

Niko wondered about atmospheric pressure. The Ramp rose higher from the Lower Plain than Everest rose above sea level but the temperature remained hot and dry and the air pressure did not decrease. How could that be? If the millibars were normal on the Lower Plain they should be breathing near-vacuum by now. And if they were normal on the Upper Plain, the Lower Plain should have been dense enough to crush bone.

To pass the time he concocted science fictional solutions involving massive airpumps and recirculating vents carved through the Ledge by some long-vanished race to equalize the pressure. And then he looked around at the endless stream of immortal souls made flesh to be forever punished, at the interior of the car that never ran out of gas and that he knew to be somehow alive, at the perfectly inhuman version of himself hunched and pensive on the hood with wings tucked tight and tendrils wrapped around mahogany knees drawn to massive chest, at the cracked jar that contained the glowing essence of Jemma's soul. And he laughed at himself until he cried and then wiped his eyes and wondered if he truly had gone well beyond the pale.

Blind black wall to the left of them, blind abyss to the right, the staggering dead between. They rode a tightrope between solid nothing and empty perdition and they played out this numbing odyssey so long that it became hard to remember a time they had done anything else, which was almost literally true for Nikodemus whose smoothed mind had done little else, when the end hove into view