

# FOLLOW

At a glance, it was a seemingly common forest, but upon closer inspection, something was very different. The sky wasn't quite right, neither were the trees, nor was the snow on the ground. Only the sound of a strange wind could be heard rustling through the dormant, dry branches. There were no sounds of birds or other animals and certainly no sounds of cars or humans or anything for that matter. It was serene and peaceful and empty, except for the field which lay very near it. There was a hole in the ground, and it was covered with a simple, rotting, wooden hatch. One may very well have thought of it as an entrance to a mine or a cave, but it led to some place neither you nor I would ever want to be in. Screams came from that hole in the ground, screams so horrifying that anyone still living would surely fall dead upon a listen.

The hatch flung open, and up walked a clean-shaven, black-haired man in a coat and clothes that were covered in dirt. He breathed a deep sigh, relieved that he had made it to the woods. He knelt over and picked up the snow. He held it in his hands for a moment, but threw it down quickly in pain. He stood up and shivered. "So cold here."

Another man emerged from the hole in the ground. It seemed he hadn't shaved in days and his clothes were torn and ragged. He was panting heavily and scared to the point of shaking, but when he saw the serene landscape he had just walked into, he was awestruck. He ran out of the hole, jumping headfirst into the snow. He cried out in excitement and began to make

snow angels, laughing till he was out of breath and then laughing some more.

The hatch slammed shut behind them.

The black-haired man stepped over to the man in the snow. He said, "Much better than Hell already, is it not?"

"Oh, God!" cried the man in the snow. "Oh, God! Yes, it is!" He brushed snow over himself and brushed it away from him several times over, enjoying the soothing, cold feeling. "I could get used to this place. Thank you so much for bringing me here with you!"

"You have to get up, Carson," the black-haired man said, helping the other man up. "And keep your voice down," the black-haired man whispered into his ear as he put a coat over Carson's shoulders.

"What? Why?" asked Carson.

"Where do you think we are now?"

"What?"

"This is not Heaven," the black-haired man said as he helped brush the snow from Carson's ragged clothes. "I hope you did not believe it was going to be that easy."

"What else has to be done?"

"We are in Limbo."

"Limbo? The edge of Hell?"

"This is the border between Heaven and Hell," replied the black-haired man. "You thought Hell was difficult to escape from? We are the lucky ones. Had they caught us, we would be down there in another section, a deeper level. You have no idea what they do to souls down there. It is indescribable..."

"Please stop."

"I will not enlighten you with the details, but assume almost the very worst."

"There's nothing here, though."

"So you think." The black-haired man began walking toward the woods. "Follow closely. This is the way."

"Where are we going?" asked Carson, following the man.

"Beyond this forest there lies another shrouded in a thick darkness. It is meant to deter souls like us from entering. On the other side is the place where you and I will spend eternity."

"Heaven?" asked Carson excitedly.

"It is certainly much warmer there."

"But that's it?" again asked Carson. "We just need to go through the dark wood?"

"The dark wood, yes, but the distance between here and there is full of demons." The black-haired man turned over his shoulder and whispered to Carson, "You cannot see them, but they watch us even now. You must stay resolute. It is your only defense against them." The black-haired man continued walking.

They walked through the field and entered the forest, and traveled past tree after tree for so long it seemed as though the forest would never cease. Following the black-haired man over a downed tree, Carson said, "Thanks again for helping me out of that place."

"The pleasure is all mine," replied the black-haired man.

"You know, you never told me your name."

"I would have if I remembered it."

"You don't remember your name?" asked Carson, surprised of such a notion.

"I died a very long time ago. One does not need a name when he is screaming in the dark depths for ages."

"When did you die?"

"The fourteenth century."

"The middle ages? Were you a knight?"

"I cannot recall," replied the black-haired man.

"Want to know what I was?" The black-haired man said nothing, so Carson continued anyway, "An insurance salesman."

"That explains why you were in Hell."

"But, you know I never... I mean, sure, I probably cheated some people out of a little more money than I should have, but... Hell. It seems unwarranted."

"Just follow. As soon as you start questioning things, you lose your ability to stay resolute."

"Alright," Carson said, and he and the black-haired man continued through the forest. They walked for many hours more, many *days* more, and just before Carson could take no more, the forest ended.

They found themselves in a field.

On the other side, the dark wood.

"That's it, isn't it?" asked Carson.

"This is our destination, yes," replied the black-haired man.

Carson looked off into the distance in another direction. He could see what looked to be like the setting sun, a tremendous light on the horizon. It stood in stark contrast to the dark wood that was before them.

"Focus, Carson!" the black-haired man yelled. "Can you hear him? He is coming. He is coming to us!"

"Who?" asked Carson. He whipped his head to the direction the black-haired man was looking. A figure approached.

"A demon," replied the black-haired man. "He will try to break us, Carson. He will try to fool us. It is all a lie! You have to remember that!"

The figure approached, and Carson could make out exactly what it was—a man, an average, every day man, stoic in composure, giving Carson a powerful stare. Carson lost his breath.

"You're on the fringe," said the figure directly to Carson. "Another few steps, and there will be no turning back and no escaping. The man you're following is leading you to Hell."

"Stay resolute, Carson!" yelled the black-haired man.

"His words are poison," continued the figure. "His tongue drips of deceit."

"He is a demon, Carson!" yelled the black-haired man. "He is trying to break you! Follow me!"

"You have but two choices: lead yourself to the light or follow this man into darkness."

"Follow!" the black-haired man yelled, and ran through the snowy field into the dark wood where he disappeared.

Carson froze, struck with fear and indecisiveness. The demon could be right, he thought for a brief moment, but a demon couldn't be telling the truth. Carson made the decision that instant. He was going to follow.

"God save you," said the figure, and he watched as Carson ran through the field and into the darkness.

There was an immense rumbling in the dark wood. There was thunder and there were screams far bloodier than any he had heard before. The air was thick and

stale and the smell of rotting corpses hung in the air. He knew it immediately. He was in Hell.

"Thank you, Carson. Thank you for not questioning me," said the black-haired man who had appeared behind Carson.

"You... You led me..."

"Despite the holy persuasions of angels, you, of your own free will, followed me into Hell, and for that I commend you. Your weak, submissive personality will work well here, because the more you resist, the more we have to hurt you."

"You..." Carson wanted to save everything in the world, but he couldn't speak more than several words.

"Yes, I. I led you out of *Purgatory*. Someday you may have made it out on your own, but after that experience, it would have been more difficult to persuade you into darkness. The light seems so much more enticing, does it not?"

"You're the demon."

"And you are now the damned."

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