

**The
Insane
Journey**

The Insane Journey



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To my sons,

Alexander and Benjamin

And my partner in life, love and other mischief,

Inge

And her son,

Aran

1

Beneath a deep-blue sky scattered with clouds dashing off towards distant horizon as if late for a very important date sat the ruins of a small Gothic church. Its crumbling stone walls were first put up nearly a thousand years before and, for the most part, still stood, despite the never-ending wind blowing against them and through their delicate latticework of window frames long since devoid of stained glass – or, indeed, of any glass at all. A headless Jesus nailed to a rotting cross hung from a single, rusty bolt in the remainder of a transept wall and swayed back and forth with a perpetually irritating squeak. One can only assume that Jesus's head, unable to tolerate the godforsaken noise, had long since exploded.

Outside the ruins, an ancient burgundy Bentley was parked. Its modern wheels and tyres attempted to insult the dignity of the bodywork, but the bodywork simply ignored them. Bentleys' bodies are made of stern stuff. It takes more than high-performance alloys to embarrass them.

The sound of the wind whistling round the hills and rustling through the odd tree atop this particular Algarve hill was soon enhanced by a dull roar which increased in volume as the motorcycle to which it belonged drove up the hill, pulled into the churchyard and parked beside the old car.

An athletic woman in her early twenties, wearing what appeared to be a cross between a nun's habit and a designer tracksuit topped off with an aerodynamic carbon-fibre coif, climbed off the bike and walked towards the old car. From the compact rucksack on her back,

she pulled out a small electronic device, turned a knob until it clicked and got down on her knees to look under the rear of the Bentley. Finding a suitable space, she tore a plastic cover off the device and stuck it to the underside of the car. She stood and with the tip of her boot brushed away her footprints in the dust as she backed away from the car.

Reaching into her outfit, she pulled out a small, black telephone with a gold cross embedded on the front.

“Sister Alessia,” she said into the telephone. A number appeared on the screen and in a second, a dialling tone.

“Good morning,” said Sister Alessia, at the receiving end of the call.

“Good morning,” said the motorcyclist. “This is Judith. The tracking device is installed and live.”

“Very good, Sister Judith. One moment, please.” The sound of a computer keyboard being tapped echoed in the phone. “Yes, I’ve got it on the GPS. Well done. Father Forge will be delighted.”

“See you soon, sis,” said the motorcyclist with what seemed an almost childlike glee. She remounted her bike and raced back down the road up which she had just come.

This windy, squeaky scene remained largely unchanged until two days later, when a small space cruiser shot across the sky, decelerated to a hovering stop above the churchyard and dropped until it was a scant centimetre or two above the ground, where it bobbed like a boat on a lake. A door hummed open and a pair of steps lowered, enabling Maxwell van Mars, a skinny chap with long curly hair and mismatched eyes, to hop out and take in a deep breath.

“Ah, bliss!” he cried out.

After a week in the tinny, recycled air of a space cruiser, the air of the European countryside was delicious. It reminded him of the first time he had ever taken a breath of Earth’s air.

For, you see, Maxwell was a Martian. Not an alien, mind. Rather, Maxwell was a human born in the hermetically sealed dome-city in the Arimanes Rupes region of the fourth planet, a city which, it should be noted, his family effectively owned through their shareholding in the Martian Mining Company as well as their stakes in dozens of associated companies registered on the Earth, Mars and the solar system's most notorious tax haven, Titan: the methane-ocean-covered moon of Saturn.

His grandfather, a pioneer on Mars, founded the company and changed the family name from something vaguely Germanic and agricultural to one signifying the family's key role in establishing the company and the colony. Grandpa may have been an interplanetary pioneer of the first order – but he utterly lacked class.

Maxwell was nine when his parents brought to him to Mother Earth for the first time. Nevertheless, he could still recall the explosion of incredible smells that attacked his senses when the spaceship doors opened and he was first exposed to the air of Earth. Indeed, the young Maxwell's reaction to standing up and taking in the luscious air of Earth was to pass out – though how much of this was the result of the fragrance-rich air and how much was the result of standing up in a gravity three times more intense than that he had known his entire life is an open question.

In any event, when he came to, he made a vow that one day he would live on the sweet smelling, windy Earth – a vow that, in retrospect, was awfully easy to fulfil when one's family was stinking rich, but one lacked the competence to run the family business or even one of its subsidiaries. Indeed, the family was quite happy to fling him a trust fund or three and keep him tens of millions of kilometres away from the company headquarters.

“Come, Wendy,” Maxwell shouted into the space ship. A moment later, a kairuku penguin with a satchel round her neck waddled out and followed Maxwell, who was carrying a couple of rucksacks, to the

ancient Bentley. He opened the passenger-side seat, allowing Wendy to hobble in with surprising adroitness, then tossed the rucksacks into the boot.

“Let’s get ourselves to Cape City and some creative depravity,” Maxwell said to the penguin as he twisted the ignition key. The engine roared to life and settled to a deep throb that suggested significantly more power than what was originally under its bonnet.

“You know I don’t do depravity,” said the penguin.

“I know, but you should give it a try. It’s such fun and I could teach you so much,” said Maxwell.

Rather than answer the question, the penguin reached into her satchel, pulled out a battered copy of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, opened it to the bookmarked page and began reading.

“Where would you like to go today?” asked a muffled voice from under a panel in the dashboard.

“Mrs Miller!” cried Maxwell. “I’ve missed you.” He opened the panel to reveal the GPS display screen – also not original equipment on a car of the Bentley’s vintage. “Lead us to the Splendouria Hotel in Cape City, please.”

“Calculating,” replied the GPS unit.

“You do that,” said Maxwell as he manoeuvred the car out on to the road and turned left.

“In 1.3 kilometres, veer right,” said Mrs Miller, following 30 seconds later with, “in 300 metres, veer right.”

Maxwell kept to the left.

“She said to go right,” said Wendy.

“Recalculating,” said Mrs Miller as the ancient Bentley roared past the suggested exit.

“Yes, but she wants me to take the highway. The road to the left is more fun to drive, if a smidgeon slower,” said Maxwell.

“In 3.4 kilometres, turn right,” said Mrs Miller.

“I’ve been thinking, Wendy,” said Maxwell.

“That’s worrying,” said Wendy.

“Don’t be cute. It doesn’t suit you, old penguin.”

“Don’t get distracted, Maxwell, or we’ll never finish this conversation. What were you thinking?”

“I reckon we should cut our visit to Cape City short and drive back to Erps-Kwerps right after the unveiling,” said Maxwell.

“But the unveiling is tomorrow night and you’ll drink way too much,” said Wendy.

“No, I’ll drink just the right amount. Don’t be so judgemental.”

“I’m not being judgemental. You have a drinking problem.”

“Not if the wine cellar is full, I don’t. Still, you’ve got a point. We’ll leave first thing next morning.”

“In two hundred metres, turn left,” said Mrs Miller.

“Oh, good. I don’t much like Cape City,” said Wendy.

“Turn left,” said Mrs Miller.

“I know,” said Maxwell to Wendy as he drove straight past the junction that Mrs Miller was referring to.

“Recalculating,” said the GPS.

“Good on you, Mrs Miller,” said Maxwell.

“Though I sometimes wonder why I bother,” said Mrs Miller.

“What?” exclaimed Maxwell.

“Continue for 64 kilometres,” said the GPS.

“Okay,” said Maxwell pushing the accelerator to the floor. The engine gurgled with delight as it sent horsepower to the wheels. The Bentley picked up speed at an unseemly pace for a car of its size and vintage. Maxwell tweaked the steering wheel and feathered the accelerator pedal to bring the massive vehicle around the many curves of the winding country road. Occasionally, the tyres let out a screech as Maxwell took a curve too quickly and the tail end of the car considered giving in to centrifugal force and spinning.

Somehow, that never happened.

Meanwhile, in a convent far away, a computer beeped and its

screen came to life, showing the speeding car as a devil's head progressing along a winding line on a digital map.

2

In a roadside café, Maxwell and Wendy stood at the counter drinking coffee and tea respectively.

“Ahhhh! I can feel the caffeine recharging my system,” exclaimed Maxwell, extending his arms like superhero preparing for battle.

“No, you can’t. It takes 45 minutes for caffeine to enter your bloodstream,” said Wendy.

“This is special coffee with fast-acting caffeine,” said Maxwell.

“There’s no such thing. It’s a placebo effect,” said Wendy.

“That’s good enough for me,” said Maxwell, as Wendy rolled her eyes.

“Excuse me,” said a tall, thin woman in a billowing white blouse and carefully torn, tight blue jeans. “Are you Maxwell van Mars?”

“That I am,” said Maxwell.

“The sculptor?”

“That too.”

“I adore your work!”

“Why, thank you, um...” began Maxwell.

“Cynthia.”

“Cynthia,” said Maxwell.

“I’ve been studying your work at uni and I think it’s great, especially the way you give your figures – those robots – life. When they are dancing, they seem so real,” said Cynthia glowingly.

Although he was a failure in business in general and the family business in particular, Maxwell had proven himself capable in the arts. In particular, he had made a name for himself as a leading sculptor of

robots. For the past few years, he had been experimenting with robots in the form of nude female figures who performed bizarre dances to any background music or rhythm they detected. If there was nothing suitable in range, the robots would sing from an eclectic collection of music stored in their memories.

The anatomical accuracy of Maxwell's nude dancers and the eroticism of some of their performances were variously a cause for controversy, adulation and erections. Indeed, men attempting sex with the sculptures was not an uncommon cause for concern, though the real problem was that the sculptures' anatomical correctness was only on the surface, making vaginal penetration a penis-bruising impossibility. Since most men who attempted the feat were more than a little intoxicated, they didn't let a little initial resistance – and pain – diminish their determination, though they inevitably felt the consequences the next morning.

“I model them after real women,” said Maxwell.

“But lots of artists do that. Why are your figures so much more alive?”

“Because my models do not sit still. They move around, dance and do other things while I watch and make sketches. I do not want merely to capture a still likeness of an attractive woman like you. Rather, I want to capture her life, the way she moves and her feminine sensuality in those movements.”

“Wow!” said Cynthia, following with a thoughtful pause. “When you said attractive like me, was that just a compliment?”

“Yes, it was a compliment. But it was a sincere one.” Maxwell looked at the young woman more carefully for a moment, scanning her entire body in a professional yet slightly lustful manner.

“I think you would be a great model for a sculpture. Would you be interested?”

Cynthia smiled, but before she could reply, Wendy spoke up.

“He will end up seducing you, you know.”

“Wendy!” said Maxwell

“What?” asked Cynthia, startled.

“He ends up having sex with most of his models,” said Wendy.

“You say that as if sex with me is a bad thing,” said Maxwell. “I have it on good authority that it can be a very, very good thing.”

“I wouldn’t know. Fortunately, you are not into bestiality,” said the penguin.

“Lord love a duck, Wendy!” said Maxwell. “What’s got into you?”

“Oh, my!” said Cynthia, now blushing a deep ruby red.

“Oh, don’t worry. She’s just jealous because I haven’t sculpted her,” said Maxwell.

“No, I’m not,” said Wendy. “We penguins only get jealous when our mates sit on other penguins’ eggs. We are not interested in posing for human art.”

“Anyway,” interrupted Maxwell. “You are an attractive woman with a lithe body, Cynthia. Assuming you can move as elegantly as you look, you’d make a marvellous model. Here’s my card. If you really are interested in posing for me, call my assistant and make an appointment to come to my studio. If you pose for me, you will need to get undressed and move around while I watch and sketch you – but, of course, you will not be expected to sleep with me.”

“Ha!” said Wendy.

“Thanks,” said Cynthia.

“Keep that up, penguin, and I’ll throw you into a pool of leopard seals.”

“There are no pools of leopard seals anywhere near here,” said Wendy firmly.

“I’ll improvise,” said Maxwell.

“How?” asked Wendy.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” said Maxwell. “Now, let’s hit the road. Cape City is still a couple of hours ahead of us. Toodle-oo Cynthia, I hope I’ll see you in my studio one day soon!”

Cynthia waved, not quite sure what to make of her brief encounter with a hero who suddenly seemed a little less heroic, but a little more interesting.

“Don’t you want to have sex with her?” asked Wendy once they had got into the car.

“Of course I do. She’s as cute as a calico kitten playing with a ball of yarn. But you know it’s not appropriate to bring the act of sex up so early in an acquaintanceship.”

Wendy looked concerned in a penguinish kind of way. “Are you upset with me for bringing up sex?”

“Not at all. Ironically, by your bringing it up, if she shows up at the studio one day, it will likely mean that she wants to sleep with me – or is at least open to the possibility – whereas if I had brought it up, she’d have been upset and walked away then and there.”

“Sometimes I just don’t understand humans,” sighed Wendy.

“No worries, old bird. I don’t much understand penguins,” said Maxwell, accelerating onto the winding road that twisted between the mountains and would take them to Cape City and some depravity that he hoped would include a sexual component. He had been locked up for a week in a space cruiser with only a penguin for company, albeit one who was his best friend.

3

Into a large stone visitors' chamber in the Cape City Mayoral Mansion walked a tall, well-built man with thick blonde hair plastered back across his head and a substantial matching moustache. He wore a black tailored suit together with the tabbed shirt of the clergy, albeit an expensive silk example.

“May I help you?” asked the young woman sitting at a reception desk beneath a rather drunk-looking gargoyle.

“Why yes, my child. Would you be so kind as to tell the mayor that Reverend Phineas Forge has arrived and is at his service,” said the visitor in a deep drawl that immediately identified his origins as being the Southeastern bit of the United Evangelical States of America, or UESA.

Like many who had been born and raised in the vast region of North America that had turned into a Christian evangelical theocracy during the last century, the Reverend Phineas Forge had a very specific vision of God and His Son branded into his brain, to the point where it was an unquestionable truth. Indeed, questioning this alleged truth only made the Reverend and his kind deeply uncomfortable and occasionally aggressive.

They had been brought up to believe in faith over facts and prayer over results. That the population of much of the rest of the world, and particularly Europa, failed to appreciate – much less beholden themselves to – the Evangelical vision, was a point of pain and concern among Phineas's countrymen and women. Hence, preachers like Phineas in his early days were sent out with sackfuls of cash as

sugar-daddy missionaries to various European cities to share the love of Jesus. Not surprisingly, it was never difficult for these missionaries to find powerful people who would happily profess their love of God, Jesus and the Evangelical Church in exchange for some of that cash. Or better still, a lot of that cash.

Fresh out of the seminary, Phineas was sent as a junior missionary to Cape City on what should have been a temporary assignment. However, he soon came to feel that his beloved Jesus wanted him to stay longer and truly clean up this southern European city of sin. So he stayed on.

That he had taken a fancy to a local girl was doubtless a major influence in this decision, though Phineas would have denied it. She probably also played a part in his signing up to do a master's degree in European history at the University of Cape City, where she happened to be a student herself. Nevertheless, the course enabled Phineas to understand better the country of Europa and her people.

As so often happens with young, idealised love, Phineas's affection for the young local lady was eventually shattered by reality, with some assistance from Maxwell. By then, Europa had become his home as well as his religious mission, and he had stayed on for two decades, transforming from an enthusiastic youth to an obsessive, middle-aged man during those years. Today, he was considered a prominent raving religious madman in Cape City society, albeit a madman who was generous with his church's funding.

Moreover, following the great economic recession of recent years and the resulting wave of social conservatism in what had been Europa's hotbed of naughtiness, a large portion of society was beginning to buy into this whole religious thing. After all, if life is difficult, it's easier to blame it on God's will rather than on one's own actions – or inactions. And praying for solutions is far easier for the simple minded than making solutions happen.

Thus, after a couple of decades, Phineas finally found himself

achieving some of the respect he long felt he deserved in this region he had long served.

“Do you have an appointment, Father?” asked the receptionist.

“Of course I have an appointment, young lady.”

“One moment, please.”

“Bless you, my child.”

The receptionist raised an eyebrow while calling the mayor on the internal telephone. She was not sure she wanted to be blessed, particularly not by a loud American with an excessive moustache.

“Reverend Fudge is here to see you, sir,” she said into the phone.

“That’s Forge, young lady. Forge,” said the reverend.

“Yes, of course, Father. The mayor will see you now. Come this way, please,” said the receptionist, getting up and opening the door for Phineas.

“Bless you, my child,” said Phineas, as he walked into a vast, plush office. One wall was dominated by a massive fireplace that could probably have contained the better part of a forest fire. In the middle of the room was a small conference table surrounded by four chairs. At the other side of the room was a massive oak desk with a massive executive chair reluctantly supporting a massive bald man with pasty complexion and disturbingly large lips.

He stood up, to the relief of the suffering chair.

Jan van den Berg had been voted in as mayor in Cape City a scant few weeks before and was still settling into office. His predecessor had a well-deserved reputation for corruption (participating in, not combating) which was why the local population had turfed him out in favour of a devout – on the surface, anyway – Christian with strong links to the region’s powerful Family Values Association, Citizens’ Rights Association and several other associations full of members who were certain they were morally far superior to you and I.

Jan had converted to evangelical Christianity some years before, not so much out of belief as opportunism and a keen interest in the

American evangelical wealth being showered upon aspiring young politicians.

He had met Phineas once or twice at church functions, but the two men had paid little attention to each other. Jan considered Phineas an annoying American evangelist who talked far too loudly, and until recently, Jan was insufficiently important to interest Phineas. However, with a landslide win in the Cape City mayoral election, the situation had changed.

“Reverend Forge! I am honoured by your visit,” the mayor said.

“Mayor van den Berg. The honour is all mine,” said Phineas, accepting the offered hand with a firm shake. “More importantly, congratulations on winning the election. The church is proud to have one of our own in charge of Cape City at last.”

“Thank you, Reverend,” said the mayor.

“Surely this is a sign that the good Lord wishes us to clean up this sinful city,” said the reverend with growing emotion.

“Yes, Reverend, but I’m sure it’s not...” began Jan.

“No, my son, it is not your fault. Your predecessor allowed the devil’s work to run rampant in this once-glorious seaside city, causing it to become a filthy cesspit of sin, debauchery and perversion.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s that...” began Jan.

“But fear not, my son. The church and I are at your service. With the Lord God’s most gracious support, we shall rid this city of sin and turn it into a wholesome urban paradise where children can roam freely in the streets without fear.”

“Actually, the children can already...” the mayor once again desperately tried to say, before being cut off again.

“And may I remind you that the church’s considerable resources are at your disposal. We understand that the war against sin does not come cheap.”

“...play in the...Resources, did you say? Does that include money?” asked Jan.

“Of course, my son, of course,” said the reverend. “My secretary will be in touch to arrange the details.”

“That is most generous of the church,” said Jan.

“Don’t mention it. It is God’s will,” said Phineas.

“Now that I think about it, you are right, of course. Cape City is a most sinful place. We will certainly need substantial resources. In fact...”

“Yes, yes. Our Lord has clearly chosen you to lead his fight in Cape City,” said Phineas.

“Now, the other reason I am here,” he continued, “is that there is a wonderful opportunity for you to make a powerful statement of your commitment to moral goodness.”

“There is?” asked Jan.

“There is, Jan. There is. I understand you will be speaking at the unveiling of Maxwell van Mars’s new sculpture at the Waterfront tomorrow evening,”

“Yes. It was a three-million-Euro commission by the previous mayor who wanted to bring an interplanetary celebrity to our city,” said Jan. “I personally find it a bit, well, too nude for a public sculpture. But the decisions were made before my time in office, of course.”

“Nevertheless, that sculpture is a pornographic blot upon your city and Maxwell is a twisted, immoral and evil individual who will surely corrupt your innocent citizens and molest their daughters. Honouring him would be a slap in the face to every upright, moral individual in Cape City, if not the entire country.”

“I see, but...”

“Have you seen pictures of Maxwell’s abominations pretending to be art?”

“Yes, I am familiar with his work,” Jan winced, reflecting on the bruised penis he had acquired some years before when he first came across one of Maxwell’s sculptures in a quiet square long after

midnight. He flinched at the memory and refocused on the raving reverend.

“It is a robotic set of dancing woman, absolutely naked, displaying their sexual organs for every man, woman and child to see, whether they like it or not. Mark my word: if that sculpture is allowed to present itself as it is, otherwise upstanding men will ravish your women and rape their daughters. It will be an ugly, ungodly scene,” said Phineas.

“That bad?” asked Jan.

“Worse!” insisted Phineas.

“What would you have me do about it?” asked Jan.

“I would have you blow it off the map,” said Phineas.

“I fear you overestimate my powers as mayor,” said Jan.

“I understand, Jan. I understand. That’s why I have a more subtle plan to thwart Maxwell’s efforts at polluting the moral integrity of your city’s fine people.”

Phineas explained his plan.

In spite of himself, Jan giggled. The resulting jiggling of his belly and lips was not a pretty sight.

“That is marvellous. I can’t wait to see Maxwell’s reaction.”

“I reckon we’ll need some help to pull it off in time for the unveiling tomorrow,” said Phineas. “Do you have people who can help out?”

Jan thought a moment.

“Yes, I am sure the Family Values Association, who have protested against this sculpture since the day it was announced, will gladly help.”

“Well, that’s just marvellous. I knew we could count on you, Jan.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Jan, hoping his co-operation would make it easier to tap into those church resources Phineas had mentioned earlier.

“Thank *you*, Jan,” said Phineas. “Now, there is another thing I would like to ask of you, my son. A more, how shall we say, discreet

request.”

“Yes?” said the mayor as he looked around and, not surprisingly, saw no one else in his cavernous office. Nevertheless, he bent a little closer.

“I, and a special action team from within the church, intend to...” Phineas paused for a moment, looking in the air for the right words to frame a delicate matter. “...Deal with the Maxwell problem once and for all.”

“And how does this affect me?” asked the mayor with some concern.

“It would be to all of our advantages if the authorities do not pay too much attention to our problem-solving actions, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course,” said the mayor, though he was not entirely sure that he in fact saw what Phineas meant, but suspected he really did not want to be further enlightened.

“Excellent, excellent,” said the reverend.

The mayor simply smiled.

“I’m glad we are on the same page regarding morality in Cape City. I won’t take up any more of your time.” Phineas stood up. “My secretary will be in touch.”

Jan stood also.

“Thank you once again, Mr Mayor,” said Phineas, shaking Jan’s hand. “And you won’t forget our little plan for the unveiling, will you?”

“Thank you, Father. I won’t,” said Jan, walking Phineas to the the lift and pushing the call button.

Phineas could not help but smile as he waited for the lift to bring him to the underground car park. He had long believed that Maxwell was, if not Satan incarnate, then a very senior demon who was placed upon the Earth to spread evil through pornographic sculptures, ungodly temptation to sin and, worst of all, depraved sexual debauchery of the most vile kind. This last point he knew for a fact –

a painful fact.

During Phineas's post-graduate studies in Cape City, a much younger Maxwell had stolen his true love, defiled her body, corrupted her soul and stolen her virginity. Her virginity had been something Phineas was quite sure God had intended him, and not some perverted scion of a notable interplanetary family, to take.

To make matters worse, Cathy, the ex-virgin in question, eventually took to writing a blog detailing her sexual experimentation. Although neither her name nor Maxwell's was associated with the blog, it was a well-known secret on campus she wrote the blog based on experience – experience that Phineas could not bear to read about, and so did not after the first two or three entries. In view of the level of perversion the blog eventually achieved, it was as well Phineas did not read it; the gloriously written detail would doubtless have over-addled his already addled mind.

“Bastard!” said Phineas out loud, remembering that painful event from years ago. Then he reminded himself that his intention to humiliate and kill Maxwell was not about petty revenge. Rather, it was to wipe the demonic man off the face of the planet and save womankind. Phineas was, he assured himself, far too pious and humble to act upon personal feelings. No. He was saving the planet. Whether the planet felt it needed saving through the elimination of one eccentric or not was not a matter that concerned him.

A ping announced that the lift was coming to a halt at the chosen floor. Phineas shook his head to disperse his ugly thoughts about Maxwell. He would soon be burning in Hell, Phineas reminded himself as the door opened. He walked to his car to find his driver, a stocky bald man in a grey suit, waiting by a massive black sport utility vehicle – or SUV, as you surely know – complete with forebodingly tinted windows all around and a shining chrome crucifix bonnet ornament.

“Ivan, drive me to Escher Abbey,” said Phineas.

“Certainly, sir,” said Ivan, opening the door for his boss before climbing into the driver’s seat and starting the engine. He expertly wound his way through the car park and the crowded streets of Cape City before hitting the open road.

Phineas was deep in thought when the telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“Father Forge, Maxwell’s car has started driving in the direction of Cape City.”

“Excellent, Sister. Thank you.”

He rang off and smiled. The demon would soon be in Hell where he belonged.

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