

Infinite Loops



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Grains of sand fell on her head as she further squeezed herself into the tight corner of the underground military base.

Almost dizzily she could hear the ear-splitting screams of children while the parents tried to shush them in vain. Her heart thumped faster, taking in the scent of copper and rot around her. She swallowed in pain around her dry as sandpaper throat when she started again at the feel of something skittering past her. Faintly she could hear the noise of artillery raining upon them aboveground.

With a bang the door to the base opened. The Council members, all dressed in white, unmarred by the terror around them silently glided in. She knew what they were here for. A stifling silence reigned interrupted only by the quiet muffled cries of children and the ongoing war outside.

"0-12," came a melodious voice. "Please follow the wartime regulations, 0-12. Otherwise..." The voice almost liltingly mocked.

A young voice countered suppressing his rage, "Grandmother has a name! And we already told you her healing beads are falling apart! She cannot even walk and you expect her to heal?"

Just when he shouted out the protest, it felt as if the temperature plunged further. She shivered. The 'Head of the Council' uttered but a single line and the door closed shut again, with both the grandmother and the youth gone. "It is war child, and the devils don't show mercy" rang hollow in her ears. She knew what they came for, yet tears formed mercilessly at the plight of yet another sacrifice.

A siren blared, breaking her out of her gloomy thoughts. "It's an internal breach, the beasts are here!" A dad cried, hugging his daughter to his chest as he staggeringly stood up. She froze up, her heart missing a beat. Again, a cacophony of noises surrounded her along with a stampede of nearly hundreds of people as they ran around checking for openings out of here. She hated herself then, a deep searing hatred for her uselessness, for having no beads, a mutant. If only...then she would have at least tried like the others, however futile to get out. She saw a man dig out his metal beads from his body to encase his family in a dome with few holes, just enough to say goodbye. She saw him fall as his lifeline was cut like a puppet with cut strings. She saw several people stampede over a grandfather's cooling body.

She also saw a woman abandoning her toddlers as she herself made a forcefield around her body. Worst of all, she saw several people grappling for beads of other people, sparing not even the elderly or the children.

The door banged open and she closed her eyes. A stench of Sulphur filled her nose and a squelch of something landed on her face. She refused to observe as she tightly clamped her ears, her hands turning white with strain. As soon as it started, it died down.



When she saw her surroundings change, she abruptly realized that she was running. She didn't know how but she pulled him up the staircase, running as fast as she could away from the glistening blood under the fluorescent lights and the still gaping maw. She saw flooded floors and more half-eaten bodies along the way, blood long washed away. He was a dead weight on her back, his short compact body slippery with sweat and day-old grime kept falling off. Her own legs couldn't bear her own weight, let alone the fire user's. Every sound made her hyperaware, every footfall felt like the last.

She at last reached the door to outside; it was long broken, the lock still stuck at INCORRECT PASSWORD. That was when the fire guy decided to move on her back, almost like a wriggling eel. He awoke with a tumble from her back, thumping his head on the ground. Bloodshot eyes opened, fumbling he sat up, taking in the unfamiliar environment. Without a word he glanced past her, and noticing the automated door his gaze stilled.

By the time she recovered enough to glance back up, he had stuck in his fingers to pry the door apart, melting it simultaneously. Moonlight streamed in, getting wider as the crack widened.

Slowly she walked up to him, still maintaining a distance, and she opened her mouth to thank him. The door decided to groan open, bent at the middle; she fearfully closed her mouth and threw a glance behind. There was nothing. Turning she saw the fire guy walk away with a pace fast enough to even make her own stilt legs jealous. She ran after him, catching up in a few long strides. He still refused to utter a single word. Deciding to ignore him, she muttered a near silent 'thanks,' and decided to keep alert. Even knowing the lore, the night sky looked weird to her. It was a new moon on a fortnight. Its pale light made the ankle-deep water sparkle silver and white, the deserted street engulfed in a white veil made for a serene view. It was broken only by their presence, wading through the waters for the artillery had long since stopped raining.

This military base was built near the border; the border always filled with people, was now deserted. The Council Members every year would try to reduce the flow of people, unfortunately the borders held mines and various high earning less than virtuous jobs which appealed to the people at large. The military was ineffective against such masses. Thus, there were many homes, all shabby and dark to attract the least attention. Yet those houses never felt eerie, only dirty perhaps.



A gurgling sound broke her mind out of her wandering thoughts. It was a child, trying to protect a baby, desperately shushing. The child had determination written on her face, holding the baby, she was ready to run across the street, coincidentally choosing the direction they came from. Perhaps noticing, the fire user stopped rushing and instead called them over. The child's eyes flashed blue for a millisecond, her hand tremblingly forming a water whirlpool in front of her, in response the fire user's eyes instinctively flashed the colour of his fire. The girl instantly seemed to calm down in front of that display of power, slowly wading closer.

Once the child was close enough, the moonlight glancing of her face illuminated the relief of having found her own kind amidst the horror of the breaking barrier. Perhaps this night saw her entire family being ripped apart in front of her. Still shushing the doll like baby, she stared wide eyed, as the fire user bent down forming a tiny bud of fire, warming up the surroundings. Perhaps the child and the baby were freezing, as after some time the baby stopped crying out and the child stopped the minute shivering that was almost imperceptible except to his keen eyes. To her surprise as to the child's the baby waved its hand towards him, and he spoke for the first time since he was taken out of the shelter, in a soft tone bending to the child's level.

"My name is A-Zhu, number 0-10. What is your name?"

With a gasp both people able to comprehend the power of that assigned number turned to stare unblinkingly at him.

Almost awkwardly A-Zhu said, "It's not that big of a deal. Its mostly because of my grandmother..."

At that he stopped talking once more, his hoarse voice filling with a tide of emotions. Sensing it, the non-user was about to steer the conversation, but she was taken over by the child jumping in saying, "My name is Asha and my brother's name is Messiah."

She then turned about to face the non-user urging her silently to go next. Before she could start introducing herself, a half-crazed giggle suddenly broke through the night. Sensing something in the periphery, they all turned their heads towards a narrow dark alley to their alley. Messiah had stopped waving his hand.

"A gathering of humans? How quaint!" came a skin crawling voice from the dark alley, the figure hardly visible even with the bright moonlight.

The hot-headed A-Zhu decided it was a good time to open his mouth again, only to ask a stupid question, "Who are you?"

"Well, aren't you cute? I am just a messenger of the true deity," came the retort as fast as lightning.

Saying so it stepped into the well-lit street, almost gliding. A-Zhu pushed Asha and her behind him. Still giggling, the figure was revealed. It was a grotesque figure emanating the smell of death. More than half of its body was missing, the other half rotting.

"You know I could feel you killing my second in command!" it peppily declared as if commenting on the weather. A-Zhu backed further away as it came closer, with a skip and a half it came up to A-Zhu, grasping him in his mangled bloodied arms, or what remained of it.

"Thus, I just had to find you." It breathed in A-Zhu's ear. Its eyeballs roved over at Asha and her, "They are just the leftovers, right 'Hero'? Useless burdens, let me take them off you!" Asha tightened her hold over Messiah. She hugged both to her side.

The devil opened its maw, splitting the poor human's face in half, the body long since a husk; A-Zhu jumped further away letting lose a series of fire daggers. With a blip of a transportation spell stepped next to Asha and her. With a shriek, Asha let out a whirlpool blast right at it. Again, with a giggle it went to transport when a flying piece of metal struck its rolling eyeball.

With a curse, she ran with Asha in hand. Her hand still shook at the close encounter. Pulling out more metal pieces left from the attack at the base she flung it blindly at her back. A-Zhu quickly used the opportunity to run towards it, much to all their amazement. With a swing of fist, he formed a flaming sword lighting all the metal pieces thrown by her. Sizzling it burned the devil, as it struggled further with its frail possessed body.

Hissing it hatefully cursed in its demonic language. Simultaneously, it formed a hand gesture pulling A-Zhu towards him. Wide eyed A-Zhu started choking on the mangled hand as Asha and Messiah both shrieked at the top of their lungs. She started panicking.

Quickly looking around, she picked up the metal bin and threw it at the devil. It stopped just before it hit the devil, but it looked over smiling eerily at her. Thankful that he was released again, A-Zhu let loose a wall of fire, evaporating the water around them. The devil yet again decided to teleport, this time just behind her, planning to rip out her throat. Yet it found, that it could not move, the new moon was covered with clouds. Without the energy source helping corrupt its body, it could not move. The strange sigil on its forehead glowed red, ready to fight through the wall of fire when it suddenly slipped.

There were glowing green vines crawling all over its legs. Sensing nothing from her, all of them turned their heads towards the squirming bundle called Messiah. The devil's vassal body sizzled as it let out a ear piercing shriek. With a thump the vines still attached, detached the flaying parts of the body. Almost going down on his knees, A-Zhu turned towards the now swirling ashes with a glowing sigil on top. The clouds had shifted once again, lighting up the surroundings. With a laugh, it rushed at them.

They were running again, she kept throwing metal pieces behind her, A-Zhu lighting them on fire. Nothing seemed to work. Even Messiah had grown tired and the vines receded. Now, he and Asha only gasped and hiccupped silently. They were truly facing the King unhampered by the bad luck he possessed for his sin now that he was without a vassal. Almost unknowingly they had arrived right next to the still pulsing barrier. The magic spells and the beads still glowing golden, even as pieces disintegrated. Beyond the barrier they could see the black sludge of death, that 'Pandemonium' possessed.

The only colour they could see beyond the barrier amongst the sludge was the blue hellfire and millions of human skeletons stacked on top of each other, reaching dizzying heights.

A hoarse laugh echoed from around them the barrier shaking like a thin piece of paper. "After I am done with you... Maybe I will venture further into your village and further still into your mighty cities! They didn't even come to help you poor souls..." sighing the voice paused, "Well, I promise to preserve your bodies for two days...no, three days after this."

The ashes gathered again after that declaration. With nowhere to run, she foresaw her death. A rush of adrenaline filled her. With a smile she leaped to her death, embracing the ashes. Strangely she knew what to do, calling forth the disintegrating barrier as every inch of her body burned.

Asha, A-Zhu joined the fray, slowly sending the pieces towards her using their beads. The King then stopped trying to move, a grin could be felt taking over its features as he whispered, "Hunter, do they know what you sacrifice for them?" Wide eyed she stared at it, as still laughing it was encased by the barrier banished to the maze caves of the Pandemonium. The barrier was healed at the cost of her life. She could feel her life draining, shock taking over, when she saw those two rushing to her.

Suddenly a window popped up, strangely floating in front of her. A-Zhu and Asha slowed as did the world around her. A stoic voice declared, "Failure to end the test infinite times results in more tests. Does user wish to continue the journey?" Smiling through the rising sorrow, she calmly said yes. The world was saved, yet she couldn't stay, only her memories wove another tale in the tapestry of her heart.