

# Being Dead

ENTHUSE  
HATE  
BFD!

Bobbie was here

by  
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"What the hell is going on here...?" Bobbie mumbled, staring at the whiteness around her. The only effect brought on by her words was a distant clap of thunder. Grumbling, she shuffled over to the nearest wall and put her hand on it to feel if it was as smooth as it looked. It was.

Then she realized she was in an enclosed hallway with no visible entrance - or exit for that matter. In the far distance, she could hear some kind of angelic choir. The heavenly harmonies piqued her interest and she shuffled along the smooth hallway to search for answers, and more importantly, the way home.

Turning a corner, she entered a larger hall where the walls were transformed into open galleries that offered glorious views out onto a bright blue sky peppered with white, fluffy clouds. The choir seemed louder, but Bobbie could see no trace of either singers or speakers.

She didn't even need to squint to see that the hallway she was walking down turned into a staircase some three hundred feet ahead of her - though before that, it was blocked by a vast gate of the finest, shiniest material she had ever seen. Stretching from the floor and into the ceiling, the gate itself seemed to shimmer, but as she got closer, she could see that it came from tens of thousands of little gemstones attached to the narrow bars making up the structure.

"What the hell...?" she mumbled as she shuffled up to the gate. Her profanity was once again accompanied by a thunderclap. The gate didn't appear too scary, so she reached out with her left arm to tap the prosthetic hook against the metal-like structure.

"Wait a minute... wait a minute! I know what this is!" she cried, spinning around to stare behind her at the hallway she had come from. When that didn't offer any further clues, she ran over to the galleries to look out. The view beyond was nothing but blue sky and white clouds; there was no sight of the quiet street she had been walking down when the shaft of light had engulfed her.

"Aw hell, this is... this is the..." - another thunderclap accompanied her profanity - "the Pearly Gates! I don't believe it!" she cried, clutching her head. The three-pointed hat was in the way, but she ripped it off and threw it onto the smooth floor. The Jolly Roger eye patch soon followed so she would see better - not to mention so she would look less ridiculous to whomever would greet her.

Her cry echoed back and forth in the hallway until it petered out into a faint whisper that lost out to the heavenly choir. Hyperventilating, she leaned forward and put her hands on her knees to fight the surge of panic that rose inside her with lightning speed. "But that means I'm d- d- de- aw shit, this ain't right! This ain't right! I can't be dead!"

Bobbie ran up to the gates and tried to give the bars a good shake, but they wouldn't budge no matter what she did. "I can't be deeeeeeeead!" she hollered, panting wildly while she wrestled with the bars. When she finally understood she couldn't manipulate

them into showing her the exit, she stepped back and slammed her hands onto her hips. "Well, get this! I don't buy any of this stuff! I'm an atheist, Goddammit!"

Once again, her profanity was answered by a thunderclap, but the newest one came much closer than those preceding it and rolled around the hallway for nearly half a minute before it moved on.

Quickly tossing the prosthetic hook onto the smooth floor so she wouldn't accidentally gouge out an eye or smack herself over the head with it, Bobbie covered her ears and clenched her jaw until the thunder had dissipated enough for her to once again hear the angelic choir that seemed to form the ambience wherever she went. "Ain't that just typical..." she mumbled while she rubbed her ears, "of course it had to be the old-school Angry God..."

"Oh, *She* isn't so bad once you get to know her," a husky female voice said right next to Bobbie's ear.

"Buh-gah!" Bobbie cried, jumping up on tip-toes before falling back down on her boot heels. Panting, she clutched her thumping heart and spun around to take in the sight of the creature next to her.

A tall, dark-haired woman of indeterminate age was standing behind the Pearly Gates wearing a fairly revealing, white sleeveless tunic with golden highlights around the neck, the shoulders and the lower hem. The woman's hair and tunic were constantly rippling like they were caught in a gentle breeze though the hallway presented no wind whatsoever.

Bobbie did a double-take at the golden, tanned arms and the fleeting glimpses of skin that were visible between the splits in the sides of the tunic, but soon sobered to look closely at the woman's face instead. "S- Saint Peter?"

"Oh no," the woman said, unlocking the Gates and holding them open. "Welcome to the halfway house. Here, you shall-"

"Saint Petra?"

The woman shook her head and waved Bobbie closer to her. "No. Please come inside."

"Then wh-"

"Rhonda. Will you get over here?"

"Rhonda?" Bobbie said and scrunched up her face into a mask of puzzlement. "Wait... Saint Rhonda?"

"No, just Rhonda. Hello, James Crammond."

*Tick-tock.*

"Do I look like a James to you?" Bobbie growled in a monotone.

*Tick-tock.*

Rhonda mirrored Bobbie's scrunched up expression as she took in the sight of the pirate who was tapping her boot impatiently. "Well... uh... no. Maybe a little with the beard and- oh... it's a fake...?" Rhonda said, staring at the full beard and handlebar mustache that were now lying on the floor next to Bobbie's right boot. "To be honest, you did look a little like... never mind. We'll deal with that in a while. Miss Crammond, I'm sorry to stress you, but you really need to move on. We have other guests coming in a little while. Come in, come in... you have nothing to worry about, you're going upstairs, not to Helgoland."

"Wh- where?"

"Helgoland. We can't actually say the other H-word here."

"Oh... yeah, the thunder," Bobbie said and scratched her cheek.

"Indeed, Miss Crammond. So?"

Bobbie took off her bandanna and fluffed her honey-blond fleece to make it fall back into its regular shaggy bucket-cut. "So... ah shit, I have no interest in ending up in Helgoland... wherever the Hell that is..."

The words had barely left Bobbie's mouth before the familiar clap of thunder rolled around the Gates spooking her quite badly. "All right, all right! Holy shit, I-"

The next thunderclap was even louder, and by now, even Bobbie Crabbe understood that she better pipe down or else. Shaking her head, she hopped across the boundary and went past the mysterious Rhonda. Once she was on the other side, the Gates were closed with a meaty clunk. Bobbie fell quiet as she took in the undeniable fact that she was oh-so-dead though she hadn't felt a thing. "Well. I guess this is it?"

"Yes," Rhonda said and put a feather-light hand on Bobbie's shoulder. "Come, it isn't far."

The two women moved ahead though Bobbie's steps were faltering. She eyed the staircase going up and wondered where the exit to Helgoland was. As the staircase came closer, the heavenly choir seemed to get louder, almost like they were guiding her along. "By the way... not that it matters, but how did I die?" she said, squinting at the taller woman.

"You were hit in the head by a flying block and tackle during a fierce storm."

Bobbie narrowed her eyes and thought back to her last evening on earth. Not only had it been unseasonably warm for Halloween, it had been completely calm. "Hold your horses... that ain't right... I was walking with my bag of candy, and... and... it was a nice evening!"

"You just can't remember, Miss Crammond. Now come, we must-"

"Hang on for a moment there, Saint Rhonda," Bobbie said and put a hand on the taller woman's shoulder. "I'm not James or anybody else-Crammond. I'm Bobbie Crabbe. Hi," she said and put out her hand.

Rhonda came to a dead stop and stared vacantly into the conditioned air inside the hallowed halls. "Bobbie Crabbe...?" she said in a monotone that matched the tone of voice Bobbie had used earlier.

"Yeah? Don't tell me that-"

Shuffling around on the spot in her sandals, the taller woman bared her teeth in an embarrassed smirk. "We may have a problem here... just a leeeeeeetle one, but-"

"Aw, hel- I mean, heck no! No, no... oh shit, no!" Bobbie cried, clutching her head and nearly tearing tufts out of her golden hair while completely ignoring the inevitable thunderclap that her profanity had brought on.

"Oh... yes, indeed..."

"I want to go back! At once!" Bobbie spluttered, stomping her boot onto the smooth floor for each word that came out of her mouth. "You put me right back down there, right this fu- flippin' minute!"

"Can't."

"The hel- heck you can't!"

Rhonda shook her head. "Not possible. It's been three weeks."

"Whaddahel- heck are you talking about? It can't have been more than three minutes! I'll bet my body is still warm and everything!"

"Time works differently up here. It's been three weeks."

"Three... weeks... three weeks?!" Bobbie squeaked, suddenly falling into a foreboding silence that grew in intensity like a volcano about to erupt.

"And you were cremated," Rhonda said with an embarrassed half-shrug.

Bobbie's silence was broken by another squeak, then yet another. After a short while of moving her lips like a beached trout, she reached out and grabbed hold of Rhonda's arms. "Cre... mated... cremated?!"

"Yes, when nobody had come forward to claim your remains, you were stuffed into an incinerator—"

"I know what cremated means, Goddammit! Aargh, I can't believe this shit! I had a good thing going down there and you people stuffed it up... I want to file a formal complaint, you hear me? I demand to speak to your Goddamned supervisor!"

This time, the thunderclap was so powerful Bobbie was thrown to her hands and knees by the shockwave that rolled through the hallways. Cowering, she raised her hands in the air to make the age-old 'time-out' symbol, but even that didn't seem to appease the annoyed divine being creating the thunder.

"Yikes!" Bobbie croaked once the thunderclap had petered out. "I gotta watch what I'm saying up here...!"

Groaning, she rubbed her ears and turned over so she could sit on the smooth floor. As she folded her legs up underneath her, she dusted off the fabric of her black, flared pants and let out a grunt. "You know... being an atheist, I don't believe in any of this."

Rhonda shrugged in a 'yeah, well' fashion and folded her tanned arms over her chest. "I'm afraid that doesn't mean a lot considering you're very much here," she said, looking down at the other woman.

"Huh! Is that all you have to say, Saint Rhonda?"

"No."

"No?"

"No, I'd like to say you look great for someone who's in her mid-seventies," the taller woman said sporting an impossibly wide smile.

"Why, thank—"

*Tick-tock.*

"Excuse me?" Bobbie said in the deepest register she could reach while she scrambled to her feet. "Excuse the hel- heck outta me? Mid-seventies? Do I look like I'm mid-seventies to you? I'm forty-six! And don't you know it's really impolite to inquire about a lady's age?"

Rhonda's arms slowly fell down her sides as she took in the information offered to her. "Oh... forty-six?" she eventually said in a voice that trailed off.

"Yesssss..."

"Oh. Must be James Crammond again. Forget it."

"Forget it? Jeez, lady..." Bobbie growled as she dusted off the seat of her pants.

Rhonda moved ahead through the corridor with a sanguine look on her face. When she realized Bobbie wasn't following her, she turned around and held out her hands like in a prayer. "Come, we must carry on. Please don't look at me like that..."

Bobbie stood with her legs slightly apart and her hands firmly akimbo. Her face that had been a mask of puzzlement upon her arrival was now a mask of sublime annoyance over the unfortunate way her pleasant evening had come to an end. "All right, I'll come... but I gotta tell you, I'm pretty miffed that I have to spend the afterlife dressed in a twenty dollar pirate costume. The material is really low-grade and the seams are already- what?" she said, interrupting herself when she caught a glimpse of utter confusion on Rhonda's face.

"A costume? So that's not what you wear regularly?" Rhonda said, clearly biting her lips.

"Hello! This is 2014, woman! Do you think anyone is dressed like this?" Bobbie said, fluffing out in her white shirt. "Well, I guess some are, but they're not a crowd I mingle with... never mind. Why do you ask? It's that James Crammond fella again, isn't it?"

"Uh... yes."

Bobbie sighed deeply and let her eyes travel all the way from the floor, up the taller woman's body and finally up to the ceiling. "May I ask when James Crammond lived?"

"Well, it says on the paperwork that he's to die in 1714... you're saying you're from 2014?"

"Yesssss..."

"Oh boy," Rhonda mumbled, scratching her ear that had suddenly gained an unusual shade of red though it was hard to see against her golden tan.

"'Oh boy' just about covers it," Bobbie growled. "You've really, really stuffed this up. Holy mackerel, you're gonna get in trouble on your next meeting with the Big Chief."

With another blush covering her face, Rhonda bared her perfect teeth in an embarrassed smirk. "But why were you wearing such a costume?" she mumbled.

"Halloween. Are you familiar with Halloween? I guess I shouldn't be surprised if you aren't."

"Well, of course we've heard of it, but it's a Pagan tradition... so we don't-"

"It may have been a Pagan tradition once upon a bygone age, but now, it's nothing more than a great excuse to get loaded on high-caffeine energy drinks and jump feet first into a sugar rush from binge-eating candy."

"That sounds unhealthy."

"Yeah, it's a real killer," Bobbie said in a monotone that made Rhonda look away in a hurry. "ANYhow... Rhonda, where did you get that really nice tunic? I was wondering if it was possible to get such cool threads instea- OOOOOH!"

Even while Bobbie was speaking, a golden light enveloped her that sent an entire tidal wave's worth of sparkles through her system. When the light faded away, it took the pirate costume with it and left her standing in a breezy, white tunic identical to Rhonda's, except that it was tailor-made for her.

"Yeah, now we're talking! Uh..." Bobbie said and looked down the upper hem to investigate the cause of the liberated feeling she had around her chest and her hips. "Mmmm... do you think it would be possible to conjure up some underwear? I feel kinda... exposed..."

"It'll pass. Now come, we really have to move on."

"It'll pass, huh? I guess you're not wearing any, either?"

"No. Never have."

"Huh. Okay," Bobbie said, unable to stop her eyes from landing here and there on a brief tour up the taller woman's body. "I guess I could go commando... ah, what the hel- heck. I feel bold today."

With a shrug, Bobbie followed Rhonda further along the white hallway until they reached the foot of the staircase. Looking up at the smooth, wide steps, Bobbie could see that it went straight up into a layer of clouds that obscured the top of the flight of stairs. Even as she was watching, the cloud drifted aside to reveal a closed door. "Well, I guess this really is it, huh? It was nice talking to you," Bobbie said and put out her hand, but found it thoroughly ignored by Rhonda who was staring at the closed door all-agape.

"What?" Bobbie said, looking at her hand, at Rhonda and finally up at the door. She came to the conclusion that it was the door that was causing the problem rather than her hand or even the mental condition of the taller woman.

"It's closed..."

"The door? That's a very astute observation, Rhonda. It's definitely closed," Bobbie said in a voice that was only slightly tinted by sarcasm and surliness.

"It's not supposed to be closed."

"Oh... what does that-"

"It means that you can't enter Paradise. At least not right now."

*Tick-tock.*

"Saint Rhonda, does that mean what I think it means? That you're shippin' me off to Hel-Helgoland with a pat on the head and a See Ya Later? Well, you can forget all about that! I'm an atheist and don't believe in any of this shit, but now that I'm here, you can bet your sky-blue eyes that I'm going upstairs!"

"Can't."

*Tick-tock.*

"Watch me, Sister!" Bobbie said and stomped up the flight of stairs. When she reached the closed door, she grabbed the handle and yanked it back and forth several times until it nearly came off in her hand. Her first attempt had had no effect on the sturdy structure, so she resorted to kicking it with her sandals, then banging on the door with both fists. Nothing worked and she stepped away from the door with a sour expression on her face. "Locked out of Paradise. Aw hell. And don't give me that thunder crap for saying hell!"

Too late - a clap of thunder went off in the staircase that rolled around the smooth walls for a little while.

Holding her hands firmly over her ears, Bobbie stomped back down and went over to stand in front of the taller Rhonda. She tapped her sandaled foot on the smooth floor like she was waiting for the world's best explanation. After a while, she provided it herself. "It's that darn James Crammond fella again, isn't it? Was I taken before my time? Holy sh- moly, I was, wasn't I?"

"You may have been," Rhonda said, scratching her ear.

"Whaddaya mean 'I may have been'... of course I was! I had four more decades down there! At least! Dammit, think of all the things I could have done! All the places I could have visited... all the gals I could have loved!"

The two women just stood there, staring at each other while the last of Bobbie's accusations echoed through the halls. Rhonda's right eyebrow began to twitch, a tic that

crept down into the corner of her mouth, then her chin. Without warning, the taller woman's cool facade melted away and was replaced by a heartrending wail. Burying her face in her hands, she spun around and stormed across the hall where she quickly disappeared behind an unsighted corner. Even out of sight, her wails still overpowered the pleasant background music created by the heavenly choir.

"Buh... Rhonda? Rhonda, Jeez, I'm sorry!" Bobbie said, rubbing her chin when it was evident the other woman wasn't coming back. "Okay... now I'm the villain. Great. I made the seraph cry... or cherub... or whatever she is. Aw shit, I'll never be allowed into Paradise. Helgoland here I come."

Another heartfelt wail penetrated the near-silent halls, prompting Bobbie to roll her eyes and set off after the fleeing gatekeeper. "Rhonda? Rhonda, where did you go? Please don't make me turn Heaven upside down searching for you! It won't improve my chances of getting upstairs. Rhonda?"

Bobbie went around the corner and found herself in a white hallway identical to the one she had just left behind. Grunting, she stopped and looked over her shoulder to make sure she hadn't taken a wrong turn. "Rhonda? Rhonda, I get lost real easily... and I'm already gettin' a little confused up here. Rhonda?" she said, moving down the new hallway.

She went past two open galleries overlooking a pretty blue sky before she reached a doorway that went off to the left. Peeking around it, she groaned out loud when it was revealed to be yet another identical hallway. "Rhonda? Are you here? No... aw, how could she have made it so far from the central hallway so quickly? Now I have to- GAAAH!"

Bobbie jumped up on tip-toes when a piercing wail assaulted her eardrums. The wail had come from directly behind her, and when she spun around on her sandals to investigate, she stared into a room that hadn't been there before. At the same time, the doorway behind her had turned into a smooth wall. "Oh, what is this... a haunted house? Rooms coming and going... people coming and going... and I'm stuck here. Rhonda?"

*"In h- here..."*

Rhonda was still out of sight from Bobbie's position in the hallway, and her weak voice made it difficult to pin down the exact location. "In where? Rhonda, where are you?"

*"In here. Straight ahead through the doorway..."*

Bobbie grunted and took a faltering step ahead. She put her hands on the edge of the doorway and realized it was the same one she had seen on the other side of the corridor. "I've been going straight ahead but Heaven keeps on turning in circles... yikes, this is soooooo creepy."

She stepped through the arch and found herself in a room packed to the rafters with rows upon rows and layers upon layers of boxes and crates of every shape and size. The room already had a double-height ceiling, but it could easily have been twice that to hold the mountainous piles of paperwork that threatened to topple over and create a tidal wave of information.

In the middle of it all stood a dark, antique desk, the only thing in the entire establishment that was made of wood instead of the ubiquitous white material used to create the walls and the floor - even the crates were white. Rhonda sat behind the desk with her face buried in her hands. Records were scattered all over the desk, creating an impression that it was all but one hiccup away from utter chaos.

"Whoa..." Bobbie said as she took in the sights. She stepped inside with her eyes out on stalks to see as much of the mess as she could. Boxes were literally everywhere; some opened, most closed. Those that were opened were overflowing with large, closely written data sheets printed in a meticulous hand. "Yikes... this is some library, huh? Do all the boxes contain these sheets? What's on them, anyway?"

"Information on everyone who's ever lived... or will ever live," Rhonda said through her fingers.

"Whoa! So it really is predetermined? Y'know, this is beginning to grate on me... as a devout atheist, I mean," Bobbie said and shuffled over to stand at the desk. She carefully swept aside a few records to rest her buttock on the corner.

Rhonda's lips briefly creased into a smile, but the humor was too much for her and she let out a sob that segued into another wail.

"Okay, okay, okay... it's okay," Bobbie said, jumping up from the corner. She hurried around the desk and began to rub the taller woman's back with long, tender strokes.

"No, it's not..." Rhonda said between a hiccup and a sob.

Bobbie looked at the countless boxes of records and wondered how many more people had been taken before their time - regardless of the amount, it would explain a whole lot of the history of the world. "Yeah, I guess... it isn't exactly like buying a cheeseburger at a fast food joint only to discover they forgot the slice o' yellow, huh?"

"I haven't had a day off in three thousand years!" Rhonda howled, crumpling one of the records between her long fingers. "I signed the wrong sheet! I didn't do it on purpose... your names were right next to each other on the master index and- and- and I looked at the wrong line! No... the wrong sheet! Ohhhh!"

"Three thousand years?! Girl, you need a secretary," Bobbie mumbled, craning her neck to look at her own record. She wasn't able to read much except that she had originally been scheduled to die in 2045 as a seventy-seven year old. The field containing the cause

of death was hidden behind Rhonda's thumb. The lines she was able to read detailed her life from the moment of birth through to leaving college, but they didn't offer any surprises to her.

"Tell me about it," Rhonda said, sniffing hard and wiping her runny nose on the back of her hand.

Bobbie went back to rubbing the taller woman's back, not just because it was the right thing to do, but because it had been a while since she had been that close to another woman. To show that she was only moderately miffed, she leaned down and kissed the tanned skin on Rhonda's neck.

The taller woman turned around and offered her visitor a grateful, little smile. "Thank you... that was nice."

"Yeah, it was," Bobbie said with a grin. "Tell me, Rhonda... you said you'd been here for three thousand years already... who are you really? And where did you come from?"

Rhonda leaned back in the chair and wiped her eyes on the back of her other hand. "Well, my real name was Rho-Na Wa-Hadra. I was born in a small village on the south-eastern bank of the Great Sea. One day-

"Hang on... the Great Sea?"

"I believe it's called the Mediterranean now..."

"Oh, okay. That explains your coloring. Go on."

"One day, I was herding my family's sheep when I was cut off from home by a thunderstorm. I tried to seek refuge under a tree, but it was hit by lightning. I caught fire and my sheep and I all burned to a crisp."

"Ew, ew, ew... for Chrissakes!" Bobbie cried - the word had barely left her mouth before the familiar thunderclap rolled around the hallowed halls. "Yeah, yeah... sheesh!" she said, looking at the ceiling.

"The next thing I knew, I was standing in the white hallway like you just did."

"But why didn't you move on?"

"I don't know. I just didn't," Rhonda said with a half-shrug. "There was an old man there to greet me at the Gates... long beard... flowing robe... I had always been told to respect the elders so... so when he said I needed to take over for a little while, I-

"Got shafted by Saint Peter," Bobbie said with an indignant snort.

"Well... I suppose."

"Three thousand years ago... that was before Junior. The members of the old gang were pretty strict on the rules, or so I've been told... Rhonda... when will the door to Paradise open for you?" Bobbie said as she knelt down next to Rhonda's tanned leg. For the first few seconds, she resisted reaching out to touch the skin, but the temptation proved too much and she let her index finger slide up between the bindings in the side of the tunic.

"It was open when I came. But it closed... and you don't get a second chance."

"Oh Gawd, that's the worst kind of cruelty I've ever heard of! Who writes those Goddamned rules, anyhow!? This is why I became an atheist! What in the holy hell do they think they're doing condemning you to such an awful fate-"

The archive room almost vibrated with the strength of the thunderclap that had been released without warning. The clap rolled around and around until it receded enough for Bobbie to take her hands off her ears. "Yikes, whoever *She* is, she's certainly temperamental..."

"Very."

"Huh."

A small break was interrupted by Rhonda turning around and shooting Bobbie an embarrassed look. "Bobbie, are you mad at me for fouling up?"

"Yeah, well," Bobbie said and ran a hand through her hair. She fell silent while she gauged how she actually felt. Weighing the pros and cons, she arrived at the undeniable conclusion: "You bet your tanned belly button I am! I was only forty-six, dang it! Okay, I don't have to suffer through menopause, but I would have liked to have seen just a little more of the world, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"Ah," Bobbie said while waving her hand dismissively, "ya didn't do it on purpose. I forgive you. And looking at this mess, I'm surprised it doesn't happen on a regular basis... or maybe it does?"

"Maybe," Rhonda said in a tiny voice.

"Ah. Okay. So..."

Rhonda jumped up from the chair behind the desk which sent a wad of records flying down onto the floor. She didn't reach for them, not even when Bobbie pointed at the records with a puzzled look on her face. "Well, I was just a common shepherd... I was

illiterate when I arrived and it took me a millennium to learn how to read and write. Uh... Bobbie?" she said shyly, shuffling around on the spot.

"Yeah?"

"Do you wanna see the sights? I could show you around... there's a lot of good stuff up here... you just have to know where to look."

Bobbie chuckled at the shy look on the taller woman's usually so placid face. She liked it better than the cold indifference that had been there when she had first laid eyes on her. "Or, in other words, you need a friend?" she said, cocking her head.

"Hardly anyone wants to speak to me when they get here... except perhaps one or two each century... oh, I could show you the trapdoor to Helgoland!"

"Holy sh- moly, you have a trapdoor to the fiery downstairs!?" Bobbie said and moved away from the desk. "A real, old-fashioned trapdoor where the sap... sorry, unfortunate customer, gets to earn his or her wings the hard way?"

"Yes..."

"Definitely gonna see that one. C'mon!" Bobbie said and hooked her arm inside Rhonda's. Grinning, she pulled the taller woman along the floor and out into the nearest corridor. "Which way?"

"Left."

"Can't be, we came from the left..."

"Left," Rhonda said and pointed a long digit in that direction.

Bobbie grunted and stomped off down the hallway with her perplexed hostess in tow. "And left it is."

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A short while later, Rhonda pulled Bobbie to a stop in the middle of yet another white hall to point at an inconspicuous part of the white floor. Only a faint, square outline showed that the tiles were different from those surrounding them.

Bobbie knelt down and let her fingers run across the smooth surface. If Rhonda hadn't pointed it out specifically, she wouldn't have been able to make out the trapdoor against the whiteness of the rest of the hall. Now that she used an index finger to trace the outline, she could feel it, but still not see it. "Whoa, this is camouflaged to a T. I would have walked straight onto it if you hadn't stopped me in time," she said and looked

around the room they were in. Like most of the other halls she had visited, it had galleries overlooking a deep blue sky peppered by fluffy white clouds.

"Oh, I wouldn't let you do that," Rhonda said shyly.

Bobbie grinned and leaned back to rest on her thighs. "Yeah, huh? Tell me, how do you operate it? I don't see any levers or triggers or anything...?"

"Sure you do, over there," Rhonda said and shuffled over to the nearest wall where an old-fashioned, two-foot long lever had suddenly appeared. Moving her arm casually, she released the lever which sprung the trapdoor.

"Yikes!" Bobbie cried and hustled back from the bottomless chasm that had suddenly opened up in the middle of the floor. Feeling brave, she inched ahead until she could peek over the edge.

The crackling fires of hell were visible far, far below; red, crimson and orange flames licked up from a dark, smoldering surface that seemed to consist of pure lava. A strong stench of death, disease and decomposition rose to greet her and made her pinch her nostrils. "Holy moly, I gotta watch where I put my hands around here... okay, you can close it now. Please!"

"Did you get a look at the fires of Helgoland?" Rhonda said and moved the lever back up.

"I sure did. Not going there any time soon, thankyouverymuch. So... where does a good-lookin' gal like yourself get her kicks in the weekends?" Bobbie said with a grin.

Rhonda shrugged and moved over to help Bobbie up from the floor. As she did so, she stepped directly onto the trapdoor but it held her weight without a creak. "Well, we don't have weekends up here."

"Figure of speech," Bobbie said and dusted off her hands on the seat of her tunic though the seat was in fact more dusty than the floor had been. "Are you really working twenty-four-seven?"

"We don't have twenty-four-seven up here, either."

"Another figure of speech. So you're working pretty much all the time?"

Rhonda shrugged with a despondent look on her face. "No, I *am* working all the time. I told you that already, Bobbie."

"Yeah, but I didn't believe you. That ain't right, girl! We all have to let our hair down now and then. You gotta have some kind of pastime, surely? Maybe roast ten gang members before breakfast or something?"

"Bobbie Crabbe! It's not up to me to decide who goes where!"

"Naw, but don't tell me you've never thought about it?" Bobbie said and bumped shoulders with the taller woman.

"Of course I have," Rhonda said with another shrug. "I see everybody up here. Well, those who believe in *Her*, anyhow."

"Politicians, lawyers, drug dealers, telemarketers?"

"Among others, yes."

Bobbie chuckled out loud and rubbed her hands together in glee. "Mmmmmh! Mmm-mm-mmm-mm-mmmh!"

"Do you have something stuck in your throat?"

"Naw, just thinking about where those people should... and will... be going."

Rhonda pulled them to a halt and put both hands on the shorter woman's shoulders in an extraordinarily motherly fashion. "Careful even thinking such thoughts, Bobbie... She will hear and you just might find yourself joining the people you were thinking about... I don't think it'll be much fun to have your chestnuts roasting over an open fire for all eternity."

"Ack, now you mention it," Bobbie said and pulled a suitably horrified grimace.

Silence fell among the two women until Bobbie's face lit up in a sunny smile that proved she had just figured out the meaning of life after death. "Ha! Ha, tell you what, Rhonda... how about I join you here? I mean, I could be your secretary or something? I know the perks are non-existent... unless you count not going downstairs... but keeping records is one thing I do well. And we could maybe talk a little and... you know. Get acquainted. Things like that. We'd have those piles o' files licked in no time."

"Gosh, would you really do that for me?" Rhonda said, pressing her hands to her full bosom.

"Aw, you betcha. It's not like I can go anywhere 'cos the door was closed for me too, right? You're a cool gal, Rhonda. I'd love to chat with you on an eternal basis. Right?" Bobbie said and once again bumped shoulders with the taller woman.

"Well, it's certainly tempting-" - a distant thunderclap rolled through the hallowed halls - "uh... an interesting offer. I'd like that, Bobbie... I'd like that a lot," Rhonda said and put out her hands like she was inviting Bobbie into a hug.

Bobbie grinned and let herself be hugged by the tall, statuesque woman. "Yeah, huh? Well, congratulations, you've just got yourself a new colleague. Huh, how 'bout that? Me, a staunch atheist workin' for the Big Company in the Sky. I guess weirder things have happened... but I'll be dam- darned if I can recall any, though. Of course, back when atheism proved to be the best option for me, I didn't know they had your kind of employees... I thought all men and women of the cloth were boring, old fuddy-duddies. Naw!"

"Please remember that it needs to be approved by *Her* before it's official..." Rhonda glanced around for spies before she leaned down towards Bobbie to whisper in her ear: "And sometimes, *She* can be a bit old-fashioned."

"Aw, what could your mythical *She* possibly have against me? Me, little Miss Wholesome? Hell, I've worked for tougher bos-"

Without warning, a thunderclap rocked the hall they were in, spooking them into holding onto each other almost like the trapdoor had just been sprung on them both.

"-ses. Okay. That's the 'watch what you're saying'-thing again. Gotcha," Bobbie squeaked while following Rhonda's example of glancing around the hall. Then she realized her cheek was resting against one of the taller woman's breasts through the delicate fabric of the tunic. "Ooops, pardon me. Old habits die hard, you know, ha ha," she said, removing herself from the comfortable nest.

"Oh, that's... ahem. Quite all right," Rhonda said with the beginnings of yet another blush covering her cheeks. "Bobbie, if you really are willing to work here... at least for a while... you need a desk next to mine. Come, let's go back to the archives room to get you settled in."

Smiling, Rhonda took Bobbie by the hand and led her off in the opposite direction from where they had come.

Bobbie's face blossomed into a two-foot neon green question mark at where they were going - they had walked in a perfectly straight line to get from the archives room to the hall with the trapdoor - but she soon filed it under experience and allowed herself to enjoy the stroll with the taller, graceful woman on her arm.

---

It didn't take them long to reach the archives room where a wooden desk similar to Rhonda's had already been installed. A pile of records had been placed on the desktop ready to be sorted. "Whoa... you gals up here have fast movers, huh? Back at my old cottage, yikes, I had to wait an entire day for two guys to deliver my bed. And they wanted tips, too. Can you believe that?"

"Well-"

"All right, what do you actually want me to do with these files? Just sort them in alphabetical order... or perhaps chronological order?"

"Whatever you feel like, Bobbie," Rhonda said with a toothy grin.

Bobbie mirrored the grin and added a little nose crinkle. "Just the thing for me! So... let me see..." she said and shuffled around the desk. She pulled out the chair and found it to be a perfect fit. "Neat!"

"Yes, isn't it? Once you have a stack of sorted records, maybe fifty or so, just put your mark on them and hand them over to me. I'll process them further."

"Signed, sealed and delivered, huh? I can do that... I can definitely do that. No, I can't," Bobbie said, looking around, on top of, under, and next to the desk.

"Uh... why not?"

"I don't have a pen or anything."

"Sure you do, top drawer," Rhonda said and pointed downwards.

"Duh, it doesn't have any drawers," Bobbie said and looked down. A set of five drawers had appeared since the last time she had looked. "Okay. This is going to take some getting used to..." she said, rubbing the side of her nose. With a shrug, she opened the top drawer and found a quill and an inkwell.

"Told you," Rhonda said, and it almost sounded like she wanted to stick out her tongue at the shorter woman.

"So you did," Bobbie said, tickling herself with the super-soft feathers at the end of the quill's shaft. "Oooh, double neat!"

*'Hello! Hello? What the hell, ain't nobody here?'* a male voice suddenly said from somewhere beyond the archives room. The profanity was immediately answered by rolling thunder.

"Oh! We've got a customer!" Bobbie said and jumped up from the chair. "A real, honest to goodness dead customer!"

"Yep. I have his record here... somewhere... somewhere around here... any minute now," Rhonda said and began to rummage through one of the piles on her own desk. Her slender fingers tore through the paperwork so fast that numerous data sheets were sent flying over the edge and onto the smooth floor. One sheet after the other was picked up, studied, studied again, discarded, picked up again and finally discarded for good. "No... ugh, I can't find it..." she said, rubbing her brow.

Bobbie could see that Rhonda was about to start crying again, so she hurried over to the taller woman's side and peeked around her shoulder while she ran a hand up and down the long back in a tender caress. "How about that one? I'm just guessing..."

"No, can't be... it says 2039."

"Okay. That one?"

"1487."

"Okay. Yikes, I really need to get these in the correct order... this is confusing... that one?"

"2014... yes, it could be the one... Roger Armstrong... used car salesman..."

"Haw! That's mine!" Bobbie said and snatched the record from Rhonda's hand. In two heartbeats, she had spun around and was on her way into the reception area near the Gates.

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Outside at the Gates, a man in a gray business suit was waiting impatiently - illustrated with startling clarity by the way his shoe tapped a fast, steady beat on the smooth floor.

Bobbie checked him out on her way over to the shiny structure. In his late forties, the man exuded an air of deviousness that was so typical of his trade. As she looked at his gray eyes, his neatly groomed beard and the rest of his ruddy face, she could almost hear him utter an endless stream of half-truths and full lies that would convince some poor sap to buy a wreck that wouldn't last beyond driving it out of the lot.

"Mr. Roger Armstrong?" she said on her way over to the man.

"That's right... Saint Peter?"

"Nope. Bobbie."

"Saint Bobbie?"

"Nope, just Bobbie."

"Oh..."

"I know it's confusing, but don't you worry 'bout that now. Anyhow, it says here that you... hmmm..." - Bobbie looked down at the record. She used an index finger to track the lines of meticulously printed text until she found the appropriate information - "...

were killed when a wheel fell off the used car you had taken out for a test drive? It went into a ditch and overturned... and you didn't wear a seat belt?"

"That's right. The mechanic told me he had welded that wheel on tight but I guess he hadn't," Roger Armstrong said and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll get the last laugh, though. The cops must be onto him by now. They're gonna bust his ass."

"Okay... well... that's certainly a charming way of looking at it. Tell you what," Bobbie said and opened the Gates with a graceful smile playing on her lips, "welcome to the halfway house. Now get ready to leave it."

"Huh?" the man said as he walked through the Pearly Gates.

"Oh, just a figure of speech. Sir, if you would please stand over here... yes... right over here," Bobbie said and put her hand on the man's elbow. "Just a little further. You see, I'm going to take your photo. Yes, it's for an identity card all newcomers need to carry during their first two weeks here. Yes, right there, that's very good, Sir," Bobbie continued, helping the used car salesman over to stand on a very specific point on the floor.

"Here?"

"Just fine, Sir. Now... say cheese," Bobbie said and shuffled over to the wall. The lever for the trapdoor popped out and she took hold of it with a wide, toothy grin.

"Chee-"

"See ya," Bobbie said and pulled the lever.

"Eeeeeee-Eeeeeee-heeee-heee-EEEEeessse-"

Bobbie put her hand behind her ear to follow the salesman's horrified scream all the way down and then some. With a satisfied smirk on her face, she moved the lever up and dusted off her hands. "I bought an old piece of sh- something for the last of my savings when I left college. Your colleague said it would last a decade... it didn't last a city block. Tell him Bobbie Crabbe says hi when you meet him down there."

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A short while later, Rhonda shuffled over to the main entrance with a carbon copy of the correct data sheet in her hand. Once there, she started looking around for the newest inductee into the heavenly family. When all she found was Bobbie wearing a grin that spelled out quite clearly that the cat had already had her fun with the canary, she cocked her head and shot the shorter woman a puzzled look. "Where's Mr. Armstrong, Bobbie?"

"What can I say... he had to split."

"Split... where to?"

"Downstairs. Hell-goland."

"Oh..." Rhonda said and looked at the lever on the wall. When it didn't offer any clues, she turned back to Bobbie. "I'm beginning to think I know why the door to Paradise didn't open for you... the next time, you really ought to check the paperwork first. He was going upstairs, not downstairs," she said, pointing at a meticulously written line on the record.

"A used car salesman going upstairs? IM-possible."

Rhonda tapped an index finger against the sheet and held it up so Bobbie could see for herself. "No, it says so quite clearly... right there."

"Ooops... ah, I'll get the hang of it eventually," Bobbie said with a grin.

Rhonda just blinked at that reply, and especially at the giggle that followed from the shorter woman. "Uh... let's hope so. The next one is almost here."

"Wow, is it rush hour or something?" Bobbie said and shuffled over to her hostess. Once there, she hooked an arm inside Rhonda's and offered her a broad, genuine smile to offset the slightly devious expression she had just worn. "You know... at first, I was really peeved with you for fouling up my paperwork... I still am."

"Oh..."

"Yes, but on the other hand, this is kinda fun. You know, the Judging part. I guess it's not always used car salesmen who walk up to the Gates, though...?"

"Uh, no. We get everybody up here. Or at least those who-"

"Believe in... you know," Bobbie continued, pointing upwards with her thumb while she whistled through her teeth to let Rhonda know who she was referring to. "And the occasional atheist, too, huh? But that's okay, this place is really different from what I expected."

Rhonda turned around so she was face to face with her new colleague. "Well, that's, uh... good," she said and put her hands on Bobbie's upper arms.

"Sure is! Now, is it possible to get takeout up here? I don't s'pose it is, huh? I'm starving... I got the jones for some papaya juice and a Tabasco dog, but..."

"We're dead. We don't eat..."

"Hey, the dead can do whatever they damn well please, Rhonda! And right now, I need a Tabasco dog so hot it'll rival the fires of Hell! Oh... shit," Bobbie said and immediately clapped her hands over her ears at the arrival of the inevitable wave of rolling thunder.

Once it had faded away, she relaxed her stance and buffed her fingers on the hem of her tunic. "Wait a minute... I can just conjure it up, can't I? Like the moving rooms? If I want it enough, it'll appear... or something. Right?"

"Well... pretty much, yes."

"Sweet! That's it for me, I'll be in the archives room, eating. Whistle for me if you need a hand... okay? Hey, do you want me to save you a couple of fries?"

"I don't know what that is..."

"Girl! French fries!" Bobbie said and clutched her head. "Mercy sakes, I can see I need to bring you up to speed on a whole lotta subjects. You know... I think this could be the start of a beautiful friendship. Yeah! Catch ya later, Saint Rhonda," she said and stood up on tip-toes to place a tiny kiss on the taller woman's soft lips.

At first, Rhonda appeared shocked, but it didn't take much more than a few seconds before she snickered shyly and began to shuffle around on the spot. "You kissed me..." she said, touching her lips.

"I kissed you... and there's plenty more where that came from. That's one of the things I'm planning to bring you up to speed on... eh?" Bobbie said with a wink.

"I don't know if *She* will approve..."

"She better 'cos I'm not backing down. So... I hear a French fry calling my name, but I'll be back out as soon as I have eaten. See ya."

"Uh... see ya," Rhonda said, moving up her hand to wave at her new friend. Behind her, the next person arrived at the Gates, and she turned around with a befitting expression on her face to take care of business.

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Whistling merrily, Bobbie hopped, skipped and jumped through the halls until she reached the archives room. When she found her empty desk, she closed her eyes and thought positive thoughts of fast food and soft drinks. The delicious smell that suddenly wafted up from the Hot Dog Meal on her desk made her break out in a wild whoop. "Awright! Tabasco Dog, here I come... aw yeah," she said as she sat down and immediately took a big bite out of the flaming hot, juicy treat. "Mmmmpf! Mmmmpf, mmmph, mmpfff, aw yeah... and it didn't cost me a dime."

After munching on the hot dog and slurping from the glass of papaya juice - which had a slice of pineapple like she had requested - Bobbie leaned back on the chair and stared at the piles of paperwork around her. "Being dead isn't half bad... the paperwork will be easy-peasy. Great food... great company with plenty of potential. I could live with that... or... something. Ah, whatever. Yeah... death is good!"

A throaty snicker bubbled up from her chest at the thought of the oddly inappropriate comment, but it was soon quelled by another lustful bite of the Tabasco special and a long slurp of the papaya juice.

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**THE END.**

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