

# Hel’s Dying Star

a *Forgotten Relics* short story

The ancient stones beneath my bare feet and the tapestry at my back are no comfort as I press my weight into them outside the bedroom.

His room. Our room.

I am not ready. Not even after the tortuously slow decline, the dwindling effectiveness of the treatment, the years-long wordless countdown to this very moment. Not even after impotently bearing witness to the same deaths claim our brethren one by one until only we two remained. I am not ready to rule alone.

I dig my bare toes into the mortar of the castle floor, aching to drain away this too-human anxiety, both hating and grateful for the affliction of emotion bestowed on me by ignorant mortals who transformed me with vague beliefs about their afterlives. They who unwittingly abducted me from the splendor of Niflheim and forced me into this unnatural conglomerate of deities.

A muffled moan from the other side of the door steels my resolve. I cannot miss his final moments. I owe him that, even if part of me perishes with him.

The heavy door swings aside at my touch, and I cross the carpet of white fur and whiter feathers to kneel by his side. It is so silent, his breathing so shallow, that the rustle of the bedclothes is loud as thunder when I lift his hand.

Even now, pale and drawn as he is, he is beautiful. The most beautiful creature I have ever had the joy of beholding in my eons of existence. The golden locks across the pillow are now straw, the rubies of health have long since turned ivory, the fierce crown of divine radiance dimmed. Humanity’s faithlessness given form. And yet when he raises his emerald-faceted eyes to me, I see only the glory of his purest self. Best beloved of all angels. My morning star.

“It is time,” he says. I have to lean close to hear, his voice is so distant now.

I can only nod, unable to speak around the vice on my heart.

“There is something I must ask of you.”

“No. Please,” I beg through clenched teeth, willing my expression serene and reasonable though I wail and rage inside. I have known from the first failed sacrifice that he would ask but prayed he would not. I am not sure I am strong enough to resist the temptation. “We have gone all this time,” I say. “Do not ask me.”

He tries to smile but can only crease the corners of his eyes. Tear stand there, tears I myself cannot shed. He weeps for us both.

I grip his hand more tightly. “There must be another way. Some untried remedy. We have seen the madness of it. The futility in the end.”

“My love, we have done everything, consumed our hosts to the barest wisps, fed upon one another in the madness of this hunger. Mortals believe too much in you, too little in the evils of heavenly sin. They have confused our stories too greatly. It is too late for me.”

I lean forward and rest my head on his chest to hide my furious grief. His heartbeat is too faint to hear, the rise and fall of his breath so shallow as to be imperceptible. There is not much time.

He strokes my blond hair, tangling his bony fingers in it one last time, pushing it aside to gaze at my monochrome skin. When he speaks again, it is a song of praise reverberating calmly through him. The remnants of his true nature clinging to these final scraps of existence.

“You are the last of us. The strongest, the most believed-in. No other being can unseat you from the throne I once held so jealously. But once I am gone, never will there be this sustenance for you again.”

I stir. Though dim, I can sense what magical resonance he retains pooled within him. Life-sustaining belief synthesized into flesh. Weakness threatens to overtake me, then. My existence has become furtive, careful survival, using as little magic as possible, hoarding the stingy ration of power retained from mortals’ belief—such a far cry from the unbridled, universal power I once wielded. I crave the essence he is offering the way wildfire craves dry grass.

But I refuse to consume the flesh of my lover to sustain myself.

“No,” I say in a choked whisper.

“Not even if it means I can be with you always?”

I close my eyes against the tears. I was unmoved by the plight of Baldur; I will not weep now.

“No.”

“Not even if doing so can break the chains of fate locked upon me by the Authority?”

I raise my head and meet the fading glow of his eyes. Fear lurks behind the angelic bearing. We have only spoken of his fall and punishment once, yet a great portion of our efforts to bolster his power were to evade his shameful destiny rather than to survive. He dreads rebirth among mankind after millennia tormenting and tempting them.

Jagged breath punctuates my words as I say what must be said. “There is no power that can undo that curse, my love. If I cannot save you, I will only sit beside you. I will not destroy your soul to preserve my own, whatever fates may befall us.”

His shining face darkens. I reach out to stroke his cheek, but he turns aside. A blade in my heart.

“Then whatever shall happen after is your burden to bear,” he says.

I begin to protest, to reassure him of my devotion and comfort him as best I can in this farewell. But at the moment my lips part to speak, searing light erupts from the center of his chest, blooming violently outward with the sound of mountains cracking. The force of it rips me from his side and bears me to the floor as he screams in agony.

I call out his name. But there is no answer in the sudden silence.

Fresh bruises on my palms and knees do not hinder my desperate scabble back to the bedside. All that greets me there is the burnt outline of the fairest form I had thought to hold for eternity. I brush the blackened sheets where he lay with shaking fingers. There is no body to bury beside our brothers and sisters cut down by the same pitiable death of starvation. He is gone.

Lucifer has been taken to the other side.

The understanding is instant and bittersweet. My love is taken from me, yet he lives, reborn through the very disbelief that killed him.

I am Lady Hel. The last regent of the underworld, dubious winner of the contest in which none wished to compete, victor by the flimsiest of circumstances—an oath so

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common humans do not realize they invoke me when they speak it. I am all that remains of the gatekeepers of the afterlife.

My love is alive, among you now in a new body of mortal flesh, as ordained by the Authority long before the Gauntlet existed. His destiny is already being fulfilled—the war is about to begin.

I do not weep. I do not grieve. I simply survive and wait for the day I may see him again. And it is coming soon.

Ellie Di Julio: June 15, 2014  
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