

When the pain hit, it was inescapable. Sudden and intense, making the instant it took place feel like a brief eternity. It was over even more suddenly than it began.

And it was instantly forgotten. Over. No longer existent. Like it hadn't even happened. And neither had anything before it. Life itself? Over and gone and long, long lost.

Darkness.

Your life? What little you had is now all over.

It was brief, and not especially memorable, now. Your short life was honest and authentic; not once did you contradict your basest nature. You lived with passion. You cared for your parents. You enjoyed the fresh air. You soaked up the sun and you danced in the rain.

None of it was perfect, of course. A life is like that. You felt frustration with people, when they mistreated you. The names they hurled, and the stones they threw; it all hurt. Even if you lashed out, from time to time (it was often), the victims deserved it. The best defence is a good offence, after all. Fire with fire, an eye for an eye, and all that. Every choice you made, every consequence you dealt? They were all yours to deliver. And

deliver you did. Looking back unabashedly, you inhabited justice and fury incarnate.

Poetry in motion. Honest and proud.

A life well lived.

And now it's over.

So why is it so hot? The first new sensation you notice is the oppressive heat, thick and deafening. You can't see much of the dim, rocky ground beneath your feet (the same feet you had in life). The ground is hard, like volcanic glass coloured dark red, and warmer than it should be. If it weren't for the thick skin of your naked feet, you might've found it blistering. Looking around, (completely having forgotten the blinding pain you'd felt an instant ago), you're surrounded by a brutal landscape filled with flame and darkness and the sounds of sorrowful moans—real doom-laden, desperate stuff. It's too dim to be able to see beyond your immediate area, lit by a few blazing bonfires that offer extreme heat but no warmth. The individual fires extend to the horizons, sporadically spread out and each lighting their own patch of dark red stone, gleaming and shining beneath them. But, for the life of you (if that phrase means anything at all anymore), you can't see more than a few of them at a time. Their flames reach way, way above your head, and they light no ceiling. Just unending blackness extending upward.

As your eyes adjust to the flame-lit gloom, you see creatures, hunched and weak, running past your vicinity's glow. They all go by, stumbling hurriedly, tripping over their exhausted feet. They're humans; or, rather, they look like the humans you used to see everyday. These creatures are so bedraggled, so godforsaken; so pathetic and feeble. A group of maybe 4 or 5 of them skitter at the edge of the fire light, crying and gasping and moaning. Their sobs remind you of something you'd only ever heard in your far-flung dreams, and their bare skin glows dirty in the firelight. You take a step toward the space they'd just passed through, and another group – 9 or 10 of them, this time – goes ambling by to your left.

What *is* this place?

And why *is* it so hot? So flaming, and desolate?

The blood in your veins stirs as a filthy, overweight, naked man goes by, crawling hastily and muttering sadly to himself. You feel a surge of disdain for this man, and you fight an instinct to attack him based solely on the repulsive nature of his repugnant appearance.

A thin twinge of loneliness. And, following it, fear. The realization dawns clear and horrifying. You know *exactly* where you are. You open your mouth to make a single sound – whatever sound happens to come out – but this inclination is eclipsed immediately by a strange new confusion.

Beside you stands a new creature, not one of the naked, disheveled, pathetic people that have been passing you by, but one of satisfied malevolence. Its skin, red. And its smell, unlike anything you've known before. You admire its wings and its sharp teeth. It wasn't there a moment ago.

Before you consider the wisdom in it, you ask it outright: "I don't know where I am. But I think I do. I've lived my life the only way I know how, and I don't think I ever did anything wrong... Am I in Hell? Am I being punished?"

The red one sees you standing there, on your firelit patch of glassy rock, and smiles. It crouches reverently to be nearer your face, and replies in a voice that seems to boom from the black sky above: "Many welcomes to you, fierce one. Yes. This is Hell. Unending and eternal. But be not mistaken: you aren't being punished." A broader, toothier smile. "*You are* the punishment."

Your feathers ruffle of their own accord. The claws of your webbed feet grip the rock beneath them.

Life as a goose was restrained. Subdued. Afterlife as a goose will be unfettered and relentlessly passionate. You are free. Finally free. You spread your wings. Your eyes to bulge from your head. You open your beak and roar, a hiss of shameless fury. And you hungrily pursue the nearest naked human, chasing them aggressively, deep into the flaming darkness.