

The Deadboys

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I watched it happen like every other night.

The rich red curtains parted. The audience cheered from their lavish seats. As the cast took a bow, I never took my eyes off the crowd.

Tonight, a story would be told. The productions could be anything, but in every one of them, the same thing happened. Someone died. Which was the reason I was on the stage. The Deadboy. One of the ones made to die every night and wake every morning.

The Mortum Production company, the most popular company in all Thrael, had four favourite actors. Each of those actors played the same role every night, endlessly.

There was Augustus, who was always the Hero, Romulus, the Villain and Valeria, the Hero's Love. No one really knew where the character ended and the actor began. I was starting to suspect that there was no real difference between them.

Then me, the fourth. The final part in the story's puzzle. Dabria, the Deadboy. Each acting troupe always had a Deadboy.

At this point in the play, Romulus, or Caecilius, his character's name, held a knife to my throat. I acted afraid which wasn't hard as I was good at dying. Practice made perfect and I had a lot of practice.

I screamed as I was meant to as he wrenched the blade across my neck. My head hit the floor, cracking. The audience gasped. As if it was a dream, I felt my body being dragged off the stage, the rough wood grain catching on the fabric of my clothes.

I couldn't speak, move or hear any longer. My eyes were wide open, ever seeing.

I wasn't dead as a human was. My skin was silicon, my blood a red dye. Deadboys, we were only half living. We were made to act out death when human actors couldn't. We had no real talent, only what we were programmed with. Even so, I watched with envy as the other actors would practice day after day and get applause for their efforts. I got nothing.

It happened like every other night, but this night, it was different.

I was used to never knowing how the story ended, because my story ended every night, and I never knew anything after that. But now I wanted to know. I wanted to know more than the feeling of the lights on my face. I wanted to know more than that stage under my feet.

But I couldn't because I wasn't meant to and wasn't made to.

I hated that my roles were cheap; I hated that the audience only wanted to watch me die. I would watch Valeria read her lines over and over, pour her heart and soul into a role, but I had no heart to put into mine, and I so desperately wanted to.

That night, my body would be shoved into a machine to be remolded, to match the appearance of my next character. I wasn't even granted my own appearance, always taking on one of another. I would be healed and my character's lines would be downloaded into my brain.

After all, who knew where the person stopped and the actor began?

In Thrael, in the world now, actors and entertainers, human or not, were property of their company. Humanity had no troubles now, and the public lived in societies of tall, gilded skyscrapers, clear air, free food, and no jobs. If you didn't want a job, you didn't have one. And people seldom wanted one. Human actors were high in demand but could only do so much. Audiences expected a show so drastic measures had to be taken. Which is why creatures like Deadboys existed. Entertainment was increasingly popular, leading to an onslaught of technological advancements.

But for once, I wanted to see how the story ended. I didn't want it to end with death because every story I'd ever known had. Monotony was a cage and I couldn't escape it.

I knew that I would wake up like I did every morning and see that night's costume hanging on the doorknob.

I never got to see those gilded skyscrapers, eat the food or watch a play. I only saw those things from the window of my apartment, tantalizingly close.

I wasn't surprised when I did wake, but as I was every day, I was miserable.

My character was a circus singer, called Lavinia, who lived her life on the stage, wearing bright, glittering gowns and serenading people. They called her the Siren of the South. She loved to sing, but the Ringmaster of the circus slit her throat, once he realized she was taking the attention from him.

I thought of Augustus, always the Hero, even off the stage; Romulus, creating mischief wherever he could; and Valeria, reading books and gushing about the leads in love.

The actor was never too different from the character. And after years of having so many characters fill my thoughts, having so many faces, I didn't know who I was supposed to be, if not dead. I was just the person they wanted me to be.

As I walked down the arching, gilded corridors to the rehearsal hall, I knew that perhaps that night, I would be exactly the person they wanted me to be. It would be my best role yet. My name wasn't Dabria. Today, it was Lavinia.

Behind the double doors to the hall, I could see the rest of them sitting on a couch. They were going over their lines – Augustus, Romulus, and Valeria were human – they had to learn their roles. They were all chattering excitedly, their voices echoing in the cavernous hall.

"Dabria," Augustus called. "Looking forward to tonight's play?"

"You have the best part, after all," chimed Romulus, grinning. He was playing the Ringmaster. If I had a stomach, I would have felt sick. Deadboys, despite being arguably more useful, were looked down upon by human actors. Manufactured, they said. No real talent.

Later that day, I would stand in front of the mirror in my room, and I would sing, over and over, the songs that were given to me. I thought of every actor I had ever seen but that wasn't enough. I wasn't human. I wasn't even a Deadboy anymore. I was Lavinia, a famed singer, the Siren of the South, and tonight I would convince the audience of that.

I wore her beaded gown, my face painted in such a way I knew I wasn't anyone but her.

When the red curtains parted, and the cast took our bow, I didn't take my face off the audience.

I wanted them to see my talent, my effort, not just manufactured for their entertainment.

It was my scene, and I sang more beautifully than a Siren of myths. I poured my entire being into the character, until tears fell and I couldn't hear the Ringmaster approach.

My song turned into a ragged scream as he grabbed me, and I fought him, shoving the knife out of his hand. I was Lavinia. I would survive.

The Ringmaster picked up the knife, and lunged at me again, determined.

"Stop!" I yelled, bringing my arms up to my face. "Please," I whispered, "let me live."

The auditorium was silent. You could hear a pin drop.

When the Ringmaster raised it again, a sound was heard that was never heard in Thrael Theatre before. The audience booed him.

"Let her sing!" they called. "Let her live! Come on, we want to hear it!"

He stepped aside, then. He dropped the knife.

I had my role, now. I loved it. I sang to them, no longer words but declarations. I had worked for this; I was no longer manufactured, I was no longer a Deadboy. I was everything I ever wanted to be. I was nothing I was meant to be.

When the curtains closed and the audience stopped cheering, I felt alive and completely unlike what I was before.

But the story ended like it always did. They wouldn't let it happen any other way. The Ringmaster crept up behind me and it happened again.

I died. I had no face, no identity, no matter how hard I could try to find one. I would be shoved into that machine and wake in my bed all the same. I would never go up those towers outside my window, never taste food, never go anywhere except where I was meant to.

I couldn't live like that.

When I awoke, I didn't go to rehearsal, didn't wear the costume. I simply opened the door and ran.

I didn't know what life I was running towards. I didn't know my character now. I didn't know the lines.

There wasn't any difference between the actor and the character. But I didn't want to act and there was no character anymore.

I ran anyway, terrified, ignorant and hopelessly alive.