

NOTHING ZERO

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The feedback reaching crescendo, Nothing screamed.

Microphone cord wrapped tightly around his forearm, he sank to his knees. At first his screams were atonal wailing, but gradually he formed a sentence. Thrashing wildly, he shrieked the words that haunted his every waking moment for the past week. He didn't understand what they meant, only they held some deeper meaning not readily apparent. "This is the end of everything," he cried one final time before he collapsed to the stage.

Lying on his back, Nothing watched the pink and white confetti swirl through the air. Tilting his head to the side, he saw Wraith kick one of the hundreds of black balloons bouncing across the stage. The normally surefooted bassist slipped and crashed to the ground.

Nothing crawled towards Aiden.

Rising to his knees, he stared up at his guitarist.

Head down, Aiden coaxed demonic washes of feedback from his instrument. When he noticed Nothing knelt in front of him, a devilish smile flashed across his cherubic face.

Snatching handfuls of hair, Aiden pulled Nothing's face towards his crotch and thrust his hips. As Aiden pantomimed fucking his mouth, Nothing grabbed Aiden's ass. Squeezing tightly, Nothing heard hundreds of excited squeals in the crowd.

When Aiden let his hair go, Nothing theatrically wiped his mouth and staggered to his feet.

Aiden leaned forward, and embraced Nothing. Arching his feet, Nothing found Aiden's lips. Even though the kiss was now only part of their act, Nothing couldn't help but remember feelings long forgotten. There was a time when he loved Aiden and Aiden loved him in turn. As their lips parted, Nothing wondered why either of them ever stopped.

Turning away from Nothing, Aiden smashed his guitar against the stage.

Hair in messy tangles, skin lacquered with sweat, eyeliner streaking his face, dress torn and barely clinging to his body and stockings hopelessly shredded, Nothing staggered to the front of the stage. The Red Rock Casino Amphitheatre was sold out. 10,000 kids, all deathly pale and dressed in black raised their hands to the star-filled Las Vegas sky as they chanted the band's name—his name. Looking at the crowd, Nothing Zero felt alive.

Unfortunately the feeling was fleeting.

The afterglow from his performance starting to slip, Nothing tore the tattered remains of his dress off. With thousands of videos posted to YouTube of him performing the act, he knew everyone in the crowd had already seen him stripped down to his underwear and garters, but that didn't matter. Without fail, each time he did the striptease, he received a wave of excited squeals as reward. It was enough to make his high last a precious few seconds longer.

When he was alive, Nothing would have done anything to hear those screams. He dreamed of performing with a band for thousands of adoring fans, selling millions of records, posing for magazine covers and filming music videos. But living in rural Ohio, far from the shimmering glamor of New

York or Hollywood, he feared his dreams would never come true. He dreaded the thought of being trapped in his small town life, all of his hopes and dreams unfulfilled and his life unnoticed by anyone but the bullies and assholes who lived to abuse him.

But then Nothing died.

Death awoke something dark and terrible inside him. Nothing was reborn as a creature of great power and endless hunger. But most of all, Nothing found himself with everything he dared dream of when he was alive. It was the final night of a sold out tour promoting his third chart-topping album, Nothing should have been elated. He should have felt like a conquering hero as he surveyed the crowd. But staring out at the thousands of adoring kids with their Nothing Zero shirts and screaming for him to throw them his dress, Nothing felt nothing at all.

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Echo knew it was only part of the show. Nothing and Aiden broke up over a year ago. It had been a nasty split, with a lot of hard words leaving even harder feelings. At this point the act was nothing more than an empty gesture. But even knowing the truth, Echo couldn't help but feel jealous as Nothing kissed Aiden.

The teenage girl next to Echo squealed. Red streaks through her raven black mane, eyeshadow so heavy it reached her eyebrows and purple lipstick so thick it looked like colored candy coating, the deathly pale girl couldn't have been older than sixteen. Every inch of her bony asexual frame shuddered as she shrieked, "I love you."

Echo wondered if knowing Nothing and Aiden hated each other would change how the girl felt about the band? *Would she still like their music? Would she even come to their concerts?* Then Echo wondered how the girl would react if she found out the person responsible for the split was standing next to her. Echo didn't even know how *she* felt about causing the break-up, much less someone emotionally invested in the fantasy of Nothing and Aiden.

Maybe in an alternate universe things weren't so complicated. Maybe she and Nothing were happy. Deeply committed to each other, they were engaged and preparing for a lavishly decadent wedding befitting the world's most infamous rock star. After being married, Nothing would remain faithfully by her side as she grew old and frail. When she finally died, Nothing would mourn her death. Maybe he would even record a hit song in her honor. But that world doesn't exist.

In the real world, Echo knew Nothing didn't love her.

While Nothing was quick to profess his love, his words were as empty as the kiss he shared with Aiden. The endless stream of groupies and drug abuse weren't what brought her to that realization. She was fine with monogamy being a word Nothing didn't understand, and even accepted decadence was his native tongue—a language she often helped him speak. No, being around him was enough to understand how hollow his words truly were. There was a rehearsed quality to his emotions. Dinners, dates and even love making often felt like a performance. She started to believe her sweet and tender Nothing was just one of a hundred different masks he wore. Even though it was a beautiful mask, she had grown tired of it.

On stage, Aiden tossed the broken remains of his guitar into the crowd. Just like the kiss Aiden shared with Nothing, the hallmark chaos and destruction that closed Nothing Zero concerts was carefully orchestrated. Aiden had dozens of guitars set aside for him to shatter during the band's encore. When she visited backstage opening night, Echo saw the four racks, each housing a dozen perfectly polished guitars to be used for only one song, "Bleed for Me." It was a small detail, but enough to make Echo swear off visiting the backstage area completely.

Before ever meeting Nothing, Echo had been a fan of Nothing Zero. She *liked* the band's musical blend of hard rock, goth and industrial, but she *loved* the reality of the band. While KISS, Alice Cooper and Marilyn Manson pretended to be demons and madmen, the members of Nothing Zero truly

were monstrous. When Nothing came into her life, she hoped the man behind the monster was just as real. But as she watched the band take their final bow, Echo feared she knew the terrible truth—there wasn't a man at all.

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Blood was waiting for him in the dressing room. The dozen PVC bags were neatly laid out in three rows of four on a metal tray that had been polished to a fine sheen. Candies and chocolates from various shops around Las Vegas laid alongside the carefully labeled bags. Lollipops, licorice, chocolate bars, truffles, M&Ms, peanut butter cups—a veritable buffet of his favorite sweets had been lovingly constructed, with the disposable bags as the centerpiece.

Nothing hadn't touched any of it. The bags remained sealed and the chocolate gone uneaten. He was far more interested in the other delectable sweets that had been waiting for him when he reached his dressing room.

The boy's names were Raven and Vex. Raven was the taller of the two. Standing over six feet tall, he had a long lean body and a sense of melancholy sadness about him. He slunk around the dressing room, as if trapped in a perpetual daydream. He'd occasionally snap out of his reverie long enough to check the green and black hair cascading down his face in the mirror. Vex was only a few inches taller than Nothing. His rounded features and glasses peeked out from beneath a wild tangle of jet black hair. Fuzzy purple fox ears sat atop his head and a matching tail dangled from beneath his Nothing Zero T-Shirt. The ball gag strapped around his neck added an edge to his impish and playful nature. Both boys were so beautiful, it would have been impossible for Nothing to choose between the two. As Vex explored the table of candies, Nothing was thankful he wouldn't have to.

Digging into the bowl of red M&Ms, Vex took only a couple. Before he plopped one into his mouth, he gave Nothing an uncertain look.

"You can have as many as you want," Nothing assured him.

"Sweets make you fat."

"Funny. I don't have that problem."

His eyes devouring Nothing, Vex ate another candy coated chocolate. "I'm sure you don't."

Smiling, Nothing picked a peanut butter cup out. "Not even when I was alive. Junk was practically the only thing I ate," he offered the chocolate to Vex.

"I know," Vex bashfully accepted the peanut butter cup.

"Do you?"

"This is going to sound lame, but I read that about you. I've read everything I could about you," nervously looking away from Nothing, Vex nibbled on his chocolate.

"He's not kidding," Raven offered. "He even read that shitty biography that asshole put out about you."

"You did?"

"I'm just a really big fan," Vex blushed.

"I love my fans," Nothing traced his fingers along Vex's chin.

Vex greeting his gaze, Nothing leaned forward and kissed him. The lingering sweetness of chocolate and peanut butter welcomed his mouth. When their lips parted, it took Vex a moment to realize what had just happened.

Nothing kissed him again.

The shock of Nothing's initial advance subsiding, Vex kissed back. The boy's tongue darted between Nothing's lips and he started to explore Nothing's body. As Vex's soft pale hands roamed across his stomach, Nothing closed his eyes. Nothing heard the boy's heartbeat quicken.

Raven slipped behind Nothing and kissed his neck. Breaking away from Vex, Nothing greeted Raven's mouth with his own.

Feeling the warmth of the boy's bodies pressed tightly against him, the dark pit at the bottom of Nothing's stomach opened wide. Nothing was suddenly very hungry. "We should get out of here," Nothing bared his fangs.

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The bus was empty and silent when Aiden entered. The purple LED lights along the aisle floor gave the interior a strange ethereal glow. He grabbed a bag of O-negative from the bar. Sinking down onto the leather couch, he let the loneliness of the moment wash over him.

With UV blocking windows and spacious sleeping compartments outfitted with interior locks, the million dollar chariot had been lavishly customized for the band. But as he turned on the flat screen, Aiden felt like it had become his own private sanctuary. He had spent countless hours alone aboard the bus, either writing songs or hiding from the backstage debauchery.

As Aiden stared at the dead blue of the television, Light boarded.

His hair bleached white and his taut tattooed body lined with deceptively powerful muscles, Light was the only human member of Nothing Zero. He was also Aiden's companion for the ride home.

"You haven't eaten yet?" Light eyed the bag of O-negative.

"No."

Pushing his hair to the side, Light offered his neck to Aiden.

The first time Aiden fed on Light was during sex.

While Nothing enjoyed indulging in the various groupies each city offered, Aiden was never comfortable with the prospect of fucking random strangers. Sleeping with Light began as an easy convenience. Two friends coming together to tend for each others physical needs. But as they spent time together, they realized they had more in common than simple sexual desire.

Setting the bag aside, Aiden nestled in against Light.

Freshly showered, the drummer smelled of clean skin and fresh strawberries. As Aiden traced his lips along Light's throat, Light moaned. Aiden dragged his teeth across Light's supple flesh, before finally biting him.

Blood spurted across his tongue, bringing a wash of memories—Light banging on all of his mother's pots and pans, getting his first drum set, joining his first band and meeting Aiden for the first time when he auditioned for Nothing Zero. Having seen them dozens of times, every moment was as precious to Aiden as his own memories.

Pulling away, Aiden wiped his mouth. "I love you," he whispered.

"I love you too," Light kissed him.

When their lips parted, Aiden tore a chunk of flesh from his own wrist and offered it to Light. Pressing his lips against the wound, Light closed his eyes and drank.

Light only manged a few mouthfuls of blood before the wound healed over.

Warmth coursing through his body, Aiden laid his head down on Light's lap. Closing his eyes, he listened to the familiar and comforting throb of Light's heart. It was a sound Aiden hoped would never stop.

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With only the endless desert night ahead of her, Echo glanced at the rear-view mirror. Las Vegas was little more than a patch of silver dark on the road behind, but still too visible for her liking. She couldn't wait until the pitch black of the Nevada desert had swallowed the remaining sliver whole.

Echo suspected the trip was a bad idea, but decided it was necessary. When she told Nothing she wanted to attend the show, he was excited. Even though he'd be home the next day, having her see the tour's final show was simply too perfect. He promised her a night she'd never forget. Knowing Nothing,

the notion filled her with dread. Despite her misgivings, she promised she'd be there.

After the show ended, Echo lingered in the amphitheatre while the rest of the audience streamed out of the venue. As she watched the road crew tear down the band's gear, a Red Rock Casino security guard came to politely ask her to leave. She flashed her backstage laminate, and he even more politely apologized. Thirty minutes after the show, long after the crowd was gone, Nothing sent her a picture of two cute Goth boys in his dressing room. Instead of making her way backstage, she headed for the parking lot.

As the darkness of the desert night completely swallowed Las Vegas, Echo's phone buzzed. Nothing sent her another picture. Stripped down to their underwear, the two Goth boys were kissing in a posh looking motel room. The accompanying message read: "WISH U WAS HERE". Turning her phone off, she cranked up the stereo.

Usually when Echo traveled, she preferred taking her old black Honda Scrambler. But when she decided she was coming to Vegas, she opted for her Mustang. She wanted to immerse herself in Nothing Zero's three records during the trip. But as the sleazy electronic rock of "Lipstick Junkie" gave way to the dark heartbroken grind of "Porcelain", Echo wished she was on her bike. Listening to Nothing moan about disappointment and heartbreak, Echo realized she could only blame herself for how the night played out.

On tour, Nothing was was fully committed to the rock and roll lifestyle. Every stop in each city brought another assortment of eager young flesh and copious amounts of drugs.

When Echo visited in the past, she had been more than happy to partake in the festivities. She had watched him suck cock in Chicago, snort coke off a waif's small pert breasts in Dallas and even shared a well hung beauty with him in New York. By sending her the pictures of the pretty Goth boys, Nothing assumed he was enticing her to come to his motel. If it were any other night, she had no doubt she would have.

Nothing didn't understand when she told him she needed to talk, she really meant it. He didn't know the truth she had been wrestling with for the past three weeks. For Nothing, it was just a surprise visit from his girlfriend. But for Echo, she wanted the night to be special, something they couldn't share with another living soul. Nothing had no idea she was pregnant.

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The sheets were sticky with blood.

Rising from bed, Nothing glanced back at the boys. Vex laid spread out, his head dangled loosely over the edge of the bed. When Nothing tore through his throat, he practically decapitated him. Slumped on the floor, the gaping wound in Raven's stomach bared his glistening viscera. His throat a crimson gash, his windpipe obscenely exposed.

Nothing left the master bedroom and found his clothes on the floor. He was staying in one of Red Rock's high roller suites, dubbed the One 80 Suite. With a large terrace, Jacuzzi tub, billiards table and floor-to-ceiling windows providing views of the Vegas Strip and Red Rock Canyon, Nothing had little doubt no expense was spared in making his last night on tour a special one.

Rummaging through the pockets, he retrieved his cell phone and called their tour manager, Krista. "I'm done," was all he said before he ended the call and dropped his phone.

Admiring the decor—stainless steel, black and brown wood, fine velvet and silk—Nothing was struck by how lonely the darkened suite seemed. He turned the television on and made his way towards the bathroom. Nothing didn't care what channel the hundred inch plasma screen had been set to. He simply needed some background noise to break the dead silence.

The night wasn't supposed to be so quiet.

When Echo told him she wanted to attend the concert, Nothing hoped she'd spend the night with him. He told Krista to secure them the best suite the Red Rock had to offer. Price was no object. He

wanted his last night in Vegas to be one he would never forget.

Nothing drifted back into the master bedroom.

Still motionless, the boy's drained corpses were the pale shade of white only death could provide. By sunrise their wounds would heal, and the savagery they endured would grant them rebirth. They wouldn't have the advantages Nothing enjoyed. They wouldn't be able to walk in the day, fly through the skies or even grow a set of razor sharp incisors. Instead, they would receive an everlasting life and a hunger just as endless. Making his way into the bathroom, Nothing hoped the boys would make good vampires.

The cold bathroom marble greeting his feet, Nothing's hopes gave way to an unerring dark apathetic indifference. Over the past five years he had created hundreds like Raven and Vex. All lost children who's pain, heartache and suffering was so opaque, they couldn't see a way through other than the razor sharp bite of a rock star. Krista would come along soon enough. By sunrise Raven and Vex would be in their own room in the Red Rock. When they were finally reborn, she would gently remind them what happened and give them the only rule they had to abide—stay out of the light. The boys would then be on their own.

Climbing into the shower, the hot beat of water washed the dark red streaks of Vex and Raven's blood away from his porcelain white skin.

When Nothing first started feeding, a bite was enough. The act of draining someone's life and feeling their memories flash through his head fulfilled the demands of his hunger. But over time, his feeding evolved into something more violent and ugly. Once he realized any damage he inflicted, no matter how extreme, would be healed during the rebirth process, there were no more barriers. The darkest and most base of his cruel desires were completely unchained. In that sense, Nothing was glad Echo had left following the concert. When she was around, there was some measure of pretense he was only feeding to survive. Without her, Nothing was free to be the monster he truly was.

Stepping out of the bathroom, the darkness of the master bathroom welcoming his nude form, Nothing looked Raven and Vex over. While their wounds were starting to heal, the boys were still a gruesome sight. There was a time when he would have tried to act horrified by the sight. He would have tapped into the memory of what it was like to be frightened and disgusted. But just like any emotion, it would fade into the black indifference that filled his day to day.

Nothing made his way to the private patio. Overlooking the Red Rock Canyon, the view was breathtaking. When he was alive, Nothing never dared dream of seeing anything like it. But Nothing would have never dreamed of the carnage lying in the master bedroom, either. The ravaged corpses of Raven and Vex, the blood spattering the walls and the chunks of flesh on the floor. Staring out at the endless black of the western sky, Nothing knew his kingdom had come.