

"And asking nothing further, broaching no questions as to restrictions or limitations, I, Memnoch, the Archangel and the Accuser of God, left Heaven immediately and descended into the great airy mists of Sheol."

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BUT, MEMNOCH," I interrupted. "He gave you no criteria! How were you to evaluate these souls? How could you know?"

Memnoch smiled. "Yes, Lestat, that's exactly what He did and how He did it, and believe me, I knew, and no sooner had I entered Sheol than the question of the Criteria for Entrance into Heaven became my full focus and desperate obsession. It is exactly the way He does things, no?"

"I would have asked," I said.

"No, no. I had no intention of it. I got out of there and started to work! As I said, this was His way and I knew that my only hope was to come up with a Criterion of my own and make a case for it, don't you see?"

"I think I do."

"You know you do," he said. "All right. Picture this. The population of the world has swelled to millions, and cities have risen though not in very many places, and mostly in that very valley where I had descended and left my marks on the walls of caves. Humankind had wandered north and south as far as it could on the planet; settlements and towns and forts existed in various stages of development. The land of the cities is called Mesopotamia now, I think, or is it Sumer, or will it be Ur? Your scholars uncover more with every passing day.

"Man's wild imaginings of immortality and reunion with the dead had everywhere given rise to religion. In the Nile Valley, a civilization of astonishing stability had developed, while war was waged all the time in the land we call the Holy Land.

"So I come to Sheol, which I have only observed from outside before, and which is now enormous, containing still some of the first

souls that ever sputtered with enduring life, and now millions of souls whose creeds and yearnings for the eternal have brought them to this place with great ferocity. Mad expectations have pitched countless ones into confusion. Others have grown so strong they exert a sort of rulership amongst the others. And some have learnt the trick of going down to Earth, escaping from the pull of other invisible souls altogether, and for wandering close to the flesh they would possess again, or influence, or harm, or love as the case might be.

"The world is populated by spirits! And some, having no memory anymore at all of being human, have become what men and women will for eternity call demons, prowling about, eager to possess, wreak havoc, or make mischief, as their developments allow."

"And one of those," I said, "passed into the vampiric mother and father of our kind."

"Yes, precisely. Amel created that mutation. But it was not the only one. There are other monsters on earth, existing twixt the visible and the invisible; but the great thrust of the world was and always has been the fate of its millions of Humankind."

"The mutations have never influenced history."

"Well, yes, and no. Is a mad soul screaming from the mouth of a flesh-and-blood prophet an influence, if this prophet's words are recorded in five different languages and for sale today on the shelves of stores in New York? Let's say that the process which I had seen and described to God had continued; some souls died; some grew strong; some managed to actually return in new bodies, though by what knack I did not at that time know."

"Do you know now?"

"Reincarnation isn't by any stretch common. Don't think of it. And it gains very little for the souls involved. You can imagine the situations that make it possible. Whether it always involves the extinction of an infant soul when it happens—that is, whether it always involves a replacement in the new body—this varies with individual cases. Those who persistently reincarnate are certainly something that cannot be ignored. But that, like the evolution of vampires and other earthbound immortals, falls into a small realm. Once again, we are talking now about the fate of Humankind as a whole. We are talking about the Whole Human World."

"Yes, I really do understand, perhaps better than you know."

"All right. I have no criteria, but I go into Sheol and I find there a

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great sprawling replica of earth! Souls have imagined and projected into their invisible existence all manner of jumbled buildings and creatures and monsters; it is a riot of imagination without Heavenly guidance, and as I suspected, there is still an enormous majority of souls who don't know that they are dead.

"Now, I plunge into the very middle of this, trying to make myself as invisible as I possibly can; to conceive of myself as utterly without any discernible form; but this is hard. For this is a realm of the invisible; everything here is invisible. And so there I begin to wander on the dreary roads in semidarkness, among the malformed, the half-formed, the unformed, the moaning and dying, and I am in my angelic form.

"Nevertheless, these confused souls don't take very much notice of me! It's as if many can't see clearly at all. Now, you know this state has been described by human shamans, by saints, by those who have come close to death, passed through it, and then been revived and continued to live."

"Yes."

"Well, what human souls see of this is a fragment. I saw the whole. I roamed extensively and fearlessly and regardless of Time, or out of it, though Time always continues to pass, of course, and I went where I chose."

"A madhouse of souls."

"Very nearly, but within this great madhouse were many, many mansions, to use the Scriptural words. Souls believing in like faiths had come together in desperation and sought to reinforce each other's beliefs and still each other's fears. But the light of Earth was too dim to warm anyone here! And the Light of Heaven simply did not penetrate at all.

"So yes, you are right, a madhouse of sorts, the Valley of the Shadow of Death, the terrible river of monsters over which souls dread to cross to Paradise. And of course, none had ever crossed up to that point.

"The first thing I did was listen: I listened to the song of any soul who would sing to me, that is, speak, in my language; I caught up any coherent declaration or question or supposition that struck my ears. What did these souls know? What had become of them?

"And in short order I discovered that there were tiers to this awful, gloom-filled place, tiers created out of the will of souls to seek

others like themselves. The place had become stratified, rather loosely and grimly, but there was an order born out of the degree of each soul's awareness, acceptance, confusion, or wrath.

"Closest to earth lay the damnedest, those who kept struggling to eat or drink or possess others, or could not accept what had happened or did not understand.

"Just beyond them came a layer of souls who did nothing but fight each other, scream, yell, push, shove, strive to harm or overcome or invade or escape in hopeless confusion. These souls never even saw me. But again, your humans have seen this and described it in many, many manuscripts over the centuries. Nothing I say surely is a surprise.

"And farther from this struggle, nearest to the calm of Heaven—though I don't speak really of literal directions here—were those who had come to understand that they had passed out of Nature, and were somewhere else. And these souls, some of them having been there since the Beginning, had grown patient in their attitudes, and patient in their watching of Earth, and patient with others around them, whom they sought to help in Love to accept their death."

"You found the souls who loved."

"Oh, they all love," Memnoch said. "All of them. There is no such thing as a soul who loves nothing. He or she loves something, even if it exists only in memory or as an ideal. But yes, I found those most peacefully and serenely expressing love in immense amounts to one another, and to the living below. Some I found who had turned their eyes entirely to earth, and sought nothing but to answer the prayers that rose from the desperate, the needy, and the sick.

"And Earth by this time, as you know, had seen wars unspeakable, and whole civilizations dissolved by volcanic disaster. The variety and possibilities of suffering increased all the time. It wasn't only in proportion to learning, either, or cultural development. It had become a scheme beyond an angel's comprehension. When I looked at Earth, I didn't even try to figure out what ruled the passions of those in one jungle as opposed to the groups in another, or why one population spent generations piling stones upon stones. I knew, of course, more or less everything, but I was not now on an earthly mission.

"The dead had become my realm.

"I drew near to these souls who looked down with mercy and

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compassion, who sought by thought to influence others for the good. Ten, twenty, thirty, I saw thousands. Thousands, I tell you, in whom all hope of rebirth or great reward was gone; souls in which existed total acceptance; that this was death; this was eternity; souls enamored with the flesh and blood they could see just as we Angels had been enamored and still were.

"I sat amongst these souls and started to talk with them, here and there, where I could get their attention, and it soon became obvious that they were rather indifferent to my form, because they assumed that I had chosen it as they had chosen theirs, and some of them resembled men and women, and some didn't bother. So I suspect they actually thought me rather new to Sheol in that I had to make such ferocious displays with arms and legs and wings. But they could be distracted from earth, if approached very politely, and I began to question them, remembering to strike for the truth only, but not to be rude.

"I must have talked to millions. I roamed Sheol, talking to souls. And the hardest thing in each instance was to get the attention of the individual either off the earth, or off some phantasm of lost existence, or out of a state of airy contemplation in which concentration was now so alien and required such an effort that it couldn't be induced.

"The wisest, the most loving souls did not want to bother with my questions. And only gradually would they realize that I was not a mortal man but something of much different substance, and that there was a point to my questions that had to do with a place of reference beyond Earth. You see, this was the dilemma. They had been in Sheol so long that they no longer speculated about the reason for Life or Creation; they no longer cursed a God they didn't know, or sought a God who hid from them. And when I began to ask my questions, they thought I was way down there with the new souls, dreaming of punishments and rewards which were never to come.

"These wise souls contemplated their past lives in a long wrathless reverie, and sought to answer prayers from below as I have said. They watched over their kindred, their clansmen, their own nations; they watched over those who attracted their attention with accomplished and spectacular displays of religiosity; they watched with sadness the suffering of humans and wished they could help and tried to help by thought when they could.

"Almost none of these very strong and patient souls sought the flesh again. But some of them had in the past. They had gone down

and been reborn and discovered in the final analysis that they could not remember from one fleshly life to another, so there was no real reason to keep being born! Better to linger here, in the eternity that was known to them, and to watch the Beauty of Creation, and it did seem very beautiful to them, as it had seemed to us.

"Well, it was out of these questions, these endless and thoughtful conversations with the dead, that my criteria evolved.

"First, to be worthy of Heaven—to have a ghost of a chance with God, I could say—the Soul had to understand life and death in the simplest sense. I found many souls who did. Next there had to be in this understanding an appreciation of the Beauty of God's work, the harmony of Creation from God's point of view, a vision of Nature wrapped in endless and overlapping cycles of survival and reproduction and evolution and growth.

"Many souls had come to understand this. Many had. But many who thought life was beautiful, felt that death was sad and endless and terrible and they would have chosen never to have been born, had they been given the choice!

"I didn't know what to do in the face of that conviction, but it was very widespread. Why did He make us, Whoever He is, if we are to be here like this forever, out of it and never part of it again, unless we wish to dip down and suffer all that torment all over again, for a few moments of glory, which we won't appreciate any more next time than last time, because we can't take our knowledge with us if we are reborn!

"Indeed, it was at this point which many souls had ceased to develop or change. They felt great concern and mercy for those who were alive, but they knew sorrow, and joy was not something that they could even imagine anymore. They moved towards peace; and peace indeed seemed about the finest state which they could achieve. Peace, broken by the struggle to answer prayers, was particularly difficult, but to me, as an angel, very attractive. And I stayed in the company of these souls for a long, long time.

"Now, if I could only tell them, I thought, if I could begin to instruct them, maybe I could bring them around, prepare them, make them ready for Heaven, but in this state they are not ready, and I don't know if they will believe what I say. And what if they do believe and are filled suddenly with the hunger for Heaven and then God doesn't let them in.

"No, I had to be very careful. I could not proclaim knowledge

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from atop boulders as I had done in my short time on earth. If I was to intrude on the progress of one of these dead ones, there had to be a very good chance that that soul would follow me to God's Throne.

"Understanding of life and death? That wasn't enough. Acceptance of death? That wasn't enough. Indifference to life and death, that wasn't good enough surely. Quiet confusion and drifting. No. That sort of soul had lost its character. It was as far from an Angel as was the rain that fell on Earth.

"At last I came into a region smaller than the others, and peopled with only a few souls. Now I speak comparatively. Remember, I'm the Devil. I spend a lot of time in Heaven and Hell. So when I say a few, that is to make a picture that is manageable to your mind. For the sake of exposition, let's say a few thousand or more. But I speak of great numbers. Don't doubt."

"I follow you."

"And these souls absolutely astonished me by their radiance, their tranquility, and the degrees of knowledge which they had attained and retained. First of all, almost every one of them had a full human shape. That is, they had realized their original forms or perhaps ideal forms in the invisible. They looked like angels! They were invisible men, women, and children, and they had about them accoutrements that had been dear in life. Some of them were brand new and had come from death thoughtful and seeking and ready for the mysterious. Others had learned all in Sheol over centuries of watching and fearing to lose their individuality, no matter how terrible things did appear. But all were intensely visible! And anthropomorphic, though of course they were diaphanous, as all spirits are; and some were paler than others; but all essentially could be seen clearly by others and themselves.

"I went amongst them, expecting to be snubbed, but I realized immediately that these souls saw me differently than the others. They saw everything differently. They were more attuned to the subtleties of the invisible because they had accepted its conditions totally. If I wished to be what I was, let me be it, they thought, and they judged me very seriously on how well I succeeded in being this tall creature, winged and longhaired and dressed in flowing robes. Within moments of my arrival, I felt happiness around me. I felt acceptance. I felt a total lack of resistance and a daring curiosity. They knew I was not a human soul. They knew because they had reached a point where they could see this! They could see a lot about every

other soul they looked at. And they could see a great deal of the world below.

"One of these souls was in the shape of a woman, and it was not my Lilia at all, by the way, for I never did see her in any form again. But it was a woman who had died I think in midlife having had numerous children, some of whom were with her now, and some of whom were still below. This soul existed in a serenity that was almost becoming bright. That is, its evolution was so high on the invisible level that it was beginning to generate something like the Light of God!

" 'What makes you so different?' I asked this woman. 'What makes all of you here, clustered together in this place, so very different?'

" 'With an acuity that astonished me, this woman asked me who I was. Dead souls just usually don't ask that question. They plunge right into their helpless preoccupations and obsessions. But she said, 'Who are you and what are you? I have never seen one like you before here. Only when I was alive.'

" 'I don't want to tell you yet,' I said. 'But I want to learn from you. Will you tell me why you seem happy? You are happy, aren't you?'

" 'Yes,' she said, 'I'm with those I love, and look below, look at all of it.'

" 'Then you harbour no questions about all of it?' I pushed. 'You don't long to know why you were born or why you suffered or what happened to you when you died or why you're here?'

"To my further amazement, she laughed. Laughter I had never heard in Sheol. It was soft, soothing, merry laughter, sweet laughter, laughter like the laughter of angels, and I think I sang to her softly in response, rather naturally, and at this her soul exploded like a blossom, the way fleshly souls had exploded below when they had learnt to love each other! She warmed to me and opened. 'You are beautiful,' she whispered respectfully.

" 'But why, why are all these others in this place so unhappy, and why are you few here filled with peace and joy? Yes, I know, I have looked below. And you are with those you love. But so are all these others.'

" 'We don't resent God anymore,' she said. 'Any of us here. We don't hate Him.'

" 'The others do?'

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" 'It's not that they hate Him,' she said gently, being very careful with me, as if I were easy to bruise. 'It's that they can't forgive Him for all this . . . for the world, for what's happened, and for this state of Sheol in which we languish. But we can. We have forgiven Him. And all of us have done it for various reasons, but forgiveness of God, that we have attained. We accept that our lives have been wondrous experiences, and worth the pain and the suffering, and we cherish now the joy we knew, and the moments of harmony, and we have forgiven Him for not ever explaining it all to us, for not justifying it, not punishing the bad or rewarding the good, or whatever else it is that all these souls, living and dead, expect of Him. We forgive Him. We don't know, but we suspect that maybe He knows a great secret about how all this pain could come to pass and still be good. And if He doesn't want to tell, well, He is God. But whatever, we forgive Him and we Love Him in our forgiveness, even though we know He may never care about any of us, any more than He cares for the pebbles on a beach below.'

"I was speechless. I sat very still, letting these souls of their own volition gather around me. Then one very young soul, the soul of a child, said:

" 'It seemed a terrible thing at first that God would bring us into the world to be murdered as we were, all of us—for you see, we three here died in war—but we have forgiven Him, because we know that if He could make something as beautiful as Life and Death, then he must Understand.'

" 'You see,' said another soul to me, 'it comes to this. We would suffer it all again, if we had to. And we would try to be better to each other and more loving. But it was worth it.'

" 'Yes,' said another. 'It took me all my life on Earth to Forgive God for the world, but I did it before I died, and came to dwell here with these others. And look, if you try hard, you'll see that we have made this something of a garden. It's hard for us. We work only with our minds and wills and memories, and imaginations, but we are making a place where we can remember what was good. And we forgive Him and we love Him that He gave us this much.'

" 'Yes,' said another, 'that He gave us anything at all. We are grateful and full of love for Him. For surely out there in the darkness is a great Nothing, and we have seen so many below who were obsessed with Nothing and with Misery, and they never knew the joys that we knew or know now.'

" 'This isn't easy,' said another soul. 'It's been a great struggle. But to make love was good, and to drink was good, and to dance and sing was beautiful, and to run drunk through the rain was joyous; and beyond there lies a chaos, an absence, and I am grateful that my eyes opened upon the world below and that I can remember it and see it from here.'

"I thought for a long time without answering any of them, and they continued to talk to me, drawn to me, as if the light in me, if there was any visible light, was attracting them. In fact, the more I responded to their questions, the more they opened and seemed to understand their own answers more meaningfully, the denser and more intense the declarations became.

"I soon saw these people had come from all nations and all walks of life. And though kinship bound many of them tightly together, that was not true with them all. In fact, many had lost sight of their dead kin entirely in other realms of Sheol. Others had never even laid eyes on them. While some had been greeted at the moment of death by their lost ones! And these were people of the world and all its beliefs gathered here in this place where light was beginning to shine forth.

" 'Your lives on earth, was there one common thread?' I asked finally. They couldn't answer. They really didn't know. They had not questioned each other about their lives, and as I asked them quick, random questions, it became clear that there had been no thread! Some of these people had been very rich, others poor, some had suffered unspeakably, some had suffered nothing but had known a golden prosperity and leisure in which they had grown to love Creation before they were even dead. But I began to sense that if I wanted to, I could start to count these responses and evaluate them in some way. In other words, all these souls had learnt to forgive God in various ways. But very possibly one way was better for this than another, infinitely more efficient. Perhaps. I couldn't be sure. And for now I couldn't know.

"I wrapped my arms around these souls. I drew them to me. 'I want you to come on a journey with me,' I said to them, having spoken now to each and every one and being completely certain of where we stood. 'I want you to come to Heaven and stand before God. Now it may be brief, and you may see Him for no more than an instant, and possibly He will not allow Himself to be seen by you at all. You may find yourselves returned here, having learnt nothing, but also

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having suffered nothing. The truth is, I can't guarantee what will happen! No one knows God.

" 'We know,' they answered.

" 'But I invite you to come to God and tell Him what you've told me. And now I'll answer your question to me: I am his Archangel Memnoch, of the very mold of other Angels of whom you heard when you were alive! Will you come?'

"Several were astonished and hesitated. But the majority said in one voice, a mingling of answers that was this answer: 'We will come. One glimpse of God, the chance of it even, is worth anything. If that's not so then I don't remember the smell of the sweet olive tree, or how the fresh grass felt beneath me when I laid on it. I never tasted wine, and I never bedded the ones I loved. We will come.'

"Several refused. It took a few moments before we all realized it but several had totally withdrawn. They saw me now for what I was, an Angel, and they understood what had been withheld from them, and they had lost their peace and lost their power to forgive in that instant. They stared at me in horror or anger or both. The other souls hastened to change their minds, but they wouldn't be changed. No, they did not want to see this God who had deserted His Creation and left it to rear up gods on altars all over the planet and pray in vain for intervention or final judgment! No, no, no!

" 'Come,' I said to the others, 'Let's try to enter Heaven. Let's give it all our strength! How many are we? A thousand times ten? A million? What does it matter? God said ten but not ten only. God meant at least ten. Come, let's go!'

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IN A FLASH, I shall have my answer, I thought. He will either admit us or cast us back down with His Might the way He once threw me to Earth. He might even dissolve the lot of us, for surely He can make His judgment on my success or failure before I ever reach the gates of Heaven. What had He said in His Infinite Wisdom? He had said, 'Come back as soon as you *can*.'