

## Humanity

The walls seemed to exhale with each step he took, constricting like phantom ribs around him. Harsh, metallic, and smoother than the night sky, they radiated a chill that crept into the darkest corners of his body, twining along his spine and nestling amongst his cells. The hall stretched on ahead, and though his feet believed it to be straight, his gaze picked up on the slight curve that kept his destination just out of sight. His fatigue swirled in rivulets along his bones, collecting within his joints and growing heavier with each incongruous breath.

He shifted the box he carried from his left hand to his right, feeling it jostle as the dove inside shifted in distress. Although he searched, he discovered no pity for the bird; empathy had long since evaporated from his subconscious, leaving a barren, scarred cavern behind. Months, years, lifetimes - time blurred in this desolate labyrinth, distorting as he woke each day to imitate the previous: Select a box from the First Room, travel for hours along the endless corridors until he found the Last Room, return to the First Room, collapse into sleep once more. He'd forgotten how the kiss of the Outside air felt, though he could still recall the spectacular array of colours that its light had produced. He often questioned the credibility of those memories; perhaps the Outside was native only to his imagination.

The air began shifting around his temples, and he knew the end of his journey neared. It carried an acrid scent of terror, a whistling note of impatience, and a firm, slow texture of servitude. He gripped the box with both hands now, willing his feet to continue echoing along the unfaltering hall. The dove sensed its imminent fate, twisting frantically within its enclosure in pursuit of an escape. Dread fermented in the depths of his bone marrow, running harsh talons along his veins and whispering adamantly into his blood.

The hall bent far ahead and the door to the Last Room appeared as a stout cutout against the unrelenting wall. He quickened his pace; his day was nearly half over. Several minutes passed before he reached the door, long, agonizing segments of time that stroked stimulating fingers along his anxiety, coaxing it into a vicious beast that rattled the corners of his mind. The familiarity of this routine could not alleviate his fear; one did not grow accustomed to the particular presence that awaited.

He held the strands of his heartbeat together as he stepped up to the door, struggling to keep its rhythm civil. The iron handle bit the heat from his palm as he entered, and the empty room unfolded beyond. It seemed the others had already come and gone, or had yet to arrive; the doors leading to the four other hallways remained tightly shut.

Everything led to here. Everyone was led here, eventually.

The room was angular to accommodate all the entrances, with a small inlet at the far end containing a door thicker than a starless night. The Last Door.

The cold metal rattled.

It knew he was here.

Swallowing, he forced himself to continue into the room, smoothing his apprehension into obedience. The roof blended into the walls, the walls dripped to the floor, and he was trudging through a sea of liquid iron that caressed him on all sides until down was up and left was right and not even the foreign light of Outside could warm his core again. The Last Door was a beacon before him, a constant in the dynamic tundra.

Minutes, hours, years, curdling and condensing into wasted residue, funnelling into his heart, twisting, scathing -

He stepped up to the door. His hands found solace with each other, lacing together underneath the box that continued to rattle in futile desperation.

He knelt before the door, sliding the box forward until it pressed against the one-way port at the bottom. Sucking in a breath that didn't fill the sour abyss of his lungs, he offered the dove a pause of farewell before condemning it to damnation.

The door shook with the force of an eternal famine as the being on the other side devoured his offering, and he scrambled backward, heart pounding.

It was never satisfied. Nothing was *ever* enough.

He clambered to his feet, shivering. The bite of nihilism from beyond had slithered up his arm when he'd breached the threshold, leaching the warmth from his soul.

His return journey was long and silent, eroding any lingering emotion into somber neutrality. As he entered the First Room, he eyed the boxes of offerings within, awaiting fates alien to mercy. Eyed the dwindling numbers and wondered what would happen when they all disappeared. When the being grew more ravenous still, and only the transporters remained in this unforgiving realm.

Sleep claimed him quickly that night, sweeping his feet from under him and tugging him from the constraints of consciousness. All semblance of his body faded, his memory curling into mulch and withering away with the swirling breeze of his tattered conscience.

He was devoid of flesh, of the intricate puzzles that made up blood and bone and membrane. He was only his mind, twisting and turning in the constraints of a tiny enclosure. He roared in defiance, needing *out, out, out*, setting the thick metal door rattling violently. The walls mocked him, suffocated him, folding him into the shape of containment, and he bombarded them with his essence, begging for release.

The fury was constant, winding through his sentience, parting only for the secondary sensation that was now growing in his depths and gripping the edges of his ambition.

He was so, *so* hungry.