cave-in. That they did ages ago, allegedly for your safety and everyone else's. No one knows the reason, or if one was ever even given. This all happened far back enough to be out of living memory—long enough for rain and flooding to carve a small crevice through rock and rubble.

After crawling your way through twists and turns, you reach wide-open tunnel. Clearly, the collapse had been made in haste. Its jagged aftermath extended only so far. Now before you, an age-old corridor stretches on and on. Forever, as far as you can guess. All lamplight is swallowed up by total blackness ahead. You lower your torch to illuminate the dusty gravel at your feet as cautiously, you inch your way forward. At first, you let your free hand travel across the stony surface of the wall. Several cuts and scrapes in, however, and soon you opt to travel with your arm lowered at your side.

You meander on this way for the better part of an hour before anything changes. You notice the switch from natural cave to constructed passage almost immediately. The rough, pointed tunnel-sides give way to smoothed granite. Ornate tiled floor appears in place of pebbles and dirt. And for the first time, you finally notice something seems off. Here the air feels thick and oppressive. Each shaky step forward takes more and more to manage. Your breathing grows labored. Your heart thumps rapidly in your chest in response to threats unseen. At once, you begin to understand exactly how this former world heritage site wound up condemned in the first place. But you being you, thrill of the unknown wins out. Your legs soon enjoy the adrenaline needed to see your unauthorized expedition through.

Ten more minutes pass as you traverse the noiseless straightaway. Far in as you are, suddenly an urge takes over you. Against your better judgment, you cry "HELLO!" as loud as you can muster and wait for the echo it yields. The sound travels on ahead, but rather than the speedy return you expect, instead comes a rich reverberation as if from some immense chamber. The cavern's end seems near. Inspired, you dash forth as fast as your weary legs allow you to. At last, your flashlight manages a small yellow pinprick amid the black ahead. You hold it steady and watch the spot grow larger and larger. Winded but eager, you run fast through an ancient archway and enter into what looks to be an enormous rotunda.

When finally you stop, you bend over, grip your knees, and wheeze heavily. You greatly overestimated the strength still left in you, and took for granted the toll the tunnel's

burdensome atmosphere had taken. Your tired muscles chide you as you saunter towards one end of the round room and take a seat. Gasping, you rest your back against the wall and pore over arcane etchings scribbled from floor to high ceiling. This written script is completely foreign to you, totally illegible. Graciously, whoever carved it also left illustrations of a nature most macabre. These you grasp well enough. Hordes of two-dimensional people, all sizes and species, kneel before some vast canid creature. You let your eyes travel across the scene, and find a grotesque relief of one subject gashing its wrist with a ritual knife. From the wound, a narrow channel cut in the granite travels down the wall and to the ground below. You notice the groove continues to spiral about the floor, weaving an intricate pattern. At its end, a wrought brass basin sits perched atop a stone altar.

You had studied your fair share in the past. Alien though these figures are, you can list off at least a half-dozen candidate civilizations with a penchant for ceremonial sacrifice. As you finally catch your breath, your common sense endures another crippling blow from your wild fancy. You inspect the damage your arm took earlier and find traces of blood on all the scrapes and cuts. Reason and gut feeling both fight with you to leave well enough alone. Still, you rationalize, you came all this way and would likely never do so again. A moment later and you resolve to stand once again. Soreness stings from head to toe as you drag yourself to the rotunda's center. You grip your light in your mouth, then swipe your freed hand's index across all your marks and scuffs. A thin film of blood soon stains your fingertip. Instinctively, you bring it down and smear it along the inside of the metal chalice.

Nothing happens, of course. Why would it? You can't help but laugh at your silly curiosity and fill the room up with sound. The echoing chuckles start to fade away as you sit back down. But silence doesn't follow. Your heartbeat loses track of any cadence. Chills jolt up your spine. To your horror, otherworldly whines issue forth from all about. To your ears, it sounds like a ghostly ensemble strumming a dirge on instruments no living thing ever heard. You make to flee, but find your legs have exhausted what little strength they had available. You watch in terrified silence as a steady stream of glowing red light pours out from the graven subject's wrist slice and travels the length of the cut groove. As it winds its way around, strange symbols previously unseen ignite upon the floor like flames. After what feels to you like eternity, the ethereal energy reaches its destination at the bowl's base.

At once, a jet of crimson light spouts from the basin and up to the ceiling. When it connects, symbols mirroring those from below sear-set themselves onto the stone. You begin to question your judgment as, in an instant, what once was rock turns formless and black. A massive chasm seems to have opened in the paved firmament above. Your eyes remain fixed on the strange anomaly until suddenly, something large appears to protrude from within.

Something alive. You chalk your next observation up to a state of pure delirium. For clad though it is in tight-fitting garments, there can be no mistaking what you see above you. A curvaceous, caramel-furred rear end and long spade-tipped tail wiggle frantically in their attempt to escape the baleful portal. Some enormous being now attempts to pass through the gateway you graciously provided!

Since your legs fail you, you fall flat to your belly and crawl for all you're worth. As you reach the rim of the rotunda, you press firmly to the wall and create distance from the oncoming figure. In good conscience, you can't believe your eyes as the scene unfolds before you.

"Damn it all, they *still* haven't fixed it?" a woman's voice exclaims. "I told them at least a dozen times, like... You see this ass? You think all *this* is ever gonna fit through a hole that small? As if..."

You look on in stunned silence as the strange being jitters about in an attempt to loose itself from the narrow opening. Abandoning the attempt, it pulls up from the circle and tries out a different tactic. Now instead, a huge paw slips out from above, then the ankle, then leg. The foot touches down with such a forceful thud as you have never heard in your life. An encore ensues in which the right paw, ankle, and leg arrive in the same manner as the first set. Once both limbs touch down, they bend at the knee, and the figure of an impossibly-large woman starts to reveal itself. Down comes her belly, then her arms, her breasts, and at long last, her face. A colossal brown dog now sits before you in totality. Simply put, she is like nothing you have ever seen. She wears a skin-tight costume that—were you in the frame of mind for forming opinions—would be best suited for Halloween. Her ample chest threatens to pop right out from the suit's meager confines. A pair of devil horns rests atop her head. Her impish grin and glowing red eyes help to round out the hellish ensemble as she eyes you over with interest. Something in her wicked gaze keeps you rooted to the spot.

"You? Really? You're behind this little rendezvous, huh? Definitely a downgrade from last millennium's model, so far as I can tell. But I ain't here to judge. Not yet, anyway..." Her cheery soprano tone rings out through the room and beyond, at odds with her grim visage. "You gonna' get that dumb look off your mug, then? Or did ya bring me here just to stare at all day long? I'll warn ya, at least three past attempts ended in tragedy for them and lunch for me, simply because my valuable time went wasted..."

You hear the demoness' stern words and make to respond, but your brain seems out of sync with the rest of you. Instead, you mutter unintelligibly while every fiber of your being aims

to halve your skyrocketing heart rate. Her smile fades. Mockingly, she brings her hand to her flopped ear and leans forward.

“Come again? Like, you didn’t actually expect me to make sense of that, right? You’re practically an insect to me, so the least you can do is speak up if you’re hoping to make this meet-up last longer than the next sixty seconds...” The mirth her voice had had clearly left when her smile did. While you can make zero sense out of anything happening in this room, you at least understand this girl can and will snuff you out in less than a minute if you give her reason to. Your nerves continue racing. Your chest rises and falls three times faster than it should. In a bid to steel even an ounce of yourself, you reach down and clutch your thigh until you feel the tips of your nails sink into your skin.

“I-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to m-mumble...” you manage at last. “I had no clue what would... That you’d...”

Her smirk returns full force. Humor grips at her cheeks and her eyes, before it makes itself known in her charming, terrifying giggle fit. “Hahaha! Wait, for real? Your dumb ass just up and came in here totally uninitiated, and just went with the flow, just like that? How the hell could you *not* know about me? I’m world-famous, dude. Last I checked, anyway...”

For the first time, the devil woman allows herself to glance away from you. She surveys the empty rotunda, then widens her eyes in realization of something as yet unknown to you. “Where *is* everybody!? You’re all on your own?” The carefree quality of her speech had now vanished completely.

“Well yeah, there’s no one here but me...” you offer up bravely.

“WHAT!?” Fury seems to take over the canine at once. With little regard for your safety, she angrily slams a closed fist to the floor. Upon doing so, the fiery symbols from before blaze hotly and nearly scorch you in the process. “You mean to tell ME—Chiru—Goddess of the Void, that in the measly thousand years since my last performance, somehow, someway, you absolute morons forgot all about me?”

“So... I should know about you, then?” you ask frightfully. Immediately, you wish you hadn’t.

“You little worm... You ingrate flea. You did *not* just ask me that in sincerity. How dare you!? How dare ALL of you!? You should know about me? The universe itself should keep

my name resting on its lips at all times..." The goddess rests her face in her hands a moment and sighs disappointedly. "All right, all right... So how much *do* you know?"

So far, honesty has failed to get you anywhere good. But with so many unknowns to factor, you decide on the straight and narrow once again. "Basically nothing... All I know is, this place is really old, and it's been completely sealed off for at least a hundred years."

"So they tried to erase me, is that what you're telling me?" Chiru asks.

"I don't know about..."

"They tried to negate my existence from their little world. Hah!" She laughs a joyless laugh. "The nerve of it all... Don't they realize that's *my* expertise? I'm the eraser, here. I'm chaos incarnate. If I were so inclined, I could snap my fingers and everything would be gone in the blink of an eye. In fact..." With that, she makes to bring her hand up to make good on her threat.

"WAIT, WAIT!" you blurt out, "Don't do anything drastic! People are short-lived, you know? We forget things all the time, or things get lost, and there's no one around to remind us."

"Go on..."

"I'll bet, like..." you start, wracking your brain for something coherent enough to placate the arbiter of your doom, "whoever built this temple pissed off the wrong folks, and they closed it off to punish them. And over time, your religion or cult or whatever you call it went extinct..."

"And I'm supposed to be okay with that, then?" As she asks this, Chiru leans down so close, her breasts frame your entire field of vision. "I'm supposed to let it slide?"

"No, no, I'd be mad too! Definitely!" At this point, you will say whatever you can to keep her satisfied.

"Then what would you suggest, bug?"

You dart your eyes about wildly as you search for a good answer. “I mean, maybe they just need to be reminded, you know? Maybe you just need to refresh their memory, make sure they never forget again!” That was your good answer?

“Hmm... Well, that sounds like an awful lot of work on my part for a bunch of idiot good-for-nothings. Why should I even be bothered?”

“Well **you** don’t have to do it! If you just let me go, I’ll make sure to tell everyone all about you. No problem!”

“To save your own skin, huh? Thanks, but no thanks. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a world to disappear...”

You’re losing ground fast. In a panic, you offer her something else. “No, no! I mean it! I’ll do it proper, I’ll do whatever you say. I’m not trying to save myself, here! I really mean it.”

“Really mean **what,** fool? What reason could you possibly have **other** than self-preservation?”

You allow yourself a hefty nervous gulp and contemplate your options. “I, uh... I think everybody ought to worship a goddess like you, you know?”

She laughs loudly at that, and for a moment, you fear the ceiling will collapse on top of you. “Is that right!? Bullshit, I don’t buy it. You just found out I existed three whole minutes ago.”

“I mean it! It’s not right that they all forgot about you, not right at all...”

“Quit wasting your breath. Prove it. Put your money where your mouth’s at.” She stands to full height, nearly skimming the domed ceiling with her horns. “Worship me, and maybe I’ll consider your proposal...”

“W-worship...” Your face flushes hotly as your heart sinks down into your belly. “Worship you!?”

“Who else, bitch?” she asks curtly.

“Right here, right now!? But how...”

“How the fuck do you think!?” Her voice teems with vitriol. Suddenly, Chiru swings her right leg forward and catches you in the stomach with her toe, launching you across the room. “On your knees, insect. Now.”

Gasping for breath, you manage to crawl toward her outstretched paw and rise to your knees. “Like this?” you ask fearfully.

“Good, you can understand basic commands. And here I thought you were completely useless... Here’s another. Kiss my foot. Now.”

You feel your cheeks heat up at her command. The demon dog’s paw alone outsizes you twice over. Thickly-padded though her toes are, you know one good step is all it would take to make you a permanent addition to the temple’s décor. Only one real choice, you tell yourself. Leaning forward, you press your quivering lips to the ball of her foot, and cling to the idea that all this is for some noble, world-saving cause...

“Hahaha! You guys never fail to crack me up, I swear. That one always does the trick.” You make to pull away, but before you can, she grips the sides of your head between two of her toes and holds you firmly in place. “What’s your rush, loser? You think one little smooch is enough to satisfy me?”

In your heart, you’d hoped it would be. As she keeps you at bay, you do everything you can to avoid admitting you really enjoy the way her foot smells.

“You’ll have to do better than that!”

“Mmmmf...” you start, prying yourself from desire, “...so what’s it gonna take, then?”

“Gonna have to be a bit more specific,” she responds. She releases you from her toe-hold, but presses forward against you as though making to stomp you into the floor. “What’s it gonna take for *what*, nerd?”

“F-for you to get what you want and head home!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be in such a rush for that to happen if I were you...” she says forebodingly. You now lie flat on your back, pinned beneath her step. Mercifully, she hasn’t broken any of your bones yet. “Do yourself a solid and look up.” She points toward the ceiling, and your eyes follow. You find the dome as it was when you first entered, no dark magic in sight.

“W-where’s the portal?”

“That thing? It’s a one-way trip! Until death do us part, that is. Your death.”

“WHAT!?” you exclaim.

“Don’t sound too pleased about it, yeesh...” she rolls her eyes casually, then once again grips your face between her toes. “What did you expect, dweeb? In the past, you little twerps considered it a great honor to be sacrificed to me. You’d pry me out of my realm, show me a good time, and then offer the summoner as tribute before sending me home. No one fussed, no one argued, and I got dinner and a show out of the deal. What’s so bad about that?”

“I don’t WANT to be sacrificed!”

“Then why the hell did you even come here, idiot?” She laughs loudly to add to her insult. “For the atmosphere?”

“I didn’t know!”

“Ignorance of the law doesn’t excuse breaking it, idiot. That’s justice 101. The way I see it, you’ve got two options. Option A, grow a spine and give me my due. But since you’re too much of a little bitch for that one, there’s always Option B...”

“O-option B?”

“Enjoy my company for the rest of your natural life: do everything I say, keep me satisfied, and never, ever step out of line. And maybe, just maybe, I’ll consider sticking around long-term until you croak...”

Being pinned under Chiru’s hefty sole has made it harder to breathe. You feel extremely woozy and lightheaded.

“I... you... what? Y-you’re joking, right? Like, demon humor, or whatever?” You know that isn’t the case before the last word even leaves your lips.

“Nah, I don’t kid about the important stuff. Them’s the breaks, you whiny little bug. You want me gone? Then buck up and let me eat you, right now. Just one gulp, and I’m gone.”

She glares down with her piercing red eyes, almost as though she's looking directly through you. "Thought not. Then get used to this sight, pipsqueak, because you'll be seeing a lot of it. And while I'm here, who knows? Maybe I'll bring the rest of the world to heel in my free-time. Global conquest never looked better, am I right? But anyhow, so long as you're just lazing around down there, I might as well learn you a thing or two about keeping me satisfied..."

She kneels down, increasing the pressure on your chest as she does so. Your heart sinks at the sight of her wicked smile. Deep down, you know very well from this point on, nothing will ever be the same again. And what's worse, some small part of you is excited about it...