

The most surprising part of death is waking up again. Don't get me wrong, I knew I was going to die. But I didn't really believe anything would happen after. Maybe heaven existed, or maybe I'd be reincarnated— But truly I felt that I would die, and everything would go black. And that'd be it.

And it is, for the most part.

I wake up, but there's no sleep in my eyes and I feel light, like I've been awake for a long time. Somehow I know I'm dead. It's like a gut feeling— or maybe it just makes the most sense considering I was in a hospital bed just moments ago, and now I'm laying in the dirt. I never really thought about how waking up in the afterlife would work. But I didn't exactly expect to be on the ground. Alone.

There isn't much around me, which feels like an understatement, because what *is* there is all so foreign. Plants that shift from teal to purple instead of green, and trees that warp around themselves, remaining still, yet seeming to change constantly.

There aren't any animals in this forrest— at least, not any that seem real. I can make out the silhouettes of birds, nestled within the branches; but they're frozen. Completely unmoving— as if they aren't there at all.

But is there one more silhouette. And I'm surprised I didn't notice it first. Something tall with antlers— Or maybe horns?.

The silhouette approaches slowly— Cautiously? Until it stops being just a shadow, and becomes something both tangible, yet horrific. And I can't decide whether I should get up and run, or continue laying here, and accept whatever fate has been handed to me.

The creature has a mans body, but the head of a deer— well, *heads*. On his left, he holds his head up high. A long neck that dissolves into a matted mess of hair and bone, and reaches up to the clean white of an exposed skull. The eyes of this head are hollow, but it seems to be the only one he commands, because the other head simply veers off to the side, hanging loosely as if it were dead, though it looks much more alive.

There's something else about him that I just can't describe.

He's something beyond my comprehension entirely, but at the same time it's like I know exactly what he is. A real God— but not the same one from the Bible.

I want to say it feels like I've always known him. That all the preaching I heard over my life was true, and I was being welcomed to a place that felt like home.

But it's nothing like that. If my life taught me anything, it's that there's always a downside. Like how a great sit-com can have a rushed ending... or how the doctors can send you home when they've missed a tumour... or how the face of God can be the most unsettling thing to wake up to. Because there's nothing familiar about death. There's just the face of a stranger.

And so I hug my arms around myself, because there's no one else to do it for me.

"Is this heaven?" I ask, but I already know that can't be right.

"This place is more of a buffer between life and death. Something like purgatory." He speaks casually, like he's had this conversation a billion times. And I have no doubt he has.

"Then what happens after this?"

He seems to shift a little, sounding a bit more sympathetic. "I'm sorry, but there isn't anything after this."— and I can't tell if he's just acting.

"Nothing?"

He nods. “You won’t exist for much longer.”

I don’t think he could have said it in a worse way. It was way too abrupt. I can hardly even process it, even though I’m just being told what I already believed. After death, I just won’t exist... I knew it, but I kind of wanted to be proved wrong. And for a minute there, I almost thought I was.

But I should have known. Of course there isn’t a heaven, or anything like it. We live and then we die; It’s supposed to be simple. But if I was anyone else I’d probably be screaming... or sobbing.

The thought of all those people waking up, excited for an immortal paradise, just to find out they don’t get to exist for much longer. It makes me sick.

I’m just glad I got a fair warning. I can’t imagine how much worse this place would be if I wasn’t prepared.

“Why?” The question’s much more hostile than I intend it to be. But it’s not like that matters.

He takes a couple steps back. Like he’s surprised. Or nervous. And for a brief moment he seems a little closer to being human, or as close as a skull-faced, immortal God can get to being human anyway— Which isn’t really close at all.

He just stands there, staring like *I’m* the anomaly. Or at least, I think he’s staring. It’s hard to tell.

I don’t really want to waste my time on him.

“Fine, don’t answer then. Just tell me how long I have.”

“A few hours. Or something like that.”

“Right. Well just leave me alone until it’s time to go then” I turn on my heel and leave him, wanting to find a quiet place to wait for my *actual* death.

I settle on what seems to be a hill, or a cliff. A place where the grass ends abruptly, but there’s no steep drop, or anything below. Simply an abyss. I bet if I stepped out onto that nothingness, I wouldn’t fall.

The sky is mismatched with every time all at once. A sun that both rises and sets, and rests beneath a star filled sky. It’s both natural and unnatural— horribly mismatched, and yet the prettiest sky I’ve ever seen. It makes my head hurt, but I can’t stop staring.

I think I could question this sky forever.

Or at least I *could* if a certain someone wasn’t hanging around distracting me.

God— Or whoever he is— peers around from behind a tree, like a shy little boy hiding behind the safety of his parents. I wonder why he wants to talk to me so bad. It’s not like I’ll be around for much longer. He said it himself, I won’t exist— God that’s a terrible thought.

“What do you want?” I’m the first to raise my voice. If he won’t leave then I don’t really have a choice. Maybe I can scare him off. Or convince him I’m not worth the time.

“I want to help you find peace”

“Right— of course. Who better than an *immortal* God to comfort someone who’s *dying*?” I don’t think I can roll my eyes any harder.

“I could say *I don’t want to die* but I’m already dead. And I don’t even *not* want to die. I have to, you know? I accepted death a long time ago.”

He sits beside me, and I scoot away. I don’t want to be anywhere close to him, even though I don’t exactly want to be alone.

“Have you really accepted it?” He asks, and the question makes me sigh.

“Yeah. I know it’s got to happen. And it’s not like I didn’t expect things to end this way. I’m fine with it.”

“But doesn’t it hurt you? To know that you’re dead?” He asks, and I realise how strange it is to be asked that kind of question.

“Well yeah. Of course it does. But somehow I’m relieved. I always thought it would just turn dark, and I’d be alone. But right now I’m still living— even if I’m not alive anymore. I can still think and breathe, and I don’t have to just be nothing. At least... not yet.”

“And that’s what scares you? Becoming nothing?”

“I think that scares everyone. Maybe even you.”

He’s quiet for a long time, and I hate how wasteful these moments of silence seem.

“You know... I would let you live forever if I could. I’d let everyone.”

“Then why don’t you?”

He doesn’t answer again, and I wonder what makes him go quiet like that. Maybe he simply can’t be bothered finding answers... But I always thought if I met God, I’d get to find out the truth of everything.

“Can you at least tell me your name? *If* you have one.”

“It doesn’t matter. No-one will remember it.” He says.

“I may be bad with names, but that’s just plain rude.”

“I mean, because you’re going to disappear.”— oh, right.

“Just tell me.”

“Magnus.” He says, and I think it’s kind of dumb. Almost like a dog’s name, except he’s a man *and* a deer so what do I know? A human name probably wouldn’t suit him. Like if he was named Ryan, or Kyle. He definitely doesn’t look like a Kyle.

“Magnus huh? Pretty weird name.”

“It’s a great name. I was given it by someone I knew a long time ago.”

“Yeah? My name was given to me by someone I knew yesterday. My Mum was the only person in the room with me before I woke up here.” — God, poor Mum.

“And what’s your name?” He asks

“I thought you already knew. You *are* God after all... But it’s Abigail. You can call me Abby.”

“Abby... pretty weird name.” — If he had an actual face, I bet he’d be smiling at his stupid joke, because I almost want to smile at it too.

It’s a long while before we talk again. He seems happy to let me explore the strange forrest he created. It’s almost like a garden, with stone archways and curving paths, except everything is overgrown. Vines and branches wrap around each other, reaching up to a cosmic sky in search of sunlight. And for a while, I actually forget about everything. For once, I’m healthy enough to walk, and I can breathe clearly.

Magnus follows as I explore, keeping his distance, and I notice he’s less like a shy child, and more like a worried parent, wanting to keep me out of trouble, or maybe keep me safe.

Further up the path, nestled under one of the stone arches is a large wooden door. It gives me a weird sense of nostalgia, and I want to peek inside. But Magnus breaks our silence.

“Abigail—“

“*Abby*” I correct.

“Abby... Stay away from that door. Please.”

“Where does it go?”

“Nowhere” — It only takes me a second to get what he means. I’m brought back to my reality, and now my exploration’s kind of been ruined. I’d happily go about my wandering, but now that I’m aware of it, One question keeps slipping back into my mind.

“Magnus. Why do we have to die?”

He doesn’t answer again. But I don’t want silence anymore.

“Magnus”

“Because I can’t control it.” He speaks quickly, like he’s confessing a secret, or panicking. “I can create life, but that’s it. Everything’s doomed to die and I can’t stop it.”

I don’t know what to say. That’s his answer? The reason I have to become nothing isn’t even understood by him?

“That’s...actually pretty sad.” I say.

“It’s the way things have to be.”

“But you’ve already lived for like billions of years. Don’t you miss anyone? Or can you even remember them? What if you meet someone you really like? You can only talk to them once because they’ll just—“ I have to cut myself off, because I realise I’m being horrible.

He doesn’t move, but in those hollow eyes that appear to see nothing, and yet see everything. I catch him searching for a glimpse of someone who no longer exists.

“I’m sorry”

“You don’t need to apologise”

“No, I’m sorry. Really.” — It’s all I can bring myself to say. I hadn’t realised how cruel this world could be to him too. Although, I’m realising a lot of things today.

“Can I tell you about her?” He asks

“Of course.”

He seems to think for a while, like he’s putting everything in order.

“She was pretty strange... When she got here, she wouldn’t tell me how she died, or what her name was. She believed in reincarnation, but she wasn’t upset when I told her what actually happens. She just asked me to give her a new name, so it’d be like she reincarnated for just a little while... I couldn’t understand how she held onto that belief, even after finding out it wasn’t true.”

“But you still gave her a new name?”

He nods. “I named her Micah... And she laughed. Apparently it’s a male name, but I couldn’t tell the difference... and she named me Magnus, and told me I could be a new person too.” He holds his hands to stop them from trembling. “I didn’t have a name before that. I didn’t really care about anyone before her either. She asked all sorts of things, like what books I liked or what kind of person I’d be if I was mortal. I’d never thought about things like that before. In a way, I think that one conversation made me somewhat closer to being human.” He says, and I don’t know if I should hug him or not, so I awkwardly pat his back.

It’s probably his first time talking about Micah, because he doesn’t seem to know what to say afterwards. I’m honestly surprised I even let him tell me about her. I always assumed I wasn’t the type to waste away my last moments... but in the hospital I just sat in bed, and right now I’m letting him tell me all sorts of things I won’t be around to remember.

Arguably, I should be emotionally dumping right now, telling him anything and everything just so there’s a chance he’ll remember who I am. But I don’t want to talk about myself.

“I haven’t forgotten anyone who mattered to me.” He adds after a long silence.

“So I’m guessing I’ll be gone from that head of yours pretty quick then.”

“You won’t. If anything, I think I’m going to miss you.” He says, and I won’t lie— I’m pretty surprised. I almost get emotional. *Almost*. But I don’t think I’m really that special. People often seek out companionship in times of hardship; so I wonder if I find comfort in his words because they mean anything, or because I want something to believe in before I’m gone.

God, I’m sick of that thought. *Before I’m gone. When I stop existing*. It’s one thing to believe nothing happens after death, but it’s agony just knowing it’s true.

“Magnus... I don’t want to die.” — It’s stupid really. The only time I said it is after I’m already dead. And he seems to breathe in for a long time, tilting his head back as if somewhere in that mismatched sky was an answer.

“I know.” He says.

“Can I ask for a favour?”

“You know I can’t—“

“I know you can’t save me. But can you grow me flowers? It’s pretty stupid, but I always hoped I’d get a bouquet from a boy— and not just because I was in the hospital.”

“They won’t grow in time.”

“That’s fine. They’ll still be mine, for as long as they’re here. And when they die, they’ll stop existing too, right? So they’ll sort of be with me— or something like that.”

This whole thing’s horrible. I want to believe that in some way this will make everything better. In an ideal world, I’d find peace, and die happily knowing some piece of me will live on, maybe through the flowers. Or maybe through Magnus.

But it isn’t really like that at all. It’s not some movie ending. When you die, you get flowers that you’ll never see in bloom. And as much as I wanted this to be some cute, almost romantic sentiment. It’s just a second funeral. More flowers that I’ll never get to see.

“I don’t have much time, do I?” I can’t help but ask. I haven’t been counting, but it feels like too many seconds have ticked away.

“There’s a few minutes.”

“What happens if I don’t go to the door?”

“It’ll be the same as before. You’ll die just as you did on earth, and I’ll have to carry you through.”

Again, I’m speechless— And it’s one of the most infuriating parts of this whole thing. I’ll never get to find the words I feel like are missing.

“What flowers do you want?” He asks

“Whichever one’s you think I’d like.”

“...Lillies?”

“Sure.”

“I know you’re not ready. Not many people find peace before they go, but I was really hoping you’d be the exception. It’s not much, but I do care about you, just like I cared about everyone before you. And even if everything seems meaningless, I want you to know that the one thing to last forever won’t forget you.”

I didn’t think I could be comforted— and I’m mostly right. I don’t know him, but it’s impossible to understand just how much he knows me. The most he can ever learn from anyone comes from their last hours, when they’re a frantic mess, searching for answers to questions they never wanted to ask.

He’s still a stranger to me, but I wonder what would have happened if I’d had a week, or even a day to know him for a little longer, and act more like myself— Like when I was alive.

If I can make myself last for one more sentence, will we become friends? If I were to open my mouth right now and get one last thing off my chest, would his reply mean anything? Would it even matter?

I want to know, but I can't find the words.

Because there's simply nothing.