

## Death Is a Party

His ass had gone numb ages ago. Boredom was a plague on the mind, and a true tragedy when afflicting a mind as great as his. Nate huffed out a sigh, crossing and uncrossing his legs. There was nothing to do here except sit and wait, and he refused to look towards the massive windows, for he learned long ago what lay beyond them. He looked instead at the other poor lost souls also stranded in the airport, waiting for a plane that just kept on getting delayed. It was just past two in the morning and many of them had nodded off in their hard plastic seats, but not the attractive blond a few seats down. Nate stared at him, a smirk playing across his lips, debating.

Well, there was nothing else to do. He got up and strode over to where the blond sat, and he plopped down in the seat next to him. The blond lifted his head and stared at him, clearly bewildered. He had a handsome face with dark mocha eyes, and when he spoke, it was in a pleasantly deep and somewhat hoarse voice.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, actually you can! You can tell me your name."

The handsome stranger's perplexed expression shifted to suspicion. "Tell me yours first."

"Nate Greenwich!"

"Sam Rooney..."

"Well then, Sammy-wammy — I can call you that, right?"

"No!" he protested, incredulous, experiencing a feeling of strange yet familiar revulsion in his gut.

"It's a pleasure to meet you!" Completely ignoring him, Nate stuck out his hand, grinning in a peaceable sort of way.

Sam glanced at it before slowly reaching out and shaking it for the briefest second. "Likewise... So where're you headed?"

"Same as you," Nate snorted. He crossed his arms behind his head and leaned back in the seat. "Don't really want to go, though."

Odd how clean this room was. Sterile.

"Mm," Sam hummed in agreement. "To be honest, I don't really know where I'm going. I'm just... here."

"Just here?" Nate turned his head to look at this man with something akin to pity in his eyes. "A lost soul, are you? A traveler?"

"I guess you could call me that."

"A man wandering with no purpose. How sad. Well, if it weren't for the circumstances, I'd say you could come work for me... But something tells me you wouldn't want to anyways."

"Yeah?" It wasn't really a question; rather, it was uttered with a sort of finality implying that Sam was politely ending the conversation. Nate wouldn't stand for that.

"Yes, you see, I'm an informant." He sent Sam a sidelong glance, and after a moment of silence he tipped his head back and spoke to the ceiling, "I've killed people." Still without an answer, he added, "Numerous people."

"Have you," and this as well was not a question, merely a reply for the sole sake of answering, but Sam's voice was higher and much more forced in its nonchalance. His face bore clear evidence of revulsion and horror, being no master of secrecy like Nate was. "So tell me," and this was so sudden, such an unwelcome change in topic that it attracted Nate's full attention. "What is this place?"

"I believe most humans would call it Purgatory."

There, of course, was the shock Nate had been expecting. He was expecting horrified outcries as well, or plaintive whines along of the lines of "but I can't be dead!" and "what about my family?", but he received none of that, only a passive glare.

"What's that make you then? A reaper?"

Nate laughed mirthlessly. "Oh, no. Far from it. This is just a favorite pastime of mine. I love humans, they're so... fascinating. Look! There's an old man; you can expect that here, and there, there's a little girl. What's she doing here? She's not even crying; do you think she knows what's going on?"

Sam was looking at him oddly now, but Nate couldn't help but notice that Sam had leaned in, ever so slightly, like there was some force drawing him in. "You know you're dead too, right?"

He scoffed, ignoring the twisting sensation in his gut. "Yeah, of course. That doesn't mean I should stop enjoying myself. Humans are too much fun."

His companion went on with a thoughtful expression. "You talk about humans like you aren't one. What's with that?"

Nate turned away rather than answer such a droll question. He switched his focus to the newcomers, marveling silently at how many there were. The boarding gate was full, stuffed almost to bursting, and he couldn't see how more people could possibly fit, but true to the stubborn nature of humanity, they did. The room expanded to fit them all. That must be it.

His companion was no longer speaking, most likely confused and upset, or merely basking in the fact that he was being left alone. Nate didn't mind much; his company was not enjoyed by many, though he loved forcing it upon them. He busied himself instead by watching the sporadic arrivals of recently deceased, from infants wailing at the tops of their tiny lungs, to men and women so wrinkled and withered they looked dead already. There were enough people here now that he could not possibly be bored, and instead he leaned forward, hands in lap, to survey the scene.

Everything here was so light, so bright, but the people were so dark. He was no fool; this was a place where sin festered, and he was thriving. The people who had figured it out, he could see them, and they acted very self-assured, as though they were

confident in their ascendance to Heaven. Nate thought them to be fools; there surely was no such thing. He had seen it in the windows.

Others were visibly confused, scared even, to find themselves in such a place with so many strangers. Some were speaking tentatively with those nearby them. Nate swept his gaze along to rest on a boy hunched over in a chair, hands folded, praying rapidly. He snorted. Praying wouldn't help him here, of all places. All these people were dead, and no amount of help from false gods could raise them from this perdition. All of these people were dead, and these were the last bidden moments of consciousness for them.

There came the niggling thought that he too was dead, but he shoved that aside with vicious denial. He tipped his head towards Sam, eyeing him with renewed interest. He wondered what his view on death was, whether it was different from his own, if he clung to the insipid belief of an afterlife, or if he was less vapid than first anticipated.

"Say, Sammy-wammy... What did you think of it? Of life?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't remember much of anything, only details of myself. I don't remember my friends, my family, where I lived... None of that. I'm guessing the same must be said for you. So tell me: Do you like how you lived your life?"

Sam was quiet for a long while. Nate pondered whether or not he would even answer, but he did, and he was not disappointed.

"No, I don't. I... I was not a good person. I hurt people, badly." Sam looked down at his lap, hands clenched in trembling fists. Nate grinned broadly. "I deserve this. Do you think that things will be better in the next life? I couldn't do it again, if not. I hurt so many people, Nate..." Sam buried his face in his hands, distressed and self-loathing.

But nobody cares about anyone else's tragedies, and Nate hardly listened as Sam went on. He was more fixated on his innate disappointment that Sam was just like

the rest of them. Surely, Nate could not be the only worthwhile one here? Sam took the hint and trailed off, maybe a little hurt, but Nate didn't particularly care.

“You realize you're human, too?”

“Of course I do.”

“You said that earlier, but you're lying. I don't think you realize you're dead, and I don't think you realize you're human.”

Nate sneered at him. “Don't speak to me like that, Sam... You know nothing. Do you have any idea how long I've been here? Obviously,” he spat, “I know I'm dead, there's no need to remind me, but so are you! So is everybody else here! But there's nothing special about you, or anybody else! I'm special! Do you have any clue how long I've been here? I've seen loads of people come and go, and I alone have been able to stay! I can resist the pull! I might be dead, but I don't have to “move on,” or whatever you idiots call it! I get to stay, and watch you all die and die again, forever!”

“Do you think you're a god or something? You're not. You're delusional!”

“I may as well be. I alone have control; I have power!”

“Nate! You're powerless here! I don't care how full of yourself you are, or who you were in life, but you're dead!” Sam said harshly. “You were allowed to stay longer for whatever reason, but that won't last forever, and you'll have to move on too, and for God's sake maybe you can do better for yourself!”

“How could I ever want to move on? I had everything! Power, wealth--”

“Friends? Family? Love? True happiness? Did you have any of that?”

“Oh, believe me, I was very happy. But, I don't need other people to make me happy. I can do that myself.”

“Maybe that's what you think, but I don't believe you.”

“Here we go again with this, eh?” Nate rolled his eyes. He uncrossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, balancing it on the back two legs, staring up at the ceiling as to avoid looking at Sam, who was gazing pointedly at him.

“You’re still dodging the subject. You're dead, Nate. Dead. There's no going back; there's no staying here. All you can do now is move on.”

“To what, pray tell?” Nate snapped, dropping his chair back down to all four legs with a loud *bang*. “What exactly is waiting for me out... out there?” He gestured wildly to the window, still without looking.

“I look out that window and see such a beautiful, perfect world... I can't wait to move on. How can you not want that?”

Nate looked at him oddly. “There's nothing outside of that window, Sam. Absolutely nothing.”

Sam shrugged, glancing wistfully towards the supposed beautiful view. “If that's what you see, maybe that's what you want, deep down. Maybe your subconscious can't handle your delusions of grandeur and wants an end to it all. Who knows?”

With a fierce glare, Nate said, “But you don't know me at all. I was loved. I was feared. I was worshipped!”

“You were a monster, Nate! So was I! Horrible, damned people! But me--I can repent! I can move on, and you're stuck here, because you can't! You're so stuck in yourself that you can't see what an awful person you are! You can't move on because you can't accept that there's nothing you can do! You can't accept that this is the end for you! You, and your damned God complex, or whatever the hell is wrong with you!”

“And what makes you say that?” A wide grin was stretching across Nate's face, rich with malice and sinister glee. “What makes you say I'm a monster?”

“You've killed people, Nate! Without a care in the world! You take pleasure in watching these people suffer, and you're toying with me. Mocking me!”

“So it's about you then, is it?”

“No!” protested Sam, less upset than he was deeply disturbed. Here was a morally blind man who firmly believed his own wild delusions and was unswaying in his belief, and there was seemingly nothing Sam could say to help him.

“Are your feeling hurt, Sammy-wammy? Do you think I'm mean?”

“I think you're damned. You can't move on because you can't accept that you're dead, and deep down you know this, but you're still going to lash out at me, and anybody else who dares try and help you. I bet you were like this when you were alive, too. Huh? Did you have anybody at all who cared about you?”

Nate regarded him with an ugly look. “I cared about myself, Sammy-wammy. What makes you think I need anything else?”

“I thought so,” Sam huffed.

“But forget me, what about you? Did you have anybody? You're a monster, aren't you?” Nate sneered. “How could anybody love a monster, right? A killer?”

Sam leaned forward, his gaze boring into Nate with a new intensity. “But I cared, Nate. I still do. That's the difference between us. I don't know if I had anybody or not, and there's no way you could know either, not for sure, but I'll tell you right now that I don't think you did. I think you were just as alone in life as you are now. But me? Sure, I may be a monster, but I'm not alone. I never will be. You? You always have been, and you always will be. We're dead, Nate, but I can repent. You? You're hopeless. No-- you're nothing.”

“You're wrong,” Nate said softly, with the kind of wavering obstinacy that told Sam he'd gotten to him.

“Maybe. But I doubt it.”

Sam was perhaps more disappointing than any of the others Nate had observed, likely because he had invested his own valuable time in actually speaking to him, but there was also the simmering feeling that something was wrong. Something was off with this picture, with Sam behaving as a human with sense and remorse. He wondered again if he had known Sam, before this all began.

Silence stretched between them, the only sound being the background murmur of thousands upon thousands of voices, and then the soft voice over the intercom announcing that flight HE6283 had just arrived and that boarding would begin shortly. The restless mass of people in the boarding gate all shifted as one, moving simultaneously towards the door, and soon Nate had lost sight of Sam in the crowd. Nevertheless, he grinned to himself, hands in his coat pockets, and matched his stride with the anxious pace of the crowd. This was his game; he'd keep his gaze averted, keep to the back of the crowd, and let all these fools crumple away.

But this time, it was different. Ahead of him, he could see the door, the numbered sign above it blinking red. On either side, there were the windows he had avoided so determinedly earlier, but now he was faced with them and he could not look away. Through the windows, he could see nothing. Absolutely nothing. Merely a colorless void, stretching on and on and on and on....

Endless, and his stomach dropped, the world seemed to be swaying around him, though he wasn't really in any sort of world, not anymore. Through the door was the same vision, and he wanted to turn and run, he wanted to be gone from this horrific place. His sight was cloudy, his breath was slipping and he couldn't catch it; he was being shepherded towards the door by the encroaching mass of the crowd around him; he couldn't escape it this time, and as he stepped over the threshold, he found himself irrevocably wishing for Sam. Then his knees buckled, he pitched forward, the void stretching out before him, and all he knew was nothing.